

# Bulletin



**Special Issue:  
Teaching Teachers**

## LDA Council 2021-2022

(As at end of March 2022)

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## LDA MISSION

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

#### THE BULLETIN

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# From the President

**Dr Robyn Wheldall**

**N**ow into our third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of lost educational opportunities are being realised. While we are yet to see the full extent of the disadvantage that has resulted for vulnerable learners, the 2021 NAPLAN results released in December provide some evidence of this. The achievement gap that exists between students from advantaged backgrounds and from disadvantaged backgrounds has grown even larger since 2019. Add in a learning difficulty or disability and the layers of disadvantage multiply. Now more than ever, Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) has a critical role to play in ensuring that no educational opportunity for children and young people is squandered. Our mission to disseminate evidence-based practice and to advocate for, and teach, individuals who require additional support to access their education is more important than ever.

With this mission squarely in mind, LDA recently hosted a very successful one-day online conference exploring the best ways to support students with learning difficulties and disability in school using Multi-Tiered Systems

of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RtI) frameworks. Getting in early and identifying students who require additional support is essential to ensuring no learning opportunities are wasted. MTSS and RTI eschew a 'wait to fail' approach, which unfortunately was the hallmark of many previous approaches to supporting students with learning difficulties in the education system. As well as making sure that evidence-based approaches are employed in intervention settings, the universal tier of instruction (Tier 1) must also be rigorous and based on effective instruction derived from principles that are evidence-based.

Not only were we delighted that our MTSS conference was so well received, we were also thrilled that participants joined us from all around the country, thanks to the wonders of modern technology. Notwithstanding the privations that the pandemic has wrought, we should celebrate the fact that the circumstances have required us to become accustomed to, and skilled at, connecting with one another in ways that may have seemed foreign to us just a few years ago. And not only can we 'gather' on Zoom, it is now also easy to make recordings of conference presentations. This too gives much greater access to participants. Obviously, there is nothing like being able to come together and to network, but the increased opportunities for people from more remote areas to join the conversation is a very real and welcome benefit.

Another opportunity for us to meet, hopefully in person for many, will be at our Annual General Meeting and LDA/ AJLD Awards

event later in the year. LDA is thrilled to announce that Distinguished Professor Emerita Linnea Ehri will be attending our LDA AGM and Awards Ceremony in person on Saturday October 22 in Melbourne to receive the Eminent Researcher Award of the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. To have this esteemed giant of reading research join us is an extraordinary honour for LDA. I encourage you to mark this date in your diary now, make plans to come to Melbourne for the event if you can, or make sure you are able to attend remotely. It will be a wonderful occasion and I look forward to seeing you then.

Best wishes,  
Robyn

*Dr Robyn Wheldall, BA, Ph.D., MAICD, is an Honorary Research Fellow of Macquarie University, a Founding Director of MultiLit Pty Ltd., and the Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit.*



**Save the date:  
2022 LDA AGM  
Saturday October 22, 2022**

LDA AGM and Awards Ceremony  
Guest Presenter Linnea Ehri, Recipient of the  
2022 AJLD Eminent Researcher Award



# Council news

**L**DA Council members have enjoyed a busy start to 2022, with all the Council committees – Professional Development, Administration, Consultants, Website, Social Media, Publications and Awards – meeting regularly. Thanks to all our volunteers for their dedication. Our hard-working Administrative Officer, Bec Rangas, routinely provides a summary report at the end of each week, keeping a record of the Council activities she has helped to facilitate with her administrative support.

LDA Governance plans are moving ahead steadily. We are pleased to announce that we are now in the process of moving forward to register LDA as an Australian Registered Body, and this will be followed by a revisiting of the Constitution to ensure that it is still fit for purpose. Any changes will be discussed fully with the membership during the year.

Council had intended to hold a Strategic Planning Day in February this year, but COVID restrictions got in the way of that. Strategic planning for LDA's future is continuing online.

Our Professional Learning Committee, led by Jacinta Conway and Robyn Wheldall and ably assisted by Kate de Bruin and other members of the committee, organised a very successful online conference in March. High quality speakers from a range of disciplines addressed the issue of Multi-Tiered Support Systems. Geoff Ongley from 24/7 assisted with IT, and Bec Rangas handled administration. There were well over 250 attendees, and feedback was excellent. The conference finished with a Q&A panel led by well-loved children's book author Jackie French (it was exciting to see, via Zoom, the carved wombats on her mantelpiece). Jackie encouraged participants to contribute to a 'manifesto' consisting of requests to send to politicians in the run-up to the coming elections, in support of the right of every child to learn to read successfully. LDA members have been asked for their contributions to this project, and many constructive suggestions have already been received. Jackie French will be helping us to edit the final manifesto, and this should play a strong part in LDA's advocacy role.

Some Council members have been attending professional learning in Social Media Strategies, and some have been attending in-services on grammar, in preparation for LDA professional learning sessions to be offered later in the year.

LDA is still trying to sort out some problems with our website, and we hope that members have not been unduly inconvenienced by this. We are still experiencing glitches with membership records and Consultant Member Applications. Geoff Ongley's assistance is greatly appreciated as we work through this.

**Nominations** for the LDA Awards and the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulty* Awards are due in by the end of May. These awards give us the chance to recognise and thank individuals whose achievements make a difference to the whole educational community. Please take the time to think about people you would like to see honoured with an award, and send in your nominations.

**Ros Neilson**  
LDA Secretary

## Manifesto

LDA recently called for submissions for its manifesto, "Every Child a Reader", to present to politicians and university Vice-Chancellors on proposed improvements to the teaching of literacy. Submissions have now closed, but if you would like more information, please visit: <https://bit.ly/LDA2022ECARmanifestoCALL>



## LDA and AJLD Awards



Would you like to see one of your colleagues recognised for their achievements?

Nominations are open for the annual LDA and AJLD Awards.

Award criteria and nomination procedures are on the LDA website, [ldaustralia.org/award-nominations/](http://ldaustralia.org/award-nominations/)  
Nominations close 28 May 2022  
Awards presented at the October 22 LDA AGM.

# Consultant notes

## Elaine McLeish, Convenor, Consultants Committee



Consultant membership has always been recognised as a core function of LDA, providing not only a high quality service for students and families, but also ambassadors for LDA's mission. Historically, as most of you will know, LDA Consultant membership has only been open to teachers with postgraduate qualifications in learning difficulties. It is now being opened up to Speech-Language Pathologists. In future, we have plans to include other allied health professionals such as Psychologists and Occupational Therapists.

This is a landmark development for LDA and a very exciting time for the Consultants Committee, who have been working on this for two years. We hope to recruit not only Speech Pathologists but also more Specialist Teachers to help us meet the increasing unmet demand for support we are experiencing through our Online Referral Service (ORS). In March, there were only ten Consultants with vacancies registered on the ORS and more than 50 requests for help.

So, if you are an LD Specialist teacher or a Speech-Language Pathologist interested in joining our Consultant team, you can find information about the criteria on our website. Because we are still smoothing out some problems with the website application process, if you want to submit an application or want more information, please contact me at [consultant.convenor@ldaaustralia.org](mailto:consultant.convenor@ldaaustralia.org) or call me on 0406 388 325 – I'd love to hear from you!

Some more good news from the Consultants Committee is the

introduction of a new 'Certificate of Appreciation' for Consultant members who have retired after many years of involvement with LDA. Some of the other criteria for this award include a long history of engagement with their local Consultant Network meetings, a solid history of attendance at high quality PD, being strong advocates for evidence-based practice and LDA's mission, and being held in high esteem by their LDA peers. Retiring Consultants can be nominated for this award by their Network leader or a member of the Committee. Nominations are then considered by a panel comprising the Convenor and two other committee members.

We are delighted to announce the three inaugural recipients of this award:

### Jean Bolton from Queensland

Jean was an LDA Consultant member for 20 years and an early participant in our Distance network.



Although from a remote location, she attended and provided assistance at all our Queensland conferences, and also attended conferences in Melbourne. She has published literacy programs and resources including 'The Huntsman's Lodge' series. She has always been a keen advocate for LDA, and remains passionate about helping students with learning difficulties.

### Fay Tran from Victoria

Fay has over 30 years' experience working in the LD field including 12 years as an LDA Consultant in private practice. In 2018, Fay was the first



recipient of LDA's Rosemary Carter Award. Her publications include *Teaching Kids to Read*, and *Clarry and the Little White Cloud* and she has produced an app

called *Tricky Spelling*. She has been an active and highly regarded member of our Geelong network for many years.

### Desma Vanderwert from Victoria

Desma was an LDA Consultant in private practice for over 20 years. She has



been a much valued member of our Templestowe network since its inception and a regular attendee at LDA professional development sessions. In her long teaching career, Desma has always been a strong advocate for evidence-based practice.

We thank them all for the significant contributions they have made, over several decades, to their countless students and to LDA.

### Elaine McLeish Convenor, Consultants Committee

*Elaine McLeish is now retired and divides her time between Northcote and Cape Paterson. She has five grandchildren and a German Shorthaired Pointer, who all keep her on her toes.*

### Message from a retiring LDA Consultant

I have thoroughly enjoyed the many years involved with LDA. To work alongside well qualified, but more importantly, sensible people, who possess the same values of teaching practice is indeed to be blessed. It has been both an honour and a privilege to be associated with the organisation of LDA. May I wish you well in your future endeavours as you seek to further LDA in the direction it should.

# In this issue of the Bulletin...

**Ros Neilson, Editor, LDA Bulletin**

**T**he theme of this issue of the Bulletin, '**Teaching Teachers**', reflects the fact that Professional Learning (PL) has become a very important topic of debate in recent months. (For those who are not sure, PL is a term that seems to be replacing Professional Development, or PD, in the current educational context). Professional learning has become increasingly available to teachers in a range of formats, including online or face-to-face workshops and in-service coaching.

During the very stimulating March 2022 LDA conference on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), speakers and panellists from a variety of perspectives kept returning to the importance of helping teachers to improve instructional practice in mainstream Tier 1 classes. Every speaker at the conference pointed out that providing appropriate professional learning for classroom teachers would reduce the numbers of students who need extra support in Tiers 2 and 3, and would make the movement between the levels of support easier and more natural for the students.

A widely-circulated recent pamphlet published by Hill, Papay & Schwartz (2022), of the RPPL team (Research Partnership for Professional Learning) at Brown University, is entitled [\*Dispelling the Myths about Professional Learning\*](#). These researchers summarise evidence to refute half a dozen widely circulating opinions or 'myths' about professional learning, including the concern that professional learning can be a time- and money-waster, and that it is unlikely to work at scale when it is extended

beyond its original research base. Hill et al. (2022) argue that although sustainability is only achieved with strong implementation strategies, professional learning programs can be effective, efficient, and adaptable to a range of contexts.

But the challenge of implementation remains at the chalk-face. What can actually be done to support teachers with ongoing professional learning? As teachers, we can all benefit from learning more about how to teach each other.

Dr Hannah Stark and Beth Shingles start the discussion of professional learning in this issue of the Bulletin with an account of a research evaluation of a wide-scale program that has been designed to support teachers' effective use of oral language as a component of literacy teaching in early primary classrooms. Some of the outcomes of the professional learning are described, and where effects were not sustained at scale, the authors offer reflections on issues that this ongoing study has raised.

A different perspective on current efforts to implement professional learning is then provided by Brendan Lee, who discusses the [\*Think Forward Educators\*](#) group's efforts to support teachers' development via a volunteer mentoring process.

Our Book Review section follows, providing reviews of three recently published books that were written with the aim of supporting effective teaching in primary and secondary classrooms. Reid Smith reviews a book designed to guide primary teachers through the complex field of English instruction in primary school; Melanie Henry evaluates a book designed to support instructional coaching at the secondary level, and Bec Rangas, writing as a well-informed parent, comments on the usefulness of a publication that aims to clarify basic concepts about both the science and the art of evidence-based literacy teaching.

Next, we offer a thought-provoking discussion by Carly Steele, Graeme Gower and Jill Wigglesworth, addressing

the important issue of providing essential professional learning for teachers about students who speak a dialect as a first language that is not Standard Australian English – in this case, Aboriginal students, whose second-language learning needs may be 'invisible' in the classroom.

Finally, Professor Linda Siegel invites us into a Canadian courtroom, providing a brief account of a project on which she was a consultant: the Ontario Human Rights Commission's findings on the *Right to Read* report. This report brings into clear focus the need for teachers to continue to help other teachers to understand and use evidence-based practice in classrooms.

Thanks to our authors for their generous contributions to this ongoing topic of discussion. We hope you enjoy this issue of the Bulletin!

**Dr Roslyn Neilson  
Editor, LDA Bulletin**

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# Teacher Talk in Early Years Classrooms following a Professional Learning Program

Can the provision of professional learning on oral language make a difference to the ways teachers talk in the classroom? **Hannah Stark and Beth Shingles** present some answers, as well as raising some questions.

Ongoing professional learning is critical to improving the quality of teaching in all classrooms. There is a well-established and pressing need to improve the quality and depth of initial teacher education in language and literacy in Australia, but there will also always be the need for the provision of high-quality impactful professional learning for in-service teachers. In this article, we provide an overview of our recently published research on instructional practice following teacher professional learning focused on promoting oral language in classrooms (Eadie et al., 2021), and offer reflections on what we have learned.

## Why do teachers participate in professional learning?

As a sector, Australian educators invest countless hours and resources into professional learning each year. Our

expectation, be it implicit or explicit, is that professional learning will allow us to learn something new, or update or deepen our existing knowledge. We then generally expect that this knowledge will filter into our instruction and interactions with students and clients, and that they in turn will benefit by learning new skills or knowledge.

Look around any professional learning space, and most participants will be jotting down a list of things to do differently when they return to their students or clients the following day. On the other hand, many educators will have had the experience of attending a seminar or workshop that was 'interesting' - but walk away feeling disappointed because it lacked practical strategies to implement.

When we choose to engage in professional learning, or encourage our colleagues or employees to do so, we invest not just time, but money and effort as well. We expect the gains from attending a few hours, or a day or more of professional learning to outweigh the cost of taking time away from the classroom, the clinic, or our lives away from work.

## Transfer of knowledge: Theory of change

We are all continuously looking to improve our professional impact, or our effectiveness as teachers. Before we invest in any professional learning, however, it is worth spending some time considering how and why we might expect certain professional learning activities to lead to instructional practice improvements and improved academic outcomes for students or clients. In the professional learning



research literature, this is often referred to as the 'theory of change'.

The theory of change in this area, however, has something of a black box quality (Timperley et al., 2007; Piasta et al., 2009). Change might take place by teachers becoming more knowledgeable, or by pedagogical practice becoming more effective. We do know that there is a link between teacher learning and student learning, but it can be difficult to know just what the link involves.

## Some evidence: The Classroom Promotion of Oral Language (CPOL) study

The 'Classroom Promotion of Oral Language' study (CPOL) was a cluster randomised controlled trial that evaluated the impact of professional learning upon early years teachers' knowledge and instructional practice, as well as the impact on their students. The CPOL trial built on the earlier 'Oral Language Supports Early Literacy' (OLSEL) pilot study (Snow et al., 2014), which found that professional learning for teachers could lead to improved oral language outcomes for early years students. CPOL was designed to measure if a positive impact on children's oral language as a result of teachers' professional learning could

be sustained at scale (36 schools in the intervention and 36 control schools).

The CPOL trial was informed by a hypothesised theory of change involving 'teacher talk'. We expected that by engaging with the professional learning (four face-to-face workshops, access to online resources and in-school implementation support), the teachers' knowledge would deepen. This knowledge would then influence the oral language teachers used in the classroom as they put their instructional practices in place, and this in turn would impact on their students' developing oral language and early literacy skills.

Our previously published findings from the CPOL study include that professional learning led to improved teacher knowledge (Goldfeld et al., 2021). Teachers who participated in the four days of face-to-face professional learning knew more about language and linguistics than the comparison group. While this was encouraging, these differences weren't sustained one year later. When we examined students' language and academic skills, we did not find differences between our intervention and control groups when measured at 12 months and 2 years post professional learning.

## The impact of professional learning on teachers' classroom talk

One aspect of the CPOL study involved asking whether increases in teacher knowledge led to changes in practice in the classroom, as hypothesised by our theory of change. In our recently published article on 'teacher talk' (Eadie et al., 2021), we report on the classroom instruction data collected from teachers in the intervention and control groups. We wanted to answer the following questions about the teachers' oral language:

- 1 Is the distribution of teacher and student talk in a classroom lesson different for those teachers who participated in the oral language professional learning course (PL) compared to those who did not?
- 2 Are the types of teacher talk different for those teachers who participated in the oral language PL compared to those who did not?
- 3 Are the types of questions used in teacher talk in the classroom different for those teachers who participated in the oral language PL compared to those who did not?

In order to allow us to quantify classroom talk, the participating teachers were asked to make an audio recording of a routine lesson on their phones. In most instances, this was sharing a 'Big Book' with their class. We determined that this was a low-cost, accessible, unobtrusive approach to collecting this data. These recordings were then transcribed. Each utterance was coded to allow us to examine the types of teacher talk observed. These codes, taken from a previously published framework (Anstey, 1991; Edwards-Groves, Anstey & Bull, 2014), broadly captured the purpose of the teachers' talk along three dimensions:

- to do with organising the classroom or the task;
- to do with completing language or literacy tasks;
- to do with what was coded as 'Learning how, when, and why about literacy', which involves explicit instruction in literacy skills.

We initially piloted this approach with a small group of teachers, following their classroom talk to determine the feasibility and reliability of this method. We then applied this same approach to our larger intervention and control groups and compared differences.

## What we found

When we compared the teachers in the intervention group with our control group, we found no statistically significant differences between the classroom talk relating to any of our three experimental questions. There was little evidence of a difference between the groups in the distribution of teacher and student talk. The teachers who attended the professional learning did not use more explicit instruction, and there were few differences in the types of questions asked, despite both topics being a focus of the professional learning program.

Of course, teacher talk is only one aspect of classroom practice. Do our findings indicate that there were no differences in other aspects of classroom practice? On reflection, using a more wide-ranging measurement of instructional practice and classroom quality may have shed more light on the differences and similarities between these two groups of teachers.

## The challenges of changing instructional practice

It is difficult to change instructional practice. Although the teachers who participated in the professional learning had a relative increase in their oral language and linguistic content and pedagogical knowledge, this didn't necessarily transfer into their teaching practice as measured in this study.

There remains a limited understanding of how professional learning can lead to change at scale.

We need to think carefully about how we integrate new and existing knowledge, especially if there is dissonance between these ideas.

Partnerships between schools, education sectors, and researchers need to continue to focus on the design of professional learning, with careful consideration given to the structure, intensity, and content of professional learning. This is especially important when professional learning is delivered to large numbers of attendees, at scale.

Change has to be sustainable, too. Learning new information is not enough. Even if change in instructional practice and student outcomes are achieved, we need to think about how improvements are then sustained. Creating the conditions for sustainable change may be resource-intensive and costly. Coaching and implementation support as a form of professional learning may need to be accessible and ongoing if change is to be sustained.

Adaptability may be important. Professional learning that is delivered with flexibility and over a longer period, with support around implementation that is adapted for the individual teacher and school, may lead to lasting change in practice.

We must also continue to look for opportunities to evaluate and measure the impact of professional learning, even though it can be costly and time-consuming to do so effectively. There is a strong case for moving beyond surveying participants' satisfaction and engagement with professional learning and looking for opportunities to measure if there has been an impact and transfer into the classroom.

## Conclusions

Our findings from CPOL demonstrate that, despite relatively intense professional learning, changing instructional practice is challenging. As Piasta et al. (2009) have observed and we concluded from our own study,

professional learning may be central to improving the quality of teaching in all classrooms, but it requires not only the acquisition of specialized knowledge but also an understanding of how to use this knowledge in classroom communication to promote student learning and achievement.

If the net gain of a day or days spent engaging in professional learning isn't translating into improved outcomes for students, we may need to ask if we have got the format, the content, the dosage, the intensity, and the strategy right. It is very important to know when it may be time to rethink our strategy, and to learn from our own experience of professional learning.

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**Hannah Stark, B.Sp.Path., P.G.Dip Health Research Methodology, Ph.D., is a research fellow in the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Hub at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. Hannah's clinical and research interests centre around language and literacy as a lever for reducing inequities in early childhood. Hannah is an experienced speech pathologist and has worked with children, families and educators in not-for-profit, Catholic and Government organisations. Her Ph.D. research was embedded within the Classroom Promotion of Oral Language trial.**

**Beth Shingles, B.A., Dip.Ed., M.Ed., Ph.D. Candidate, is a researcher and project manager working at the education and health interface. She has managed several large-scale school-based trials at the Centre for Community Child Health. Her research interests include a focus on implementing solutions that eliminate developmental and educational inequities for Australia's children. Understanding how to work alongside educators to implement sustainable improvements in practice within complex school systems is Beth's current research focus.**

## Would you like to browse through the LDA Bookshop?

The LDA Bookshop features a limited number of publications, all founded on evidence-based research, that bridge the gap between the research and practical teaching resources for school administrators, classroom teachers, school support staff, and those who teach individual students. You can make purchases via the LDA website. Please contact LDA ([enquiries@ldaustalia.org](mailto:enquiries@ldaustalia.org)) if you would like to suggest books that we could usefully add to our bookshop shelves.



# Challenges of Teacher Professional Learning

In this article **Brendan Lee** outlines the rationale of his own journey as a school leader in thinking about, planning, and delivering professional learning to teachers.

*"And cut!" calls out the Instructional Leader.*

*The 'students' start chatting amongst themselves, and the Instructional Leader approaches the practising teacher. "Do you know why I called, cut?" asks the Instructional Leader.*

*"Yeah, after the Turn-and-Talk, I asked the speaker to respond to the class, rather than the listener. This let the listener off the hook." responds the teacher.*

*"You got it, but that's why we're practising now, so we can fine-tune your teaching!" replies a relieved Instructional Leader.*

I've just described a fictional scene that Dr. Simon Breakspear, founder of [Teaching Sprints](#) and [Agile Schools](#), alluded to in a recent webinar for the Think Forward Educators (TFE) Mentoring Program. This article provides the context for that webinar.

I begin with the fact that as teachers, we normally don't get time to practise new skills in a training environment. Teaching is not like playing competitive sport, where you have training nights on Tuesday and Thursday before a game on Saturday. And this presents a challenge when it comes to teacher professional learning.

## Teachers aren't prepared to do a good job

Some of the major challenges currently facing teachers include:

### Initial Teacher Education

- A number of recent reports on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) on reading, writing and mathematics (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Fahey et al., 2021; McLean & Griffiths, 2022) tell us that we are not preparing novice teachers adequately for the challenges of the classroom. A report published by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022) argues strongly that ITE courses should be evidence-based and more support should be provided for early career teachers.

### Pressures of decision-making

- Teachers have to learn and apply their learning simultaneously. Decision-making becomes very difficult in this context – and that's if you remember what aspect you wanted to change, under pressure.
- Jackson (1990) pointed out that teachers make between 1200-1500 decisions every day and that doesn't even include outside-of-class time! For example, teachers have to decide: How will they allow students to enter the classroom? Where do they put their bags? Where will the teacher stand as they enter? Where will the students sit? Who can they sit next to? How much noise will be allowed? ... As well as 'What am I going to teach today?'

### Lack of time

- A report by [Hunter et al. \(2020\)](#), published by the Grattan Institute, includes a survey of 5,442 Australian teachers and school leaders, in which it was found that "more than 90 per cent of teachers say they don't have enough time to prepare effectively for classroom teaching – the core of their job."

## Challenges of learning as an adult

As adults, we are all hindered to some extent by a number of cognitive biases such as:

- The Dunning-Kruger effect: We think we know more than we do.
- Confirmation bias: We look at new information based on preconceived ideas.
- Sunk-cost bias: We make decisions based on how much we have previously invested (time or money).
- The 'curse of knowledge': When we know what we know, it can be hard to understand what others don't know.
- Halo effect: We are influenced by who is presenting information to us due to their status or presence.
- Fundamental attribution error: We can over-emphasise personality-based explanations for a person's actions.

Essentially, therefore, teachers are not entering the profession properly prepared, and they are then not given adequate support to improve on the job. It doesn't matter how you look at Australia's results in PISA over the past couple of decades, any teacher would be able to tell you that our students are not where they could be. This lack of success then leads to low morale. Experiencing early success is vital for building intrinsic motivation. As McCrea (2020) argues, we are more likely to pay attention if we believe it is a wise investment to do so.

## Schools aren't prepared to support teacher improvement

Teachers are a product of their school's system. If classroom teachers are feeling that they don't have enough



time, knowledge, and resources, it's likely that school leaders will be feeling the same. Teachers and leaders know that they have to be adaptable, but they are currently faced with an overload of 'jobs' being added on without anything being taken away.

This article is not about changing systems and policies. Rather, I'd like to focus on something that all schools have to do, but don't always execute as well as they could: professional development (PD) or teacher professional learning (TPL). Currently, if teachers are feeling exhausted, undervalued, and lacking a sense of purpose, how can they find the mental capacity to learn?

I have empathy for those that feel under-valued and missing a sense of purpose. I have also sat in PD sessions after school - sessions that feel like they will have no bearing on how you teach. From an economic point of view, we should also value teachers' time:

- PD length of time x number of staff x pay per hour = A lot of money!

In NSW, the Maintenance of Teacher Accreditation Policy of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) mandates that full-time teachers complete 100 hours of professional learning throughout each 'maintenance period' of five years, and I know the expectations are similar across the country. Due to the expectations around professional learning, all schools will have some sort of time allocated for it. However, on average TPL is having minimal impact on improving student learning outcomes (Lynch et al., 2019). This lack of impact can be put down to a number of factors:

- Not having access to evidence-informed programs
- Lack of time to prepare
- The timing of when it is offered e.g., it is often after school when teachers are tired
- Lack of teacher expertise
- No practical element of how to apply the new knowledge
- Poor learning culture in the school

## What can be done?

I like to begin with Professor Dylan William's well-known *quote*: *"If we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve."*

As Hanushek & Rivkin (2006) point out, "The quality of the individual

teacher is one of the most significant variables influencing how much progress students make in school." We can either get rid of underperforming staff or support their development. We don't want to push teachers out (especially in this current climate), so teacher improvement is the most effective and efficient way of advancing student learning outcomes.

There are a number of guides that support the implementation of effective professional learning. The one that I have found really useful is the new theory from Sims et al. (2022), on designing and selecting effective professional development, with their findings and recommendations published in the Education Endowment Foundation's *Effective Professional Development Guidance Report*. After conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis on 104 evaluated PD programs, Sims et al. (2022) summarised their findings in terms of four necessary building blocks:

- **Insight:** Teachers gaining an enhanced or expanded understanding of teaching and learning.
- **Goals:** Motivating a teacher to consciously pursue a specific change in their practice
- **Technique:** Helping a teacher to utilise a new teaching practice.
- **Practice:** Supporting a teacher to consistently make use of some technique in the classroom.

Each of the building blocks has active components that the report refers to as 'mechanisms', which are defined as "empirically evidenced general principles about how people learn and change their practice." (Sims et al. 2021, p.5). These mechanisms, such as 'managing cognitive load', 'modelling' and 'prompting action planning' form the essential ingredients of the building blocks.

Since the release of that report, I have found myself using the guide as a checklist of features to ensure are included when delivering professional learning to teachers.

## Planning a Professional Learning Curriculum

Last year at my school, I introduced a TPL framework at a planning day with school leaders. We looked at Education Consultant Tom Sherrington's three levels of planning professional learning: Whole school, Team, and Individual

(Sherrington, 2021). I divided it up like this:

- **Whole school:** Based on teaching practices that need to be changed across the whole school e.g., curriculum, behaviour, effective teaching. Guided by our Strategic Directions, NSW Curriculum and DoE Policies.
- **Team:** Groups to be formed based on shared goals. Focused on research-informed precise teaching strategies that are deliberately practised.
- **Individual:** Personalised learning based on teacher and student needs, personal interests, and performance and development plan (PDP) goals.

Collaboratively with the school leadership team, we put together a continuous and coherent plan to build teachers' knowledge on the Science of Learning in 2021, before narrowing the focus onto literacy and numeracy in 2022 in preparation for the new NSW K-2 English and Mathematics syllabuses.

## Why I have found the Teaching Sprints Model effective

We decided to focus on the Team level and, having looked at the various guidance reports and other Cycles of Inquiry styles of TPL, I really connected with the Teaching Sprints model articulated by Dr Simon Breakspear. He has co-authored a book with Bronwyn Rylie Jones: *Teaching Sprints - How Overloaded Educators Can Keep Getting Better*. The book outlines three big ideas:

- 1 Start with the Best Bets
- 2 Practice Makes Progress
- 3 Focus on Tiny Shifts

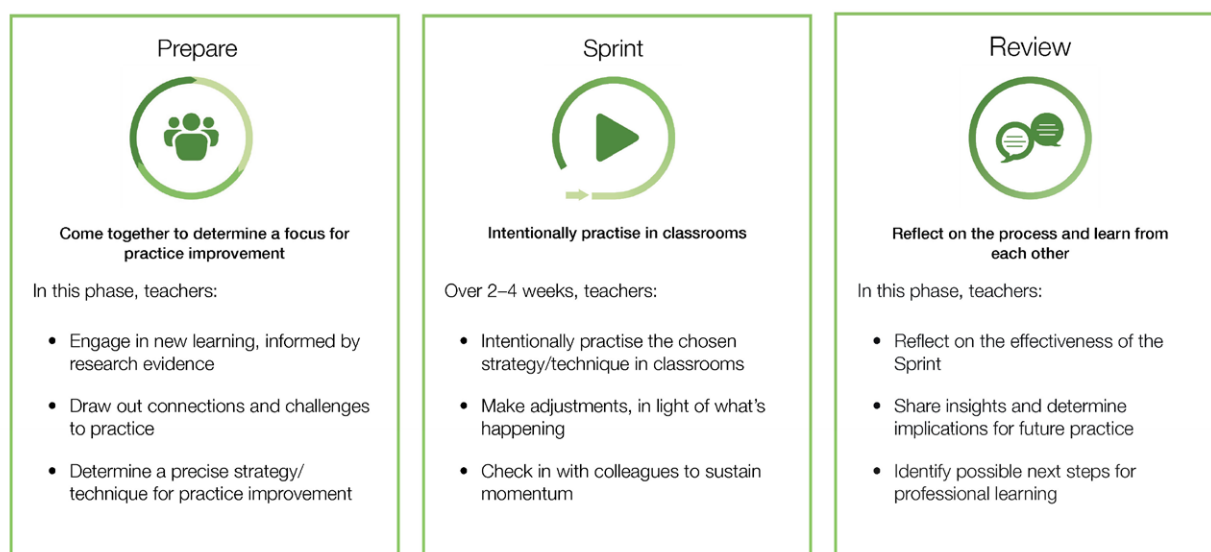
These big ideas are supported by the three-step process:

- 1 **Prepare:** Come together to determine a focus for practice improvement
- 2 **Sprint** (over 2-4 weeks): Intentionally practise in classrooms
- 3 **Review:** Reflect on the process and learn from each other

Looking at the various barriers that teachers face that I outlined at the beginning of this article, I have found Teaching Sprints really helps educators overcome them. This is how it addresses the challenges that I mentioned earlier:

- **Initial Teacher Education:** While it doesn't improve the actual ITE being delivered, by working in

## Teaching Sprints Process Overview



small groups, novice teachers are supported by experienced colleagues during the learning process. The simple steps and focusing on “tiny shifts” serve to decrease the cognitive load on the novice teacher.

- Decision-making: It can be overwhelming looking at all the different aspects of teaching and sifting through the mountains of evidence.
  - Firstly, taking a “best-bets” approach narrows down what teachers look at.
  - Secondly, by intentionally working on one specific element of their teaching practice, this reduces the range of things that the teacher has to think about. Professor Viviane Robinson (2021) has described this deliberate practice phase as ‘relentlessly’ focusing on a goal and leaving everything else as business as usual, even if it means that it is not very good.

Too often we attend workshops, but then fail to enact our learning due to the lack of having a process that forces us to practice. Habits are hard to break, especially if we are not intentional.

- Lack of time: The Teaching Sprints’ website ([teachingsprints.com](https://teachingsprints.com)) provides Protocols, which are described as tools “For Evidence Engagement & Disciplined Dialogue”. It also provides research resources and starters. This means that school leaders do not have to

learn a new method for running TPL and don’t have to spend hours trying to find sources of information.

There are also very realistic suggested time frames for each phase, with the recommendation of trying to fit this into the school timetable. This shows staff that there is an emphasis on teacher learning and that their time is valued.

- Cognitive biases: By leading with the research, this reduces the danger of ‘fundamental attribution error’ or ‘halo effect’ that can be experienced when an individual presents new information. Challenges like confirmation bias, the Dunning-Kruger effect and sunk-cost bias can also be addressed by the group, or more specifically the Sprints Leader.

The leader’s job is to keep referring back to the evidence and to move away from anecdotal personal experiences that may have a detrimental effect on the team’s ‘buy-in’. Leaders have the role of creating a psychologically safe environment, which is why working in small groups rather than as a whole staff group is encouraged.

### Think Forward Educators Mentoring Program

Unfortunately, not all schools are ready to implement the Science of Learning in an evidence-informed manner. Luckily, Dr. Nathaniel Swain saw this as an area of concern and founded the [Think Forward Educators](https://thinkforwardeducators.org/) organisation. The Mentoring Program offers teachers

the opportunity to link with educators outside of their own school.

For more information on the program head to: [thinkforwardeducators.org/mentoring](https://thinkforwardeducators.org/mentoring)

### In a nutshell

- ITE needs to improve, so that beginning teachers are adequately prepared for the challenges of the classroom
- School leaders need to prioritise teacher professional learning and plan for it
- Delivering TPL in an evidence-informed manner means including the building blocks (Insight, Goals, Technique and Practice) and mechanisms
- We might never have a ‘Practice Classroom’, so we have to choose to deliberately practise.
- Take a best bets approach and focus on tiny shifts

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*Brendan Lee is an Assistant Principal as Blaxland East Public School, NSW. When he's not playing "dress-ups" with his two daughters, he focuses on bridging the gap between research and practice by supporting teachers in implementing the evidence.*

# TEACHING SPRINTS

How Overloaded Educators Can  
**KEEP GETTING BETTER**

SIMON  
BREAKSPEAR  
BRONWYN RYRIE  
JONES

CORWIN

# Book Review: Teaching and Learning Primary English

In this book review, **Reid Smith** provides an overview of a publication that takes teachers through a tour of a very wide territory: the Primary English Curriculum.

*Teaching and Learning Primary English (2021), edited by D. Thomas and A. Thomas. Oxford University Press.*

Education is littered with memorable quotes and platitudes, drawn from texts and floating about in social media. None of them come closer to describing the essence of teaching more than this well-known gem from Dr Louisa Moats:

*“Teaching reading IS rocket science.”*

Moats (2020) outlines the incredible complexity involved in the teaching of reading, and the depth of knowledge and understanding that is required to help children make progress. Any primary school teacher who has embarked on the journey of helping kids to read and write, along with all the other skills that a good primary literacy program entails, knows its complexity and difficulty. What makes the task difficult is the knowledge and effort required to properly address the various aspects of literacy into one place. There are so many plates to spin, and only so many limbs to spin them.

A recently released book, *Teaching and Learning Primary English*, edited by Damon Thomas and Angela Thomas, will be a godsend for many teachers. It brings together a range of research on primary English and then translates it into actual classroom practice. With increasing access to research and researchers, the question for new and experienced teachers alike is what it looks like in the classroom. This has been a vexed question for teachers to answer on their own – and luckily, this new volume is here to help.

*Teaching and Learning Primary English* is composed of a series of chapters authored by a range of eminent researcher and teachers. The book uses a central metaphor of the travel guide, taking the reader through three general “regions” of Primary English: Reading, Writing and Children’s Literature. Each of these regions is broken down into a series of “destinations” (chapters) that then addresses component themes (like vocabulary and fluency), describing the evidence-base for each. Thomas and Thomas set some frameworks around instruction early, describing a model of explicit instruction that becomes the backbone of the sample classroom application and ideas in each chapter. This framework provides coherence in the way research is translated into practice.

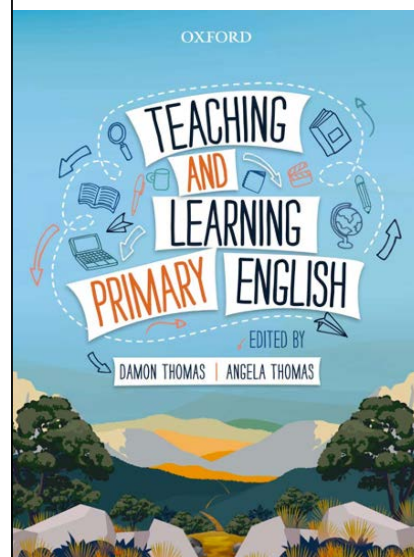
The authors of each chapter describe typical development of children in the domain and ways to assess that progress, before providing sample lesson plans so that teachers can get a feel for what teaching these concepts might look like in the classroom.

The range of topics covered in the text is comprehensive; the expected Big 6 of reading and the various levels of organisation of writing sit alongside chapters on picturebooks, keyboarding skills and handwriting. One particularly

useful chapter provides advice on working with children with reading difficulties, which is an area of some trepidation for some primary teachers.

Perhaps the most common question teachers have about primary English teaching is how they can put together their literacy blocks to most effectively address all the necessary literacy skills. Examining the index of *Teaching and Learning Primary English* gives a clue as to the complexity of this task. There are 25 “destinations” in total, some of them hugely complex and taking years for children to master. Given all the skills and knowledge that “primary English” entails, how does a teacher make decisions about how to structure their day and properly address each of the important strands of primary English?

*Teaching and Learning Primary English* attempts to address this with a final chapter featuring the reflections of practicing teachers on practical considerations, with an emphasis on how they arrange time and prioritise teaching of various aspects of English in their classrooms. Having a window into teachers’ practices is always



interesting; there is so much to learn from the experiences and expertise of others. What was striking for me was the difference in emphases placed on different elements of English from each of the teachers – the Australian Curriculum has long been a Rorschach inkblot upon which we can imprint our own concept of what literacy instruction should look like. Being responsive to student and cohort needs is important; however, I felt that this chapter could have benefited from more concrete guidance on planning and programming based on the research featured in the rest of the book.

One challenge present in boiling down a significant body of research to a manageable and useful text is that the contributors to the volume hold a range of different views about the ways in which primary English should be taught. The task of weaving those contrasting ideas into a coherent whole is not an easy one, and the editors have done a fine job despite the occasional inconsistency.

*Teaching and Learning Primary English* is a worthy text to sit by any primary teacher's desk, and no doubt would accumulate dog-ears and sticky notes over time. I would recommend this book for those teachers looking for a fine, coherent summary of the current stage of research and ways in which it could be implemented in the classroom.

#### Reference

Moats, L. (2020). *Teaching reading IS rocket science*. American Federation of Teachers.

*Reid Smith is a primary teacher and Head of Curriculum, Assessment and Instruction at Ballarat Clarendon College. He is a PhD candidate at La Trobe University, studying the relationship between knowledge accessibility and reading comprehension, and is a member of the La Trobe Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab.*

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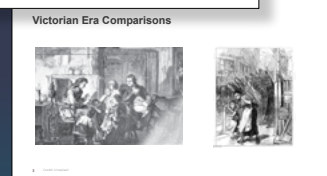
- **lesson videos** – a teacher presenting a lesson using effective practices such as explicit instruction
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# Book Review: Literacy Coaching in the Secondary Grades: Helping Teachers Meet the Needs of All Students

In this book review, **Melanie Henry** evaluates a secondary schooling perspective on an 'Instructional Coaching' approach to teacher education and support.

Wexler, J., Swanson, E., & Shelton, A. (2021). *Literacy Coaching in the Secondary Grades: Helping Teachers Meet the Needs of All Students*. Guilford Publications.

As a secondary school leader bearing the title of Instructional Coach, a key part of my role has been to figure out how to use the evidence from research around best practice instruction, and support teachers to apply the evidence to classrooms to improve student outcomes. As I became increasingly aware of the language and literacy challenges faced by secondary students, I sought advice from a range of experts and read widely, but I found some recommendations difficult to translate to school or adapt to the secondary level. Recommendations were often not written with older students in mind, and they did not take into consideration three important features of the secondary school context: the complexities of curriculum; timetabling challenges; and teacher

beliefs about their role. Wexler, Swanson & Shelton fill an important gap in publishing *Literacy Coaching in the Secondary Grades: Helping Teachers Meet the Needs of all Students*, because this book explicitly recognises all three of those feature of the secondary context. It is the resource that I wish I had had, probably half-way between starting in my instructional leader role and where I am now.

I think I would best describe this as a very 'intentional' resource: it is written for a school leader (middle level or above) who is in a position to promote and shift whole-school change. School leaders in this position are busy people and don't necessarily have time to sift through the research themselves. This means they would benefit greatly not only from a synthesis of the research but also from someone else's expert thinking in how to translate the research to actual classroom practice. Wexler, Swanson and Shelton were all once secondary school teachers, and their authentic understanding of the sources of challenge comes through in their approach to writing this book, which is supported by checklists, examples of learning tasks and case study examples.

Divided into three key sections, this book is probably best read in the order in which it is written, although readers with prior knowledge could probably read it in any order, as required.

Part 1, *Introduction*, devotes three chapters to defining the scope of the adolescent literacy problem and providing the reader with the language to make a convincing argument for a model that includes both *literacy instruction* and *intervention*. The distinction here between instruction and intervention is important, because it highlights that with a few deliberate tweaks to practice,

all classroom teachers can provide more effective Tier 1 literacy instruction to all students, integrated within their content discipline area.

Part 2, entitled *Instructional practices every secondary literacy coach should know*, comprises five chapters that deal with the role of the Instructional Coach in supporting teachers to develop their expertise in high impact instructional practices. To highlight a few: these practices relate to explicit instruction and corrective feedback, building background knowledge and vocabulary, selecting texts for classes with a wide range of abilities, fluency instruction, and how to intensify instruction for those who are struggling (chapters 6 and 7).



## LITERACY COACHING IN THE SECONDARY GRADES

Helping Teachers Meet the Needs  
of All Students

Jade Wexler, Elizabeth Swanson,  
and Alexandra Shelton

Although illustrated with examples, the summaries around what is effective practice are short, and both teachers and coaches might benefit from drawing on additional resources that the authors suggest, which purchasers of the book may download from the publisher's [website](#). One of the many useful tools that can be downloaded, for example, is the *PACT* (Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text) checklist, which offers a way for teachers or instructional coaches to observe and record whether the target strategies are being implemented.

Part 3 is entitled *An adaptive coaching model to improve literacy instruction for all students*. This section addresses the challenge of supporting teachers in a way that adapts to the different needs of individual teachers, providing a suggested structure and approach. The authors highlight how critical high quality professional learning is to the success of change in schools, attributing at least some of the challenges of poor adolescent literacy to a 'trickle-down effect' (p.123) where teachers can't access the support that they need to improve student learning because the coaches themselves have weak knowledge of what to do or how to do it.

To address this challenge, the authors introduce a framework called an Adaptive Intervention Model (AIM). The underlying principles of the AIM model specify that the interventions are targeted and responsive to the needs of the individual, in a way that is similar to the provision of intervention in any other context: firstly, the type or dosage of intervention offered is individualised according to the participant's needs; and secondly, the intervention is regularly adjusted based on the response towards the intended outcome. This makes sense to me, and already sets up the coaching process to be more valuable than one that lacks an individual as well as a whole school component.

What also strikes me as distinctive about the AIM coaching model is that, rather than a simple content emphasis, the goal of coaching is for teachers to know which practices (summarised in Part 2) to use and how to implement them to effect. These practices, then, become the focus of the coaching, which involves plan-monitor-reflect sessions, with frequent check-ins.

The authors suggest that for the coaching process to work well, the instructional coaching role should sit

with one person and all teachers should participate. This is a luxury I enjoyed in my context but, from my experience, it may still be rare in Australian secondary schools.

One thing I very much like about this book is how easy the authors make it for the reader to 'see how' and imagine the ways that they would apply the recommendations to their context. It's not full of jargon, and the authors address the reader directly. Each chapter also has some helpful 'Terms to know' and reflection questions to help readers to check their own understanding of key concepts. The checklists and worked examples dotted in chapter appendices throughout offer helpful starting points to replicate and adapt as required.

This is, however, a short book – 244 pages from start to finish, which includes extensive references – so I would not necessarily recommend this as a first or introductory text to evidence based-practices for addressing literacy in the secondary school context. It's an effective synthesis in that it brings together a large amount of literacy research in a coherent way, but it doesn't go into any one area in significant depth. Chapters and sections are short, so it's easy to read. But if this is the only, or one of few, literacy resources the coach has used, they may not have the depth of knowledge to address the follow-on questions that teachers may have. I would not put this down as a failing or something missing from the book – it's just not its purpose.

I was thoroughly excited when I received the alert that this book was published, as I had found a previous publication by this researcher team (Sharon Vaughn is the editor of this series) to be very helpful to me in the challenge of thinking about how to structure an approach to intervention in my secondary school: *RTI for reading at the secondary level* (Reed, Wexler & Vaughn, 2012). I would encourage readers to seek out that publication, as well as other research from the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk (University of Texas at Austin). Their secondary-focused publications are high quality and very useful.

## Reference

Reed, D. K., Wexler, J., & Vaughn, S. (2012). *RTI for reading at the secondary level: Recommended literacy practices and remaining questions*. Guilford Press.

*Melanie Henry is a Ph.D. researcher in La Trobe University's Science of*

*Language and Reading (SOLAR) lab. Until recently she was also the instructional leader at The Pavilion School, a specialist setting for at-risk and disengaged adolescents returning to education. Her research interests centre around evidence-based literacy interventions for secondary students, instructional practices, school decision-making and change in schools.*

# Book Review:

# The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading

**Bec Rangas**, a parent who has learned how to help her own children to learn to read, offers comments on a publication designed to elucidate concepts central to an evidence-based approach to teaching reading.

*The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading (2021), by Christopher Such. Corwin.*

I am writing this book review from the perspective of a parent who has had the challenging experience of helping my own children to learn to read, and who has engaged in discussions about teaching reading with my children's school. Further, in my role as LDA Administrative Officer, I have been exposed to the excitement and challenge surrounding LDA's mission to help all children learn to read and write. In this context, being invited to read and review this book by Christopher Such has been a real privilege.

In *The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading*, Christopher Such has provided a comprehensive look at teaching reading at a primary school level. He begins by taking the reader on a short journey through the creation of the written English language and

how it compares to other written languages, with a view to providing an understanding of the reasons reading should be taught in a certain way.

With his clear support of teaching reading through the use of Structured Synthetic Phonics (SSP), Such confronts the arguments of many teachers who insist that whole word or balanced literacy approaches are the best way to teach reading. Providing good quality references to support his comments and conclusions, Such has ensured his book can be confidently viewed as a position based on thorough research.

Discussions on the appropriateness of terminology used in the different approaches to teaching reading are extremely useful in the clarification of why people often oppose certain views. Such helps to identify why the language we use can be so important in bringing about change.

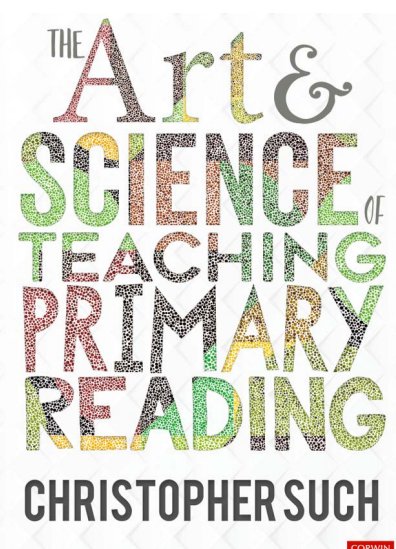
Such addresses a wide range of topics in the book, including reading difficulties, writing, assessment and data, the process of selecting appropriate books, and the importance of spelling as a means of strengthening orthographical knowledge. Despite this breadth of focus, it is also a practical book: he even goes so far as to provide sample timetables for teaching reading in each grade of primary school. Latin and Greek root words are listed, as is a list of Tier 2 vocabulary words for primary schools, and a comprehensive glossary.

One of the very useful features of this book is the way in which Such has presented his work. The book's chapters (grouped into six logical parts) each contain a summary ("In a nutshell..."), other implications for the classroom, questions for professional discussions, a retrieval quiz, suggestions for further

reading and, of course, references. This layout assists in making the book versatile for use by many readers.

As a parent interested in assisting my children with their reading, I found this book very informative and easy to follow. The prompt to think back over what I had just read and ensure I really understood its content, was welcome. Indeed, I re-read some sections as a result. For those who want to delve deeper, suggestions on what to read next are also very valuable.

For those working in a school setting, I can see this book being useful for enlightening those not familiar with the SSP and the Science of Reading approach. For those uncertain about the ongoing debate between balanced literacy and the use of SSP, I can see



this book being a tipping point for understanding why it is that supporters of a SSP program so vigorously promote that approach. The layout Such has provided makes this a useful tool for a Literacy Coordinator wanting to enhance the understanding of their teaching staff and prompt discussion. It is equally useful, however, for an individual teacher wanting to enhance their own understanding.

I highly recommend this book, no matter what the reader's level of understanding of the Science of Reading. I feel sure that, especially in the points that the book offers for discussion, there is something in it for all.

*Bec Rangas is the Administrative Officer for Learning Difficulties Australia, as well as being the mother of four children and a passionate advocate of the right of every child to learn to read.*

*Note from the editor: A very useful 'Book Study' activity focussed on Such's The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading was curated by Pam Kastner in 2021. These Book Study discussions, along with podcasts, PowerPoint presentations and YouTube videos are available at: <https://wakelet.com/wake/F59eLLyuJU8ea1Xwl8kNS>*

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# Invisible language learners: What educators need to know about many First Nations children

In this article, originally published in *The Conversation*, **Carly Steele, Graeme Gower and Gillian Wigglesworth** tackle the issue of what teachers need to know about students in their classrooms who may not be recognised as speakers of an additional language or dialect.

Of the original 250-plus languages and over 750 dialects spoken by First Nations peoples before 1788, only 12 are being learned by children today.

However, widely spoken contact languages – creoles and dialects – have emerged. One example is Aboriginal English, which is a broad term used to describe the many varieties of English spoken by Aboriginal people across Australia. Another example is Kriol, which is a creole language spoken across northern Australia.

These contact languages are not always recognised as the full languages they are by some educators and society generally.

Because of this, many First Nations children are not treated as second language learners. Their languages are sometimes viewed as deficient forms of Standard Australian English and can be “invisible” to teachers and education systems.

To improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

children who do not speak Standard Australian English as their first language, their language backgrounds must be recognised and valued.

## What are contact languages?

Contact languages form when communication is essential between speakers of two or more languages. In Australia, this occurred between the speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and English speakers after the British invasion in 1788.

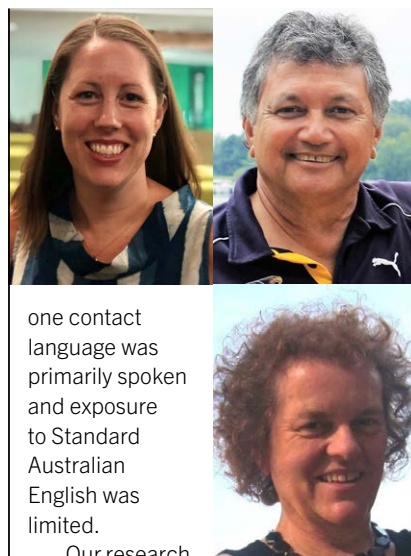
A variety of contact languages developed which are both similar to, and different from, each other. Some languages are more closely related to English, while others have more features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Many of these contact languages are not officially named.

The features of contact languages often reflect the impacts of colonisation for communities across Australia. These factors contribute to their lack of recognition in Australian society, including school systems.

## Our study

Little is known about contact languages, but many First Nations children all over Australia come to school speaking them as their first language.

Our research was conducted at three primary school sites in Far North Queensland. One group was made up of monolingual Standard Australian English speaking children. The other two groups were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who spoke Indigenous contact languages. The First Nations groups were located near each other, but despite their proximity, they differed. One of the two First Nations groups was in a rural town where Standard Australian English is widely spoken and the children had a diverse range of language backgrounds. The other was in an Aboriginal community where



one contact language was primarily spoken and exposure to Standard Australian English was limited.

Our research is intended to make the Standard Australian English language learning needs of many First Nations children more “visible” to educators. We identified some of the linguistic differences between Standard Australian English and the contact languages these First Nation children speak for testing.

First, we compared the short-term memory capacities of the three groups. The short-term memory capacities of all groups were the same, demonstrating all the children had the ability to store language in their short-term memories for immediate use.

Next, these students were asked to orally reproduce a range of simple sentences given to them in Standard Australian English to gauge their proficiency. There were 18 simple sentences of different syllable lengths – six, nine and 12.

Sample sentences included:

- The dog barks at the cats (six syllables)
- In the bush, they built houses from sticks (nine syllables)
- He always eats mangoes in the park with his friends (12 syllables)

Each sentence was marked for

grammatical accuracy in Standard Australian English. The speaking ability of all three groups differed significantly. On average, the Standard Australian English-speaking group recorded 71.1% accuracy, the group of First Nations children with diverse language backgrounds scored 45.1% and the others who spoke the same contact language and lived in an Aboriginal community scored 29.6%.

We also examined students' knowledge of four Standard Australian English grammatical features:

- The prepositions "at", "in" and "on"
- Plural "s" on nouns, for example cats
- Simple present tense with a third-person singular "s", for example, *she runs*
- Simple irregular past tense, for example, they *ate*

The Standard Australian English-speaking group and the speakers of contact languages differed significantly in all aspects except for the prepositions "at", "in", and "on" where there was no difference.

For the other grammatical features, the difference of accuracy between the Standard Australian English speakers and second group ranged from 12.1% to 20.8%, and for the third from 20.1% to 45%. Simple present tense with the third-person singular "s" was the most difficult feature for the speakers of Indigenous contact languages, and plurals the easiest.

These findings highlight the close relationship that exists between Indigenous contact languages and Standard Australian English, as well as the significant differences.

Speakers of Indigenous contact languages may be proficient in some aspects of Standard Australian English, as demonstrated by their use of prepositions but not others. The findings also showed significant differences between the two groups of First Nations children, which probably reflect their diverse language backgrounds and their differing levels of exposure to Standard Australian English.

## Why does it matter?

Our findings showed the Standard Australian English speaking ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students improved over their primary school years. However, it never reached the levels of their monolingual Standard Australian English speaking peers.

As children progress through school, the Standard Australian English

language and literacy demands increase at such a rate that language gains are unlikely to be identified in either classroom-based or standardised assessments. Consequently, students' achievements may not be visible or recognised in the classroom.

The impact of this can be seen in continued *narratives of deficiency* surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. The *educational and social implications* of this are considerable, and the educational outcomes for First Nations children who speak contact languages are a national disgrace.

## What can be done?

To meet the Standard Australian English learning needs of First Nations students who speak contact languages, their languages must be recognised and valued in the classroom. Contact languages need to be treated with respect and understanding, and not viewed as incorrect forms of Standard Australian English.

To show respect and promote learning, we encourage teachers to learn about students' first language/s and include them in the classroom. Students should feel free to express themselves in whichever language they choose, recognising their first language/s play an *important role* in learning.

All teachers need to understand how language is learned and should be supported to effectively teach Standard Australian English alongside curriculum content. Language skills are the cornerstone of literacy and educational development. Teachers should *explicitly teach Standard Australian English* and provide students with the opportunity to practise their language skills.

Targeted training needs to be delivered in initial teacher education courses and through professional development for those already teaching.

In the *current climate* of heavy responsibilities on time-poor teachers, sufficient funding and time must be given for teachers to gain the skills required.

To provide a fair and equitable education for all, the language backgrounds of First Nations children should be embraced in their education settings and the broader systems.

## Reference

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copy, hyperlinks are available at:

<https://theconversation.com/invisible-language-learners-what-educators-need-to-know-about-many-first-nations-children-175917>.

## Additional reference

Steele, C. & Wigglesworth, G., (2021). Recognising the SAE language learning needs of Indigenous primary school students who speak contact languages. *Language and Education*, DOI: [10.1080/09500782.2021.2020811](https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.2020811)

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*Associate Professor Graeme Gower (PhD) is a descendant of the Yawuru people of Broome, Western Australia and has been involved in Indigenous education for 40 years, eight years as a primary school teacher and 32 years in higher education. He is currently the Project Lead of the On Country Teacher Education Training (OCTE) program in the School of Education at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. The OCTE program targets Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEOs) throughout WA to train as primary school teachers, while remaining in their communities. Graeme is particularly interested in Indigenous cultural competency and research in Indigenous education, including effective school and community partnerships with Indigenous communities and teaching pedagogy.*

*Gillian (Jill) Wigglesworth is Professor of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. She is a Chief Investigator and leader of the Melbourne node of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language. She has an extensive background in first and second language acquisition and bilingualism, as well as language assessment. Her major research focus is on the multilingual communities in which Indigenous children in remote areas of Australia grow up, the languages they acquired as their first languages, and how these interact with English once they attend school.*

# Human Rights vs. the Educational System: The *Right to Read* Inquiry of the Ontario Human Rights Commission

**Linda Siegel**, who was a consultant in the Ontario Human Rights Commission that conducted an inquiry into how children are taught to read and write, has provided a succinct account of the development of a report that has been presented to the Supreme Court of Canada, with recommendations that are in fact relevant to every educational system and every teacher of literacy.

**T**he Supreme Court of Canada has confirmed that the human rights laws in Canada affirm the right of all students to an equal opportunity to learn to read.

Concerned with the possible violation of human rights of students with reading difficulties, the Ontario Human Rights Commission began an inquiry, called *The Right to Read*. The Commission is a body that is independent of government but provides advice to the government. It does not have a law-making function and is not a judicial body in the traditional sense. The Commission produced a Report, entitled *Right to Read*.

In Canada, education is a provincial matter. There are certain national standards; up to the post-secondary level, education must be free and universal. However, there is no national curriculum; each province or territory sets its own rules and procedures in relation to education.

This *Right to Read* report is concerned with education in the province of Ontario, the largest and most populous province in Canada. However, its findings are relevant, and its recommendations are appropriate, for every Canadian province and territory and probably every other jurisdiction anywhere in the world.

The Commission used a variety of methods to investigate the problem. They conducted a detailed analysis of the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum document in relation to language and literacy. They reviewed the curriculum and course outlines of the colleges of education. They obtained data from eight boards of education in Ontario. These boards varied in geographical location and demographic make-up. Until the pandemic made it impossible to do so, they conducted sessions with the public in which people could relate their experiences and express their opinion. During the pandemic there were online surveys that provided valuable data for the Report.

The 157 recommendations of the Report were sweeping and comprehensive. One of the most critical was a set of recommendations involving the language and literacy curriculum outlined by the Ministry of Education of Ontario. The Report noted that word reading skills are a critical foundation for the development of comprehension skills. The Report recommended that

students get explicit, systematic and direct instruction in the important foundational skills, in particular phonemic awareness and phonics.

The Report stressed these skills as necessary, but not sufficient, for becoming a skilled reader.

*"It is of the utmost importance that students in the early years get explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. In later grades, instruction in morphology, that is prefixes, roots, and suffixes, become the foundation of vocabulary skills, so critical to reading comprehension."*

*"A comprehensive approach to early literacy recognizes that instruction that focuses on word-reading skills, oral language development, vocabulary and knowledge development, and writing are all important components of literacy."*

*"Explicit, evidence-based instruction in building background and vocabulary knowledge, and in reading comprehension strategies, are all parts of comprehensive literacy instruction."*

The Report recommended that the Ministry of Education remove all references to the three-cueing system and guessing strategies for reading words. The three cueing system is often used in place of teaching basic phonics skills. It encourages guessing rather than decoding skills.



Another important recommendation made in the report is the systematic use of early identification procedures to identify children at risk for reading difficulties. In the early grades (First Year of Schooling to Grade 2), children should be screened, twice each year, for accuracy and fluency of reading. The Report emphasized that it is very important that the progress of students in reading be monitored with systematic and valid tests.

The Report examined the treatment of Indigenous, Black, and Latin American students, as well as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and found evidence of systemic discrimination in terms of access to resources and encouragement of academic goals. This type of racism and classism is, unfortunately, quite common and pervasive.

The Report urged that students who were having reading difficulties get the benefit of evidence-based interventions. The commission recommended that students who are struggling with reading get remedial help as soon as they need it, without waiting for detailed psychoeducational assessment. Clear criteria should be developed to ascertain which students should receive interventions. The Report emphasized that an intelligence (IQ) test should never be required for a student to access an intervention.

The Report urged that the faculties of education, responsible for teacher training, incorporate the science of reading into their curriculum. In addition, they recommended that the understanding of reading difficulties, including dyslexia, occupy a critical place in their curriculum. The commission recognized the term dyslexia and advocated its use.

The Report recommended that all students who require them should have access to IT and non-IT accommodations, and the criteria for accommodations should be made explicit.

Not surprisingly, Balanced Literacy and Reading Recovery advocates are critical of the Report. The usual arguments are advanced: the Report is too narrow in its emphasis on phonics. As noted earlier, the report is replete with references to the complexity of reading and the importance of a variety of processes. The opponents argue that the English language is too unpredictable for phonics to be useful. Max Coltheart and Louisa Moats, among others, have provided evidence to

disprove this assertion and have shown that most words in English can be successfully decoded based on rules.

It should be noted that at least some of the detractors have financial interests in textbooks, programs, and/or speaking engagements in which they ignore and/or disparage the science of reading.

It is worth noting that the Ontario Ministry of Education has responded in a very positive way to the recommendations of the Report. Here are some quotations from a Ministry of Education document dated March 11, 2022.

*"We will engage with stakeholders in the education sector, parents, and Indigenous partners, and work with key experts so that every student, including students with learning disabilities, is supported to learn to read well."*

*"Revising the elementary Language curriculum and the Grade 9 English course with scientific, evidence-based approaches that emphasize direct, explicit and systematic instruction and removing references*

*to unscientific discovery and inquiry-based learning, including the three-cueing system, by 2023."*

*"Releasing a science-based guide for educators in spring 2022 that will support effective early reading instruction."*

The launch of the Report can be found at <https://bit.ly/right-to-read-live>

The executive Summary and full report are available at <https://bit.ly/RighttoReadInquiryReport>

*Emerita Professor Linda Siegel, University of British Columbia, is a major contributor to the field of learning difficulties. She has over 200 publications to her name, in the areas of early identification and intervention to prevent reading problems, dyslexia, reading and language development, mathematical concept learning, mathematical learning disabilities, and children learning English as a second language. Linda was the recipient of LDA's Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties Eminent Researcher Award in 2012.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# RIGHT TO READ

Public inquiry into human rights issues affecting students with reading disabilities

Ontario Human Rights Commission  
Commission ontarienne des droits de la personne

