

Jocelyn Seamer – July 2018. First Published in the Territory Educator Magazine.

Teachers are amongst the most passionate professionals on the planet. Most of us teach because we love to see the light in the eyes of children and young people as they grow and learn. We hope that our work makes the world a better place and improves the lives of the children in front of us. But there is a problem that needs to be addressed. By us. Today. Just under half of our country experiences levels of literacy that put them at risk of social and financial disadvantage. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) As I think about how our profession manages the issues around reading instruction, I can't get this figure out of my head. Half of our country can barely read the label on the medication they have just been given or understand the information contained in the enclosed fact sheet. We know that low levels of literacy place a person at risk of unemployment, poverty, poor health outcomes, becoming a victim of violence, being incarcerated, depression, anxiety and dying younger than their peers. This is likely not news to anyone. I would like to suggest that we, as teachers, can take steps to address this issue immediately.

The Federal Government's proposed phonics screening check is a hot topic of conversation. South Australia has just completed a trial of over 4000 students with only 15% of children achieving the threshold score of 32/40. I have been a public supporter of a national check as I see the value of systemic data collection that identifies children at risk of reading failure early. The Foundations of Early Literacy Assessment is an important tool in making this identification and I am very pleased that it is a part of our assessment schedule here in the NT. However, I am not writing today as an NT Teaching Principal, but as a member of a profession that has a responsibility to every child in Australia. We see students in our classrooms every single year who just don't develop their reading skills and feel the regret we weren't able to meet their needs. Those children are then passed from teacher to caring teaching and eventually leave us, either in year 6 or in the high school years, having been let down by the school system. The system is letting us down too.

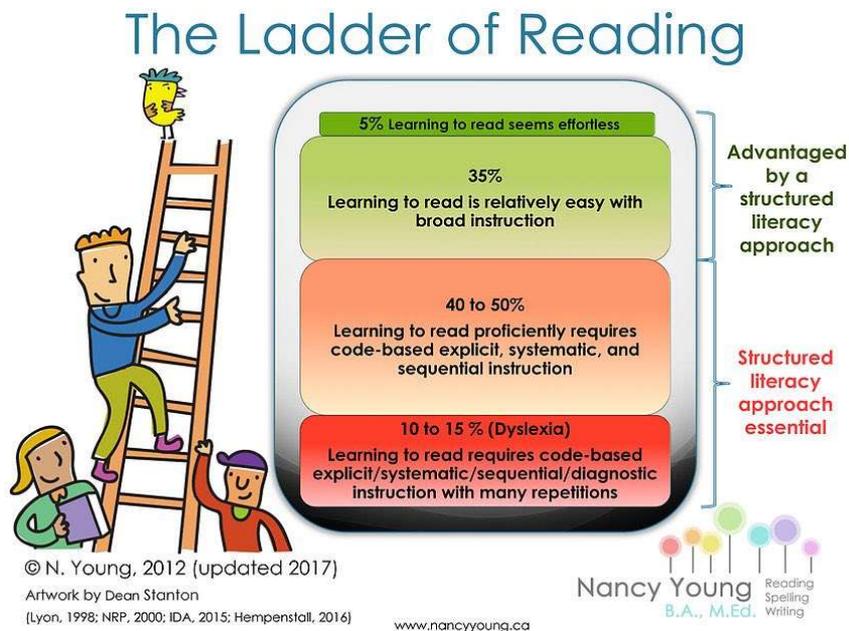
The more urgent issue is that the knowledge and tools to have every child reading at an appropriate level exists right now. I have been very fortunate to have received initial teacher education in New South Wales and then the early years of my teaching career here in the Northern Territory learning from people who understand Systematic Synthetic Phonics. I have seen the results of the approach first hand, in a range of contexts. Phonics, in some form, is taught in just about every primary school in Australia. My question is, "What kind of phonics?" I suggest that the majority of teachers cannot answer that question. Not because they are incompetent but because teachers have not been given the professional learning opportunities to understand the evidence base that underpin lessons and programs that work for every child. Evidence based practice involves explicitly teaching phonics in a

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systematic and cumulative way, providing decodable texts that align with the phonics knowledge and phonemic skills of the child, learning to read and spell at the same time, providing a literature rich environment to build language and comprehension and not teaching high frequency words as whole units. Evidence based practice immerses children in quality literature AND teaches explicit phonics. I know that there are many who will disagree with me. The road forward is paved with dialogue, disagreement and discussion. I am pleased to have the opportunity to further the discussion on this issue.

It is an exciting time to be working in the Northern Territory. We are leading the way with our system supported literacy initiatives and are seeing the beginning of some very pleasing growth as a result. From the Phonological Awareness Kit, to FELA and the supported roll out of Read Write Inc phonics in schools, many teachers are being given the tools to create positive and long lasting change for their students. The really exciting thing isn't Read Write Inc itself. (Although it is an effective vehicle to deliver high quality, scaffolded reading and writing instruction while reducing your weekly prep time to about half an hour). The truly exciting thing is that a very large number of children in the NT are receiving quality systematic synthetic phonics teaching for the first time. This is important because children do not acquire reading the same way that they acquire language. Exposing and immersing children in books and a literature rich environment is not enough to teach the vast majority to read. A systematic, logical, cumulative approach is useful for all, necessary for most and critical for some. Think about that child in your class who, no matter how many times you show him the sight word, simply can't remember the word from one page to the other. Or the child who says the first letter (because that's what she's been told to do) and then gives you every random word under the sun but not the one she needs. I know that there are people reading and commenting that the child just hasn't been taught to use the multi-cuing method properly. I'm sorry, but that method leaves A LOT of children behind. It is simply not good enough when the goal is reading success for ALL. We know that strategies put in place to support a child with additional needs benefit all children in the class. It is the same with reading instruction. To teach all children in the way that benefits the most vulnerable is to ensure that nobody falls through the gaps. Teachers also don't have to play the guessing game of trying to predict which child will experience reading failure. Educated parents, a good breakfast and bedtime stories do not mean that a child will succeed in learning to read. The inverse is also true. To teach all children in the way that benefits the most vulnerable, reduces our need of intervention programs, behaviour support staff, prison officers, crisis centres and unemployment support workers. We have it in our power to ensure that no more children cry when asked to read their home reader at night and that no more parents need to pay thousands of dollars for ineffective tutoring when all their child needed was systematic instruction in the classroom. I've had fathers sitting in front of me, crying because they are scared that their son is going to end up like them. One Dad said to me, "I know

that I'm smart enough to do a better job. But I just can't read the emails. I don't want him to be like me."



I can only use my own school as an example of the power of this approach to teaching reading. We are a very small remote school in the PaRR region with 20 children from preschool to year 6 on the roll. Our children are not ESL and we have very small class sizes. Those are not the main reasons our children are seeing wonderful results. Twelve months ago I challenged myself to bring every child (one third of whom qualify for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability) to grade level. This was a daunting prospect and one that I took on with enthusiasm. The first thing I did was to place all predictable readers under level 20 in a box in the corner of the room and replace them with decodable, cumulative readers. I threw out the sight word program resources and informed parents that other than nightly reading there would be no homework. I then implemented systematic synthetic phonics in the school as a whole school approach. This is not the forum to explain our journey in detail, but what I will say is that we now have EVERY child from year 2 onwards (we don't Benchmark below that grade) reading at or above grade level (bar one student with a disability who is not quite there but is making excellent progress). In 2017 EVERY child achieved expected or above expected growth in PAT-R after less than a year of systematic synthetic phonics and I am confident that this will continue.

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I would like to qualify the above results and explanation of methods by saying that we do not teach phonics alone. Quality phonics is necessary but not sufficient in and of itself to help children develop strong literacy skills. In 2018 other features of our whole school approach are:

- We teach the big 6 with oral language the foundation of our whole literacy program.
- We read high quality literature with complex language every day. Our children have free access to read whatever books they want to, either on their own if they are able or with an adult if they are not yet ready.
- The second hour of our daily literacy block is a language and writing program based in quality picture books where we draw on the work of Kathy Rushton and Joanne Rossbridge to teach both oral and written grammar in the context of carefully selected stories.
- We provide daily reading opportunities where children read a 'good fit' book before moving onto their free choice books. We read with children every day.
- We embed literacy across the curriculum and have worked hard to increase the amount of student dialogue across the day.

My passion for promoting evidence based reading instruction stems from a deep desire to address the social injustice of illiteracy. It is not acceptable that perfectly intelligent children develop into perfectly intelligent adults who cannot read. Is it possible to receive quality instruction but not learn to read to an optimum level? Of course. We know that attendance, nutrition, sleep patterns and instability in the home all effect a child's ability to engage with learning. There is often not a lot that we can do about those factors of a child's life, but there is an awful lot that we can do in the four walls of our classrooms, in our yearly School Perception Surveys and in our staff meetings. We can start by asking for more professional learning in evidence based practice borne out of quality research and the resourcing to bring that practice to life.

I wholeheartedly disagree with the statement that a phonics check is incompatible with the Australian Curriculum. The National Literacy Learning Progress has a whole section on phonics which is very clear about the knowledge and skills to be developed. As I have said, phonics alone does not build strong readers, but without the teaching that builds the skills to connect a squiggly line with a phoneme in one hundred and fiftieths of a second, understand how the 44 phonemes are represented in their various ways and blend those representations together to read words, most children do not have a hope of developing high levels of literacy skills. You cannot make meaning if you can't lift the words off the page.

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I call on our profession to say “Enough is enough” and demand action from our educational leaders to equip us with the skills and knowledge to making effective reading a reality for all of the children in our care. If you would like to read more and have access to the research that underpins the methodology we employ you can find out more at <https://www.iferi.org/>.

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter6102008>