

# Submission to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy

**Marie Emmitt, David Hornsby and Lorraine Wilson**

Melbourne, Victoria.

March 2005

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# **1 Introduction**

## **a Our Background**

We are writing this submission as educators who have worked in the field of literacy education over many years. We have experience in classroom teaching, school administration, teacher education, writing for the profession and leadership roles in literacy associations. Our expertise is recognised nationally and internationally.

Our classroom teaching has included extensive work in disadvantaged schools and with many students experiencing difficulty in literacy.

## **b The Focus of Our Submission**

We endorse the definitions and dimensions of literacy outlined in ‘Briefing Paper 1’. We take a broad view of literacy and come from a holistic view of learning. We are committed to helping students become efficient meaning makers, text users, text analysts and code breakers in an integrated way using purposeful, real-life texts (Luke & Freebody, 2000). However, for the purpose of this submission, we are focusing on the place of phonics in reading and spelling as phonics continues to be misunderstood and used as a ‘red herring’ in many debates about literacy education.

We define reading as a social practice that is always part of real life activity. It involves the construction or re-construction of meaning from someone else’s printed word. Braunger and Lewis (1998, p 5) remind us that “our definition of reading leads inevitably to the way we teach children to read.” This view is supported in the report prepared for the Commonwealth of Australia/ACER which states, “How literacy is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted” (Lonsdale and McCurry, 2004, p 5).

Australia’s literacy standards are the envy of many other countries (OECD, 2002) and while there is no evidence that standards in literacy have fallen over time, it is true that rising levels of literacy are required to participate effectively in a democratic society. We acknowledge that there are students still failing to become sufficiently literate. The reasons for failure are complex. However, systems, schools and teachers have a

responsibility to respond to the diversity of student needs. This is becoming more difficult when

- schools are constrained by the standardization of the curriculum and the expectation that all children will achieve the same standard at the same time;
- schools are not being adequately resourced to provide additional support for children who are cold, hungry, physically or emotionally abused;
- teachers are not always provided with the professional development required to give them the understandings and skills to cater for these very complex and variable learning needs.

Any inquiry into the teaching of reading and students who do not succeed must address the nature of reading itself. What is reading? How do readers read to make meaning? Only when the complexity of reading is understood can plans be made to address the needs of underachieving students. Programs based on simplified definitions of reading side-track the learning, waste the time of those students most in need and have minimal long-term effect.

## 2 The Role Of Phonics In Reading and Writing Alphabetic Text

### a Learning to Read

Literacy skills have changed significantly and understandings of what is involved in *learning* to read have changed as well.

Understandings of what is involved in *learning* to read have changed.

Most reading instruction is based, implicitly if not explicitly, on one of the three following views:

*View 1.* Learning to read means learning to pronounce words.

*View 2.* Learning to read means learning to identify words and understand their meaning.

*View 3.* Learning to read means learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from, or understand, a text (Weaver, 1994, p 15).

Weaver goes on to explain that the first view of reading assumes that meaning will take care of itself once words are pronounced.

The second view assumes that determining individual word meanings leads to the meaning of the whole text.

In sharp contrast, the third view assumes that meaning results not necessarily from the precise identification of every word in a sentence, but from the constant interplay between the mind of the reader and the language of the text (Weaver, 1994, p 15).

Traditionally, reading was viewed simply as the visual-cognitive skill required to ‘read the words’ in alphabetic texts. Getting the words right (that is, pronouncing each word correctly) was considered good reading; comprehension was not the focus.

However, the ultimate purpose of reading is to construct and reconstruct the meaning of text. (Anstey, 2002; Braunger and Lewis, 1998; Goodman, 1975; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983; Smith, 1985, 1988.)

The ultimate purpose of reading is to construct and reconstruct the meaning of text.

Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader’s existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation (Michigan Department of Education, 1989).

Just pronouncing the words is no longer sufficient to participate in today’s society and the demands of a modern democracy.

Clearly, just pronouncing the words is no longer sufficient to participate in today's society and the demands of a modern democracy. As the policy in Queensland states,

(Reading is) a social practice that draws on a repertoire of social, cultural and cognitive resources to construct and reconstruct meanings from various traditional and multimodal texts. It is enacted in different ways, for different purposes, in a variety of public and domestic settings. Reading is therefore a cultural, economic, ideological, political and psychological act (*Literate Futures: Reading*, Education Queensland, 2002, p 23).

Meaning may be constructed from visual texts as well as alphabetic texts, and it may incorporate both print and electronic media. That's one reason why we use the term 'multiple literacies' rather than just 'literacy'.

Meaning may be constructed from visual texts as well as alphabetic texts.

## **b Sources of information used when reading text**

When processing alphabetic text, readers rely on multiple sources of information within that text to make meaning. These sources of information are only available in meaningful texts written by real-life purposes (what we call 'authentic texts'). Readers can access more information from these texts. The more information they can access, the easier it is for them to read and understand the text.

Three important sources of information in text are meaning, grammar and letter-sound relationships – often referred to as semantics, syntax and graphophonic relationships respectively. The complex relationship between patterns of letters (graphemes) and patterns of sounds (phonemes) is often referred to as *phonics*.

Only authentic text provides the assistance that readers need to read for understanding. It has meaning and grammatical sense, which are essential for determining how the letter-sound relationships work. How would you pronounce words such as *read*, *wind* and *close* if 'sounding out' was the only strategy you could employ? You could not select the appropriate pronunciation unless you had a context which provided *meaning* and

Authentic text has meaning and grammatical sense, which are essential for determining how the letter-sound relationships work.

*grammatical function* for the words (as in the following examples).

- i Yesterday, I *read* my friend's book. Tomorrow, I will *read* my own book.
- ii The *wind* blew the tree on to the house. Please *wind* the clock.
- iii They were too *close* to the door to *close* it.

How did you determine the pronunciation of the words in italics?

Unless these words appear in meaningful text, phonic strategies cannot be used to read for meaning. We cannot sound out the word *read* unless we know its meaning or grammatical function first. When the sentence indicates that the word *read* is in past tense form, you pronounce it as /red/ (to rhyme with *fed*, *bed*, *said*). When the word is in future tense, it is pronounced /reed/ (to rhyme with *feed*, *bead*, *seed*).

Unless these words appear in meaningful text, phonic strategies cannot be used to read for meaning.

When the text indicates that the word *wind* is a noun ('The wind .....') you pronounce it with the /i/ sound as in *bin*, *skin* and *thin*. When the text indicates that the word is a verb, you pronounce it with the /i/ sound, as in *find*, *mind* and *kind*. We repeat: meaning and grammar are essential for determining how phonics works. Simply looking at letters and 'sounding them out' does not work – unless reading is restricted to sounding out phonetically regular words in fabrications such as *Nan can fan Dan* (artificial text rather than authentic text).

Meaning and grammar are essential for determining how phonics works.

Many common words such as *are*, *love*, *all*, *the* and *water* are difficult or impossible to 'sound out'. Phonics alone does not help readers pronounce these words, but when they are in meaningful context, students can use *all* the resources in the text and all their strategies to read.

Meaning, grammar and sound-letter relationships are often referred to as three "cueing systems" in text. All three operate interdependently. *No cueing system can operate on its own*, but

when meaning and grammar support phonic knowledge, the combination is powerful.

Research over considerable time has shown that over-teaching of phonics, with little or no emphasis on meaning, is ineffective. (Chomsky, 1976; Carbo, 1987; Meek, 1983; Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996).

Over-teaching of phonics, with little or no emphasis on meaning, is ineffective.

### c Reading Strategies

Common reading strategies include sampling, predicting, testing, confirming and self-correcting. In all of these, phonics plays a part. (Goodman, 1993; Smith, 1988; Weaver, 1994; Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996)

Common reading strategies include sampling, predicting, testing, confirming and self-correcting.

Readers use some key strategies to process text. The eyes send visual information to the brain. The brain uses non-visual information (knowledge of language or syntax, and knowledge of the world, or semantics) to construct meaningful text. The more non-visual information a reader can use, the easier it is to process the visual information or print on the page. Reading is “a questioning or problem-solving process in which we search for meaning, sampling only enough visual information to be satisfied that we have grasped the message of the text so far” (Clay, 1991, p 14).

The more non-visual information a reader can use, the easier it is to process the visual information or print on the page.

In this process of making meaning, using visual and non-visual strategies, readers sometimes miscue. A miscue is an *unexpected* reading error. Consider the sentence, “I will not go to the show.” If a student reads it as, “I won’t go to the show,” the student has not read the exact text, but meaning has not been lost. Continued reading would be appropriate. In fact, going back to self-correct would only interrupt the flow of the reading. (Readers sometimes notice that they have made the mistake. They may correct silently in their own heads, or see no need to self-correct when meaning has been maintained.)

A miscue is an *unexpected* reading error.

Consider the sentence, “It was just one of those unfortunate things.” A student might read it as, “It was just one of those uncomfortable things.”

Based on the grammar (syntax) of the sentence, and the developing meaning, we can easily see how the student might have predicted *uncomfortable*. Since many of the letters in *uncomfortable* are the same as the letters in *unfortunate*, the prediction is even more understandable. If meaning is maintained as the student reads on, there is no need to self-correct; the reader may not even notice that the miscue has been made (experienced readers do this all the time). However, if meaning is changed or destroyed, it is important for the reader to self-correct. If a student does not self-correct when meaning is lost, the teacher will focus the attention back on the text and help the student to use appropriate strategies to read for meaning.

If a student does not self-correct when meaning is lost, the teacher will focus the student’s attention back on meaning.

All readers make errors as they read. What’s significant is whether or not they self-correct when meaning is changed or lost. Proficient readers do not correct when it is unnecessary; they *do* correct when meaning is lost. Testing and confirming of meaning are going on all the time. However, when meaning is uncertain or lost, more conscious attention is given to checking cueing systems one against the other. In the example above, the student will need to look more closely at the spelling patterns within *unfortunate* to self-correct.

What’s significant is whether or not they self-correct when meaning is changed or lost.

Consider the following text:

*Mum shrieked, ‘Please stop fighting. Go to your bedrooms!’*

A child reads:

*Mum shouted, ‘Please stop fighting and go to your rooms!’*

Has the child read for meaning? Clearly, the answer is yes. However, after reading the text, the teacher may go back with the child to discuss the child’s reading.

In comparison, consider this example:

*The boy rode the horse down the lane.*

A child reads:

*The boy rode the house down the lane.*

It is obvious that the child has not read for meaning. If the child does not self-correct, then the teacher must intervene to discuss the overall meaning of the text and then have the child re-read. During the re-reading, it may become necessary to draw the child's attention to the letter patterns in the words *horse* and *house*.

If a child loses meaning and does not self-correct, then the teacher must intervene.

#### **d Phonics and Learning to Write**

While the debate about phonics is usually related to reading, it is actually during writing that phonic knowledge is paramount. While trying to write words, students are required to listen for the sounds in the words and to write letters or letter clusters to represent those sounds.

It is actually during writing that phonic knowledge is paramount.

Research in whole language classrooms (Clarke, 1988; Winsor & Pearson, 1992) suggests that writing is the medium through which both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge develop – the former because students have to segment the speech stream of spoken words to focus on a phoneme and the latter because there is substantial transfer value from the focus on sound-symbol information in spelling to symbol-sound knowledge in reading (Pearson, 2004, p 225).

Children's early writing demonstrates their acute phonemic awareness, that is, their ability to hear sounds in words and to represent them as accurately as they can with the knowledge they have of letters and letter-sound relationships. The following early spellings show that young children are very capable of hearing the sounds in words:

Children's early writing demonstrates their acute phonemic awareness.

tabl (table)      mi (my)      kam (came)      rp (up)

These children are clearly hearing every individual phoneme; they have yet to learn the conventional spellings of those phonemes in these words.

By engaging in the process of invented spelling, children discover for themselves more about the relationships between sounds and letters. They practice applying the alphabetic principle and gain in phonemic awareness (Gentry, 1987 in Sipe, 2001, p 266).

Research has found that development in spelling moves through different stages, which are the same for all children learning alphabetic scripts. The developmental stages are described in different ways (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Wilson, 1978) but descriptions commonly include:

Development in spelling moves through different stages.

- scribbling
- strings of letters and letter-like symbols
- use of some letters to represent some of the sounds in words
- use of letters or letter clusters to represent all sounds in words
- use of common visual patterns
- use of meaning patterns
- conventional spelling.

During the early stages of spelling, students mainly use sound to spell words. At the ‘semiphonetic’ stage, they use some letters to represent some of the sounds they hear in words:

wk (work) u (you) rn (ran) bk (back)

At the ‘phonetic’ stage, they pay more attention to every sound in the word, and represent each sound with a letter (or letter cluster):

tabl (table) egul (eagle) ran (rain) jumpt (jumped)

The demands are increased when students realise that “spellings must account not only for how words sound but also for how they look” (Gentry & Gillet, 1993, p 49). Students also come to realise that spellings are tied to meaning as well as sound, so that a given “meaning unit” needs to be spelled consistently from word to word (we keep the ‘g’ in *sign* to be consistent with *signal*, *signature*, *signify*; we keep the ‘c’ in *medicine* to be consistent with *medical*, *medicate*, *medical*.)

If students continue to spell mainly by sound, they will remain immature spellers. Visual patterns and morphemic knowledge (meaning) must be used if spelling is to move from the phonetic stage, through the transitional stage to the conventionally correct stage (Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Snowball & Bolton, 1985).

If students continue to spell by sound, they will remain at an early stage of spelling.

### 3 Teaching And Learning Phonics

#### a Phonemic Awareness

Much of the debate about the teaching of reading has focused on phonemic awareness (phonological awareness) and phonics. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. Phonics includes an understanding of the relationships between the patterns of letters and the patterns of sounds; these patterns are complex and variable.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words.

There has been considerable debate about the role of phonemic awareness. The debate has centred around whether phonemic awareness is a prerequisite for learning to read and write, or whether it develops through reading and writing. Part of the confusion relates to the concepts of correlation and causation.

Studies that are used to support explicit, systematic phonemic awareness training are correlational. Correlation is not causation. For example, there is a positive correlation between being dead and being in a cemetery. However, the cemetery did not cause the death. There is a positive correlation between phonemic awareness and ability to read, but no causation should be implied.

There is a positive correlation between phonemic awareness and ability to read, but no causation should be implied.

Troia (1999) reviewed 39 phonemic awareness training studies and found no evidence to support phonemic awareness training in classroom instruction. Krashen (1990a, 1999b) conducted similar reviews and had similar findings. Taylor (1998) points out that phonemic awareness research is based on the false assumption that children's early cognitive functions work from abstract exercises to meaningful activity, rather than vice-versa, as in other learning.

Castles & Coltheart (2004, p 77) report that "no study has provided unequivocal evidence that there is a causal link from competence in phonological awareness to success in reading and spelling acquisition".

No study has provided unequivocal evidence that there is a causal link from competence in phonological awareness to success in reading and spelling.

Moustafa (Web site, 2005) reminds us that children who have not yet learned to read have difficulty consciously analyzing spoken

words into their constituent phonemes. For example, children who have not yet learned to read hear the phonemes /p/ and /l/ in the word *play* as a single sound /pl/ (Bruce, 1964; Ehri & Wilce, 1980; Liberman, Shankweiler, Fischer, and Carter, 1974; Mann, 1986; Rosner, 1974; Treiman, 1983, 1985, 1986; Treiman and Baron, 1981; Tunmer & Nesdale, 1985). In fact, phonemic awareness develops *through* reading and writing (Goswami, 1996; Scholes, 1998; Treiman, 1983, 1985).

Phonemic awareness develops *through* reading and writing.

## b Phonics

In written English, the relationships between the patterns of letters and the patterns of sounds are complex. One letter may represent different sounds, and one sound may be represented by different letters or letter clusters. This is true even in simple texts written for early readers.

One letter may represent different sounds, and one sound may be represented by different letters or letter clusters.

In *Grandpa and Thomas* by Pamela Allen, we read:

Grandpa and Thomas go to the beach.  
Thomas carries his bucket and spade.  
Grandpa carries his bag, the big picnic rug,  
and the green umbrella.

This text could be used to discuss some of the different sounds the letter 'a' represents:

- In *grandpa*, the letter 'a' represents two different sounds.
- In *and*, the letter 'a' represents the /a/ sound as in *hat*.
- In *Thomas*, the letter 'a' represents the unaccented vowel referred to as the 'schwa' sound.
- In *carries*, the letter 'a' represents the /a/ sound as in *hat* again.
- In *spade*, the letter 'a' represents the /a/ sound as in *day* (with the 'silent e' being part of the split vowel digraph).

Clearly, teaching that a letter has a sound is quite misleading; we cannot know the sound a letter represents unless it is in meaningful context.

Teaching that a letter has a sound is quite misleading.

The same text could be used to discuss some of the different spellings for the /ee/ sound:

- In *beach*, the /ee/ sound is spelled 'ea'.

- In *green*, the /ee/ sound is spelled 'ee'.

The complex relationships between the patterns of letters and the patterns of sounds can be learned best in text that is meaningful and familiar to the students.

In Pamela Allen's delightful text (extract shown above) the context would be rich for discussing words such as *beach*, *bucket*, *bag* and *big*, identifying the first letter as 'b' and helping children understand the 'b'-/b/ relationship.

Familiar words or highly personal words such as the students' names may also be used to highlight letter-sound relationships. For example, from students' names such as *Jack*, *Christine*, *Katie* and *Carl*, generalisations about representing the /k/ sound can be made.

As a result of daily observation of students through all the literacy events across the day, teachers can determine what phonic knowledge is being used and what other phonic knowledge needs attention. The whole curriculum provides on-going opportunities and contexts for the teaching of phonics; fifteen or twenty minutes a day on an isolated program can never achieve the same result. An externally determined teaching sequence cannot cater for the diverse needs found in any one classroom. It's the teacher making professional decisions at the point of need which ensures relevancy of the teaching and maximises success for learners.

The whole curriculum provides on-going opportunities and contexts for the teaching of phonics.

### **c What can teachers do?**

Obviously, rhyming books are invaluable for the opportunities they provide for children to hear the sounds of language and to see the spelling patterns for those sounds. For example, if teachers use a book like *Cat in the Hat* by Dr Seuss, they would read it together and enjoy the rhyme, rhythm and humour. They might help the children to express their response to the book through drama or art/craft or music, and certainly through oral language. The aim is to engage their hearts as well as their minds!

The aim is to engage their hearts as well as their minds!

...developments in neuroscience prove that emotions are integral to thinking, reasoning, and problem solving and

cannot be divorced from learning (Damasio 1994) or learning to read and write (Coles 1998) (Lyons, 2003, p 2). Books themselves must invite children back time and time again. Revisiting favourite texts provides children with multiple opportunities to match spoken language with written language (to relate sounds to letter patterns). The teacher takes maximum advantage of these re-readings to teach skills and strategies.

Books like *Cat in the Hat* allow teachers to build children's vocabulary and expand their knowledge of how our language works (their knowledge of grammar). During re-readings of the book, comments would be made about the rhyming words *cat* and *hat*. The words are listed and then the children are asked to give other rhyming words to add to the list: *sat, rat, fat, bat, chat*, and so on. Teachers then 'stretch' some words to help the children hear the initial sounds and the repeated rhyming ending: *sss-at, rrr-at, fff-at*. The 'stretchable' sounds are called 'continuants'. Other sounds, such as 'plosives', can't be 'stretched'. However, teachers still break the words into their two parts: *c-at, b-at, ch-at*. They point to the letter (or letter combination) in each part as they say the parts. When the children can do this, teachers then help them to break the words into letters and sounds: *c-a-t, b-a-t*, etc. They help the children learn that, in *these* words, the letter 'a' represents the /a/ sound as in *rat* (sometimes called the 'short a' sound). However, the letter 'a' represents many other sounds, so teachers look at other known words where the letter 'a' has a different sound. For example, they might revisit *Mrs Wishy-Washy* (a favourite story that has become a 'classic') and note that the letter 'a' in her name has the /o/ sound as in *hot*. Then they might have children list other words where the letter 'a' represents the 'short' /o/ sound (*was, want, what*).

Rhyming texts provide wonderful opportunities to focus on sound patterns and the letter patterns that represent them.

Throughout every step of this procedure, there is teacher modelling or demonstration first, followed by shared practice (teacher and children working together) and finally independent mastery and application by the children themselves.

Teacher modelling is followed by shared practice and finally independent mastery.

To summarise, a sequence might be:

1. Read and respond to rich literature or engaging non-fiction text.

2. Re-read to develop reader response, build vocabulary and extend comprehension.
3. Develop response through oral language, drama, art/craft, music.
4. Focus on ‘word families’ that help to highlight phonic generalisations and spelling patterns.
5. Write the words in their two parts (known as onset and rime):

s – at  
 r – at  
 f – at  
 c – at  
 ch– at and so on.

6. Write the letters (or the letter clusters we call digraphs) for each sound in the word:

s – a – t  
 r – a – t  
 f – a – t  
 ch – a – t and so on.

7. Compare the ‘-at’ words (where the letter ‘a’ represents the short /a/ sound) with other words where the letter ‘a’ represents different sounds, as in

So teachers start with a ‘whole’ text which is meaningful and engaging. They teach the skills explicitly, through this text. They revisit the skills over and over again as they continue to use multiple texts of a wide variety.

Teachers teach skills explicitly using meaningful text.

In addition, students learn about phonics in their early attempts to write. When attempting to spell a word, they move from the sounds they hear in the word to selecting letters to represent those sounds.

Students learn about phonics in their early attempts to write.

*How do we know which ‘phonic generalisations’ to teach, and when?*

The term ‘kid-watching’ has been used to refer to the teacher’s role of observing and recording students’ reading and writing

behaviours. Teachers observe which phonic generalisations the students know and they look for those they still need to review or teach. For example, the child who consistently writes the letter 'b' to represent the /b/ sound clearly has the 'b' -/b/ relationship established. The same child may use the letter 'a' to represent the /u/ sound (as in *bun*) because the word 'a' is pronounced /u/ (as in *bun*) and not /a/ (as in *cat*). These constant and disciplined observations inform the teacher about which phonic generalisations need to be taught. Teachers also get the information they need by listening to children read, discussing their reading and using materials rich in alliteration, rhyme, and common spelling patterns.

Disciplined observation informs the teacher about which phonic generalisations need to be taught.

In addition, teachers may use more formal instruments such as those outlined in Clay's book, *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (for example, the Letter Identification Test to test knowledge of letters and the Dictation Task to test ability to hear and record the sounds in words).

#### **d What is the Research Evidence?**

Research in classrooms provides evidence that where skills are taught in context there are benefits to the learner beyond just learning the skills.

Where skills are taught in context there are benefits to the learner beyond just learning the skills.

Freppon (1991) studied 24 first-grade children in four classrooms, two with a contemporary reading program that focused on meaning and two with traditional skills reading programs. She found the children in the contemporary classrooms not only had a better sense that reading was constructing meaning with print but also were almost twice as successful as the children in the traditional classrooms at sounding out words.

Eldredge, Reutzell, and Hollingsworth (1996) studied the reading growth of 78 second-grade children, some in classrooms with shared reading and some in classrooms with traditional round-robin reading (where children take turns reading a story orally). They found that shared reading typically moved average students from the 50th to the 80th percentile in word analysis, i.e., letter-

sound correspondences, on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. They also found that average students in the shared reading group became 20 percent better in oral reading than the students in the round-robin group and the below average students in the shared reading group became 41 percent better than the students in the round robin group in oral reading.

Cantrell (1999) studied the reading achievement of 49 children in 8 multi-age primary classrooms, four that focused on reading for meaning and skills taught in context and four that taught skills out of context and did not promote meaning-centered reading. She found the students in the meaning emphasis classrooms achieved scores between the 50th and 76th percentile on the Stanford 9 national norms whereas the students in classrooms where skills were taught out of context and meaning was not emphasized achieved scores that fell below the 50th percentile.

Students taught skills in context scored significantly higher than those taught skills out of context.

The 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (Mullis, Campbell, and Farstrup, 1993, p. 30) asked fourth-grade teachers across the U.S. to characterise their reading instruction and then compared the teachers' responses with the students' scores on the NAEP standardized test of reading. This national, large scale study found that students whose reading instruction emphasised meaning outscored students whose reading instruction emphasised phonics and that students whose reading instruction had little or no emphasis on phonics outscored students whose reading instruction emphasized phonics.

Freppon's research (1988, 1991) showed the students who were taught phonics in context could apply their phonic knowledge and sound out words more successfully than students who were taught phonics in isolation. Smith & Elley (2005) reported on Freppon's research in the following way:

The study showed that children from the skills based classrooms attempted to sound out words twice as often as the children from the literature based classrooms, but the literature based children were more successful: 52% success rate to 32% success rate for the skills based learners.

Students who were taught phonics in context could apply their phonic knowledge and sound out words more successfully than students who were taught phonics in isolation.

We would do well to remember Donaldson's warning:

‘If a child learns skills without understanding, he has not mastered the system but is, on the contrary, bound by it (Donaldson, 1978, p 99).

#### **4 Students with Difficulties**

There is a range of reasons to explain why some students have difficulties learning to read and write. The reasons include those external to the school (such as family and/or community dysfunction) and those for which the school is responsible (such as programming). There are also some students who have particular learning needs as a result of physical, emotional and intellectual disabilities. Lack of phonic knowledge is likely to be an issue in very few cases.

It is unfortunate that poorer readers have sometimes only been taught phonics – and in addition, phonics in isolation from the other cueing systems. Rather, struggling readers need:

- Access and opportunity to a wide variety of reading materials
- Teaching that motivates readers to want to read
- Teaching that builds self-esteem and confidence
- Time to really read authentic texts
- Supportive instruction in use of all reading strategies
- High expectation of success in a supported environment.

(Braunger & Lewis, 1998.)

Students who struggle with literacy rarely require a unique program. They still have to learn the same reading and writing strategies as any other learner. However, they may need more explicit demonstrations of literacy strategies, opportunities to experience what reading can mean for them, more time involved in real literacy events, more supportive feedback from highly informed teachers, and access to rich literature relevant to their interests (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Students who struggle with literacy still have to learn the same reading and writing strategies.
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Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998) believe that special intervention programs for children at risk should not be based upon a different

curriculum, different goals, or different standards. However, they remind us that special programs should differ from everyday programs in three ways:

1. The professional qualifications of those providing instruction.
2. The intensity of the instruction (made possible by small group and individual teaching).
3. More time devoted to teaching and learning reading.

Research indicates that meaning based instruction for students who are experiencing difficulties in learning to read is more effective than narrowly focused skills based instruction. Milligan and Berg (1992) studied 165 first-grade children, 82 in classrooms with contemporary, meaning-based reading instruction and 83 in classrooms with traditional reading instruction. They found the middle and lower-achieving children with the contemporary reading instruction were significantly better in reading comprehension than the middle and lower-achieving children with traditional reading instruction, especially the lower-achieving children. They also found the high, middle, and lower-achieving males with the contemporary reading instruction comprehended text significantly better than the males with traditional reading instruction.

Meaning based instruction for students who are experiencing difficulties in learning to read is more effective than narrowly focused skills based instruction.

Anderson, Wilkinson and Mason (1991) studied 149 third-grade children in six classrooms. They asked the teachers to teach their students four lessons, two lessons with an emphasis on overall story meaning and two lessons with an emphasis on such things as letter-phoneme correspondences and accurate oral reading. They found that the lessons that emphasized overall story meaning led to better outcomes in relation to factors such as students' recall, oral reading, story interest, and lesson time. While all of the reading groups—high, average, and low—benefited from the emphasis on meaning, the average and low groups especially benefited from it.

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## 5 Teacher Professional Knowledge

In reviews of the literature relating to students experiencing literacy difficulties, a key factor for success is the quality of the teacher (Allington & Johnston, 2000; Allington, 1994; Bembry et al., 1998; Ferguson, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Pressley et al., 2000; Snow et al., 1989).

For students experiencing literacy difficulties, a key factor for success is the quality of the teacher.

These studies, and others like them, simply point to (the) incredible power of providing children with high-quality classroom instruction. In fact, both Ferguson (1991) and Snow et al. (1989) found that nothing was as powerful as the quality of the teacher in predicting the achievement of children” (Allington, 2001, p 112).

Teachers teach; not programs. If governments invest in teacher professional development, the returns are significant.

Investments in teacher development produced far greater student achievement gains than other investments.

Investments in teacher development produced far greater student achievement gains than (other) investments . . . spending on teacher education swamped other variables as the most productive investment for schools (Allington, 2002, p 29).

Teachers of literacy must have coherent theories of learning, language and literacy; they must understand the reading and writing processes and have a broad range of effective teaching procedures. In addition, they need a knowledge and an appreciation of a wide variety of children’s literature and other high-quality texts.

For teachers to be able to support children to learn and use phonic knowledge appropriately it is important that they have explicit knowledge of phonics and give accurate information to students. Below is a list of some of the understandings teachers need to have.

Teachers need explicit professional knowledge.

- Phonics is one information source in recognising words when reading and spelling words when writing, but phonics only works when students have strategies to use all sources of information available in text.
- While there are 26 letters, there are approximately 43-44 sounds.

- There is not a one-to-one relationship between letters and sounds but rather between letter patterns and sounds.
- A letter by itself represents no sound; letters represent sounds only when they occur in words.
- In written English one letter may represent more than one sound. The letter ‘a’ can represent many different sounds (eg *cat, was, apron, walk*, etc). Hence teaching that the letter ‘a’ says /a/ for apple is only part of the relationship and could be misleading.
- The one sound may be represented by different letters (eg *was, dog, sausage, cough*).
- Children’s early writing informs teachers about children’s developing phonic understandings (eg *prite* as written in ‘a pretty dress’). This indicates that the student can hear every sound in the word, and even uses acceptable sound-letter representations. However, the teacher is clear what the student now needs to learn.
- An understanding of the developmental patterns of learning phonics and how children’s writing, with their approximations, can inform the teacher of the child’s knowledge of phonics. For example, if a child writes ‘jumpt’ for ‘jumped’ the teacher needs to understand that the child is using phonic knowledge accurately but now needs to learn that in English spelling the spelling of affixes is consistent despite the pronunciation.
- Many generalisations commonly taught are of limited value as they are complex with too many exceptions. For example: ‘When there are two vowels one of which is the final *e* the first vowel is long and the final *e* is silent as in *bone*.’ But the generalisation does not work for common words such as *done* and *gone*. ‘When there are two vowels side by side, the long sound of the first one is heard and the second one is usually silent as in *bead*.’ But not for *chief* or *build* (Clymer, 1963).
- Spelling regularity occurs at the meaning level of words (eg *sign* as a spelling pattern remains constant despite the different pronunciation in words related by meaning: *signify, significant, signal*).
- Knowledge and use of sound-letter relationships (phonics) is important, but teachers must know that phonics is just one spelling strategy of several, including morphemic, visual, mnemonic and those external to the learner.

## **6 Conclusion**

As literacy educators who are passionate about the power and joy of literature and literacy in our own lives, and who have been instrumental in helping young people experience the same power and joy, we are committed to all children having the same opportunity.

We have seen many teachers who have been effective with students, including those students with difficulties, because they have had professional knowledge and they have been in an environment where they could use that professional knowledge to make informed curriculum decisions appropriate to their learners' needs.

We hope that this inquiry leads to the provision of a professional environment where teachers' on-going learning is supported and where *teachers* make the curriculum decisions for their students. The "one-size-fits-all" approach of mandated programs cannot cater for the complexity of literacy learning and the uniqueness of literacy learners.

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Wilson, Lorraine (1978) *Write Me a Sign* Melbourne: Thomas Nelson.

**Marie Emmitt** is a professor and Dean of Education at Australian Catholic University. She was trained as an infant teacher and taught in the early years of schooling. In her Arts degree she majored in Linguistics. She has been in teacher education for many years but has remained active within the profession. She was the national president of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association, has provided professional development in a wide range of literacy areas and has undertaken research in early literacy, middle years literacy and adult and workplace literacy. Marie has presented regularly at national and international conferences. She is a co-author of a teacher text *Language for Learning: An Introduction for Teaching*, which is now into its third edition.

Professor Marie Emmitt  
Dean of Education  
Australian Catholic University  
115 Victoria Pde., Fitzroy 3065  
Dean.Education@acu.edu.au

**David Hornsby** was with the Victorian Education Department for 28 years and taught at every year level. For 4 years he was a curriculum consultant in primary and secondary schools. He then returned to the primary classroom before becoming principal of Ringwood Heights PS for 5 years. He is now working as a literacy consultant in schools and lecturing at La Trobe University. David is invited to work with teachers and to present at conferences both interstate and world-wide. He has completed many lecture tours of the United States and the United Kingdom, and has also worked with teachers in Indonesia, New Zealand and Singapore. David has written or co-authored many best-selling teacher reference books. His latest, *A Closer Look at Guided Reading*, won "The 2001 Australian Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing."

David Hornsby  
9 Woodside St  
Fitzroy North 3068  
[david@davidhornsby.com.au](mailto:david@davidhornsby.com.au)

**Lorraine Wilson** commenced her long career in education with the Victorian Education Department. This included 22 years teaching, four years as a curriculum assistant with the Curriculum and Research Branch, five years as a deputy principal, and nine years as a member of the Victorian Primary School Language Committee. Since leaving the Victorian department she has worked as an education consultant, specialising in literacy. Much of this consultancy has included long term relationships with individual schools, helping to develop school wide literacy programs. Lorraine has an international reputation in the field of literacy with requests to speak at conferences throughout Australia and the United States. She is a member of many national

and international literacy professional associations. She has published extensively both for children and teachers. Her latest book, published by Heinemann in the US, is *Reading to Live: How to Teach Reading for Today's World*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, 2002.

Lorraine Wilson  
81 Amess St  
Carlton North 3054  
[lorraine@lorrainewilson.com.au](mailto:lorraine@lorrainewilson.com.au)