

The story of an ugly duckling: aka phonics check furphies

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I have never met a teacher who is not sincere about trying to do the best they can for the students in their classrooms. Insincere teachers may exist, but I don't see them. Fortunately, in the context of the ongoing community, academic, and political debate about phonics instruction and assessment of children's phonics skills, teachers' sincerity is not at issue. However it is also not enough, regardless of its abundance.

A dip into the [recent \(last 3-4 decades\) history of reading instruction](#) reveals the strange and sad tale of phonics being turned into the unwelcome ugly duckling of early years classrooms. I have written about the contested place of phonics in the early years previously, so won't re-hash that history here. We are now at an odd impasse, however, that sees most parties to the debate in broad agreement (at least overtly) about the importance of the so-called "[five big ideas](#)" [surrounding early reading](#) (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency), but the welcome mat that is rolled out in (a) teacher pre-service education and (b) early years classrooms for these elements is uneven. When was the last time you saw a heated Twitter debate about the importance of comprehension for early readers? Or vocabulary? Of course we don't see such silly debates, because they do not occur – everyone agrees (OK, prove me wrong someone!) that these are critical ingredients in early years instruction. Phonics, however (and perhaps to a lesser extent its close relative phonemic awareness) has to paddle very hard to justify its presence in early years instruction.

This ambivalence has been more than evident in Australia since the [federal government's announcement](#) that a Year 1 Phonics Check will be rolled out across Australian states and territories in the next year. I've heard all kinds of opposition to this move and would like to collate the key arguments here, together with my responses.



My response

We're already doing phonics aka "phonics is in the mix"

There is no doubt some truth to this statement. I think it's fair to say that in most classrooms, some form of phonics instruction is used, but I will wager that in a large number of cases, this is a third-of-three option in the widely-used [Multi-Cueing Strategy](#) (also sometimes referred to in the UK as '[Searchlights](#)'). This is a whole language zombie that remains alive and well in teacher education and Australian classrooms, and encourages children first to guess, and as a last resort, to use [analytic, not synthetic phonics](#), in order to work out the first sound in the word with which they are unfamiliar.

This leads me to the other problem with the "We're already doing phonics" defence – the fact that where phonics is "in the mix", it is more likely to be analytic than synthetic. All children need to learn to decode, and some do so more seamlessly than others. Those who enter school with smaller vocabularies, less phonemic awareness, and less pre-school text exposure will derive particular benefit from being explicitly taught the alphabetic principle via synthetic phonics instruction. These are the same children who teachers then identify as needing "extra resources" when they don't easily make the transition to literacy. Maybe the "extra resource" they need is more rigorous initial instruction. Can you see a circular argument happening here?

My third issue with this response is that if this is the case, why are literacy levels in this country way below where they should be? If all is well with respect to early years instruction, how do we account for the fact that we are producing [way too many secondary students with inadequate literacy skills](#) and have a [workforce with worrying low oral language and literacy skills](#)?

Teachers already assess their students and know which ones are behind

Maybe they do, and maybe they don't. This assertion is difficult to assess, because there is no universal tool and no central data collection on the decoding skills of Australian students. My bet is that many teachers are using '[Running Records](#)' for this purpose – another whole language throw-back, and not a substitute for a properly standardised Phonics Check.

Teachers are the experts and should be left alone

No professional group should put itself above scrutiny. Imagine if doctors, nurses, airline pilots, or engineers said, "Stop looking over our shoulders. We know what we're doing." [Have a look at what happened in recent times to babies born at a small regional hospital in Victoria](#), where doctors and nurses were assumed to know what they were doing, and were left alone accordingly.

Testing doesn't improve performance

This is like saying, "Guns don't kill, people do" – it's a logical fallacy. If testing doesn't have a place, why do maternal and child health nurses weigh our babies? They weigh our babies to scientifically monitor progress, rather than seeing what they want or expect to see.

All we need is more money (a la 'fund [Gonski reforms](#)')

I have yet to see or hear any explanation as to how more money will improve [teacher knowledge](#) and skills with respect to early reading instruction. Perhaps we are to spend it on expensive teacher PD, rather than properly preparing pre-service teachers in the first place?

Fund schools fairly for sure, but don't assume that more money is the answer. That is simplistic nonsense. Further, we could make significant savings right now by [removing support for all kinds of neuroflapdoodle that are endorsed and invested in by schools](#).

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We need more support for struggling students

Yes, we do need more support for struggling students. But if we work from a [Response to Intervention framework](#), we want to ensure the highest quality instruction at Tier 1, so that those students in Tiers 2 and 3 are there because they have genuine needs that will respond to the expertise on offer by speech-language pathologists and educational and developmental psychologists. They should not be there because they are [instructional casualties](#) from Tier 1.

It is too expensive

The cost of the Phonics Check in the UK has been [estimated to be around £10-12 per student per year](#). Compare this to the cost of providing the Arrowsmith Program, as recently promoted by a state branch of the Australian Education Union. Compare it too, to the cost of educational failure.

We shouldn't subject six-year-olds to tests

We shouldn't subject six-year-olds to academic failure and a lifetime of falling behind.

A Phonics Check won't improve children's reading skills

The [evidence from the UK](#) suggests that at a system level, the introduction of a National Phonics Check has contributed to improved reading in the early years. If we have an efficient means of making at least some gains in this critical domain, why would we not take it? Why would we not provide data-driven feedback to the teaching profession about what beginning readers actually can, and actually cannot do?

Phrased another way, how can we justify to children in the long tail of under-achievement, turning our backs on an option that is likely to offer them a brighter future?

Reading is about extracting meaning, not sounding out words

The [Simple View of Reading](#) holds that successful reading requires both decoding skills and comprehension. Children should be equipped to read using skills of decoding and inferencing, not inferencing (aka guessing in some cases) alone, along with a long list of learned-by-sight words.

We take a 'balanced literacy' approach

This is akin to the "phonics is in the mix" argument. Balanced literacy, however simply lines up all the ducks and says, "off you go – jump in the pond!" It does not position systematic synthetic phonics instruction as the starting point to get children off the blocks.

If you look at the literature on balanced literacy, a word you will encounter frequently is "eclectic". That does not inspire confidence that a systematic approach to instruction is being taken.

'Balanced literacy' is the answer to good phonics instruction in the same way that "throw in some sultanas" is the answer to "How do you make a fruit cake"?

English is too inconsistent a language for phonics instruction to be useful (so a Phonics Check is a waste of time)

This is another urban myth regularly trotted out by whole language disciples, who themselves were probably never taught about the morpho-phonemic structure of English, or about how to trace the etymology of the various words English has appropriated from other languages.

About 50% of English words do have a transparent orthography, meaning that they can be read by someone who understands letter-sound correspondences. A further 36% have only one sound that deviates (typically a vowel), 10% can be spelt correctly if morphology and etymology are understood, and a mere 4% cannot be decoded from knowledge of these principles (see [Snow, 2016](#)).

As I have said a number of times, there are no magic bullets in the important business of reading instruction. There is, however, a wealth of scientific evidence to draw on, and it is inexcusable for teacher educators to stand between this evidence and the next generation of classroom teachers.

No doubt there are other fallacious arguments in this space too. Let's hope, however, that reading instruction's ugly

duckling can be transformed into a beautiful swan. There are children out there whose educational futures depend on it.

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