

## **Submission for the Community-wide Consultation - Lifting Literacy; Lifting Tasmania)**

I am a psychologist who works in the literacy and learning service at St Giles, which offers assessment and intervention to children and young people with literacy difficulties and co-existing disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability and Cerebral Palsy.

As a parent and literacy professional, I am often in awe of the wealth of knowledge, talent, dedication and skill of teachers and other educational staff. We know that educators work in very challenging circumstances with many barriers to their impact on students' literacy outcomes. For students to fully benefit from the enormous impact teachers can make, **there must be policy-level and school-level specific requirements for professional development, literacy approaches and resources. It is crucial for these requirements to be firmly aligned to the best-quality research available.**

It is vital that guidelines are set by appropriately trained professionals regarding what is essential for literacy instruction, with the following in mind:

1. *How well does it align with the well-established evidence for effective literacy instruction?* There are many poor-quality approaches that could claim to be research-based to some degree. For example, there may be some research showing effectiveness of an intervention compared to *minimal or poor-quality* intervention. That is setting the bar so low that it does not help solve the problem of low literacy rates in Tasmania. A more important criterion is that the approach should align with evidence-based principles (i.e., be evidence-informed)
2. *How does the research fit within the hierarchy of evidence quality and quantity?* There are crucial differences between different types of evidence, such as non-experimental design, quasi-experimental design, meta-analysis and systematic review. Some approaches claim to be based on evidence, but this evidence is of low quality and therefore effectiveness could be due to a range of factors not related to the intervention.

To improve community-wide literacy outcomes, it is important to closely collaborate with professionals who are highly trained in evaluating scientific research. It is paramount in policy-level and school-level decision-making about approaches, professional development and resources used in school and community programs. Psychologists and Speech Pathologists have this training and have contributed to the evidence on effective literacy instruction for decades. Often educators and other professionals have also gained this expertise through post-graduate

training in the science of literacy. This science reflects an understanding of the brain-based cognitive and linguistic processes involved in literacy. It clearly shows the superiority of systematic phonics approaches. Although the superiority of synthetic phonics over analytic phonics is not as clear-cut from the research, there is enough evidence that makes it very likely to be superior, at least for people with literacy difficulties. This includes well-designed studies including a longitudinal study and a meta-analysis (referenced [here](#) and [here](#)). Independent reviews synthesising empirical research and evaluation of top-performing schools showed the best outcomes when synthetic phonics was used (e.g., the UK national review “The Rose Report” and an Australian study by Loudon, 2015). In addition, synthetic phonics aligns with brain-based processes like the mapping of written letters to sounds in spoken words and the eye movements of proficient readers. Finally, the programs and approaches with the most rigorous evidence of efficacy, such as Direct/ Explicit Instruction programs, are based on systematic synthetic phonics.

In Tasmania, as with many communities worldwide, some widespread literacy instruction practices are decidedly not in line with well-established research. These arise from philosophies that align more with a whole-language approach than a science-of literacy approach. Research showing which strategies are commonly used in Tasmanian schools should not be used to recommend those practices, especially when current practices have not yielded an adequate literacy rate. The empirical support for synthetic phonics approaches should be put in perspective: the level of support for synthetic phonics is high, whereas the level of support for whole-language approaches (such as non-decodable text and cueing strategies) is low. We should not expect a highly rigorous standard of research for one approach and a low standard of research for others. In addition, cueing strategies directly contradict a systematic phonics approach (synthetic or not) because they encourage unsystematic phonics practice in conjunction with non-phonics cues. If we agree that we should *teach* people with explicit, systematic phonics, why should we ask them to *practise* unknown phonics in a way that is *unsystematic* and *not explicit*?

### **The levelled reader system:**

From kindergarten, children are often encouraged to read books that contain all code (letter-sound correspondences) with *no connection to the phonics they have learnt*. This means that they need to use strategies other than phonics, such as memorisation or guessing. In conjunction with this, parents and teachers are encouraged to use strategies that are based on cueing, such as “Eagle Eye” (guessing from pictures) and Skippy Frog (skipping words to guess from context). Multi-cueing strategies are a whole-language instruction method (which also tend to incorporate analytical phonics). These strategies have been encouraged in Tasmanian schools at a government and university level, like in [this](#) document. They are based on [flawed underpinnings](#) that do not align with what the evidence tells us about the brain-based processes involved in reading. For

all literacy goals related to written text, such as reading comprehension and written expression, it is crucial that people learn to decode and encode efficiently, without extraneous cues, from the earliest stages. Learning to decode effectively is accomplished with decodable / phonetically controlled text. Once sufficient code is learnt, reading with non-phonetically controlled text can be encouraged. Many children will gain decoding skills with some systematic phonics practice and exposure to a wide range of texts, including non-decodable text. However, the people for whom I advocate, those who have significant disabilities and have the literacy odds stacked against them, need rigorous and systematic practice with decodable text until they have enough code to gain success with non-decodable text. Otherwise, there will be cognitive overload and they will learn to rely on poor strategies for reading and spelling. They then add to the statistics that impede the goal of 100% literacy -and we all know that those statistics represent real people and their quality of life.

### **A piece-meal approach**

A widely used approach endorsed by the education department is Letters and Sounds. This approach draws on evidence-informed strategies based on systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). Unfortunately, however, it may indirectly encourage the use of levelled readers, as it does not provide guidelines on the texts students are encouraged to read outside the Letters and Sounds activities. Programs like Letters and Sounds are not sufficient without ongoing professional development and use of regular progress monitoring and adapted strategies for those who need it. In my experience as a parent and literacy professional, Letters and Sounds and other approaches are often used within a piece-meal approach, rather than as recommended. For example, it is emphasised in Letters and Sounds that knowledge of the letter-sound correspondences must be secure before moving on to the next phase. However, this often does not happen in schools, with children being taught certain graphemes for a short time without sufficient practice to lead to the automaticity that research shows is critical. This could be rectified by effective individual tracking and progress monitoring (which is described by Letters and Sounds but difficult for teachers to implement without time and resources allocated for this purpose). If non-evidence-informed methods are reduced (such as practising levelled readers), it would be easier to allocate time and resources to individual tracking and systematic synthetic phonics instruction.

### **Teaching sight words that could be taught within a grapheme scope and sequence**

Another approach from a whole-language philosophy is to teach long lists of "sight words" (e.g. Golden Words, Oxford Words), many of which contain common graphemes that could be taught at that stage of systematic phonics instruction. Learning to read words by sight does not align with research about how proficient reading and spelling is learnt (not by sight, but by mapping written letters to speech sounds in words). The most frequent or irregular whole words can be taught by a

combination of phonics and memory strategies, but the number of words should be minimised (as is proposed by SSP approaches like Letters and Sounds).

### **Measures and targets - the "don'ts" are as important as the "do's"**

The above problems mean that the principles of science-based literacy instruction are undermined in many Tasmanian educational settings. In Paper One of the Community-Wide Framework, there is, of course, an emphasis on what needs to be done. However, I believe it is just as important to specify what should *not* be done. If there is a good SSP approach and it is undermined by significant whole-language elements, it defeats the purpose to a significant degree. This includes some of the measures and targets currently used in most schools, such as the PM Benchmark Reading Assessment system, which is a [whole language approach to assessment](#).

If you don't assess the right things, you can't teach the right things, and you can't see if the teaching is working or not. The mandatory Phonics Check in Grade one is a very welcome initiative, but this needs to extend further. Kindergarten and Prep children should be assessed for phonemic awareness ability, especially those with speech and language delays. Children who are currently in grades higher than Grade One as this policy is introduced will miss out on assessment in the critical skill of decoding ability, which is not adequately assessed by PAT and NAPLAN. There are several free assessment systems that assess phonemic awareness and decoding ability, which could be used in every grade. The Motif tests are especially useful because they have Australian norms and allow group administration for maximum time efficiency. The DIBELS and CUBED systems are also useful because they allow for very regular progress monitoring, which should be used with children assessed as at-risk (as is recommended by the Response to Intervention Model).

Within schools and other education programs, measuring adherence to a science-based literacy approach is as important as measuring student outcomes. There are many Tasmanian professionals and organisations who are trained in evaluating and interpreting evidence. Many of these are involved in programs listed in Paper One (such as the 100% Literacy Alliance and Connect 42). The Tasmanian Roadmap to Literacy has outlined useful targets in ensuring research-based educational practices. When measuring progress toward 100% literacy, it is important to identify and minimise resources, professional development and practices that *don't* align with an evidence-informed approach. Otherwise, high quality programs and approaches can only go so far. Significant systemic change is needed for 100% literacy to be a realistic goal for Tasmania.

### **Gaps in existing programs:**

Increasing access to and expanding on existing services in Tasmania is an important goal. However, it is even more important to ensure there is a service that advises on and monitors the adherence

to evidence-informed instruction. This advisory group and/ or regulatory body could establish the desired measures and targets in terms of education practices and apply these targets to all government funded programs. Similar practices are occurring in the UK and much information could be gained from the processes that have evolved there, including what has worked and what hasn't.

One gap I can see in the programs and services outlined in Paper One is specific support for people with disabilities (aside from specific learning disorders in literacy). Of particular importance is addressing the needs of people with very significant intellectual and physical disabilities and/ or complex speech needs. These are the people for whom functional literacy is often least accessible. Due to limited time and staffing, educators and practitioners will often resort to permanently scaffolded reading and writing that does not allow for independent functional literacy. While appropriate accommodations and assistive technologies are crucial, it is important not to "give up on" achieving meaningful literacy outcomes for these people wherever possible. More rigorous evidence-informed instruction is needed (with appropriate modifications for complex needs), not less. More intensity is needed, not less. Services such as St Giles serve people with a range of disabilities, but there are major barriers in terms of resources and funding, so this is not possible for many. This is a large gap in service provision, and it must be addressed to truly approach 100% literacy in Tasmania.

**Recommended reading:**

High performing primary schools: What do they have in common? William Louden 24 June 2015