

The Literacy Challenge: Rationale and Program

A great deal has been written about appropriate methods for teaching children the important life skill of how to read. As might be expected, this important topic generates no small amount of emotion, as individuals and groups strive to identify the most effective technique, strategy or methods for teaching reading. As is sometimes the case with heightened emotions, divergent camps form, struggles for supremacy emerge, cooperation is limited, professional egos grow and the goal of teaching children to read is quickly replaced with the need to be seen as *right*.

Although a simplified version of events, this description appears to reflect the current state of teaching reading in Western Australian Schools. Advocates for including phonics as a key strategy in teaching reading argue about the best way to teach phonics. Some argue for synthetic phonics, an approach that emphasise the importance of commencing instruction with phonics slowly progressing to words while others argue for analytic phonics which favours starting instruction with the whole word which is analysed to identify phonics. And others argue the importance of language rich settings that support reading across curriculum areas.

The argument goes round and round with no clear answer and definitely no clear winner, while the cost of the argument is paid in the skills of our children. It is unlikely the conflict will ever be resolved, largely because each of the competing camps is partly correct, partly incorrect and the ultimate goal of instruction has long been forgotten.

It is clear that the teaching of phonics needs to be included in a reading program and that this has never been disputed, but evidence that analytic phonics is more successful than synthetic phonics (and vice versa) is scant. There is strong evidence that language rich settings support reading development. However, these approaches focus on aspects of teaching reading and none of them account for the complexities of teaching reading, which has been described as a significant challenge for children.

While the *reading wars* have raged for well over 200 years, there have been several calls for calm and a more balanced approach based on evidence. Regrettably, more reasoned and holistic approaches have largely been ignored by those who argue for aspects of teaching reading without consideration to the complexities of reading itself.

A more balanced program takes what works from opposing sides of the *literacy wars* and combines them with teachers empowerment and student engagement to facilitate literacy development.

Perhaps the first strategy in resolving the reading wars is to define what it is that we hope to achieve when teaching reading and the skills learners need to develop which go well beyond the teaching of phonics and start well before school attendance.

Reading literacy refers to the ability to understand, interpret, evaluate, and derive meaning from written texts. It involves a range of skills and competencies that enable an individual to effectively navigate, comprehend, and communicate ideas and information presented in various written forms, such as books, articles, reports, and digital content. Reading literacy encompasses not only the basic ability to decode written words and sentences but also the capacity to analyze, synthesize, and critically engage with the content.

A person with strong reading literacy skills is able to:

1. Decode and recognize words accurately.
2. Comprehend and interpret the meaning of written text.
3. Extract relevant information from a variety of sources.
4. Analyze and evaluate the content's credibility and validity.
5. Make connections between different pieces of information and ideas.
6. Engage in critical thinking and draw inferences from the text.
7. Apply the acquired knowledge and information to real-world situations.
8. Communicate effectively through written expression.

Reading literacy is a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in education, personal development, and participation in society. It empowers individuals to access and understand information, form opinions, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to various aspects of life.

Beginning readers need a strong oral vocabulary. While it is well recognised that not all children commence their school careers with the same level of vocabulary, this is particularly true for those children who have English as a second language (ESL) or dialect (ESD). A strong oral vocabulary familiarises students with the sounds of language known as phonemes. Phonemic awareness is a critical skill in reading and requires due attention as the first critical skill in learning to read. Children will continue to develop a strong vocabulary throughout the years of schooling. This might be achieved through singing, storytelling, everyday communication (talk, talk, talk) or word play.

Children need to develop print awareness. In simple terms this refers to an understanding that printed words reflect oral language and might include basic awareness that books are opened right to left, that text remains constant and can be decoded, that text is decoded from left to right and that text is in the wider environment. This might be achieved through early exposure to books, identifying and decoding environmental text or reading aloud.

With print awareness and a robust and developing vocabulary, children are well placed to make the connection between phonemes and graphemes – the sound represented by the graphic (letter). This is known as alphabet decoding and requires students to match the phoneme with the corresponding grapheme only (letter names are not required at this stage) in order to start decoding the alphabet. In the early years, continue to review alphabet decoding.

Beginners then move to decoding simple words typically comprising consonant – vowel – consonant sequences (CVC) i.e., mat, bed, hop... This simple structure comprises words that use letter sounds only i.e., they spell and sound according to letter sound only (no digraphs, phoneme blends, diphthongs or different vowel sounds). While early readers generally start with three letter words, this can easily be extended to four or more letter words keeping to the same principle, letter sounds only i.e., gold, jump, sand.... Provide extensive practice with CVC and words that use letter sounds only in both reading and writing activities.

Being mindful that the English language has a *rich orthography* that is balanced with a fairly simple alphabet (only 26 letters), early instruction can focus on simple consonant, vowel consonant words. Given that some letters, vowels, will represent multiple sounds, that two consonants combined might represent a specific sound (phonic blend), while other represent a complete sound (digraphs) and that other phonic blends might involve three or more letters, it seems wise to build on simple words to include common phonic blends (it is not possible to include all phonic blends).

Once children are comfortable decoding CVC words with some level of confidence, it is possible to slowly introduce phonic blends (two or more consonants that form a specific sound) i.e., 'cl' in clap, click, cling.... Be mindful that there are hundreds of phonic blends influenced by dialect and accent, therefore it is not possible to teach all phonic blends, but it is possible to teach some common blends.

Once a blend has been introduced, incorporate this into reading decoding and wherever possible writing coding activities. In this way students are learning the new blend, decoding the blend in reading and then coding the blend in writing. Continue to build a repertoire of phonic blends throughout the early and middle years. Progress to digraphs (phonic blends that introduce a new sound) i.e., 'sh' in shop, shed, shell... Use a structured and systematic approach (analytic or synthetic phonics are recommended).

Introduce the short sounding vowels (using letter sounds only) i.e. 'a' – cat, bat, pack and the long sound of the same vowel 'ay' clay, stay, cake, lake... also consider vowel blends 'ia' – rain or 'oa' – boat... (diphthongs) Incorporate these into reading decoding and writing coding activities. Provide continual review cycles and the practical application of new knowledge. Use a structured approach that scaffolds and builds understanding.

Teaching and learning activities to this point provide the basic building blocks of reading, but further work is required if fluency and deciphering meaning are the goals. Students need to explore morphology – the smallest meaningful units of language and combination of these to create new words i.e., clean – unclean, tidy – untidy... in this example 'un' gives the meaning 'not'. Teachers introduce prefixes, suffixes as well as free morphemes (clean) and bound morphemes (un) to introduce morphology. Student directed word exploration is recommended.

Difficult words will be intentionally taught through various strategies and techniques which might include flash cards, tricky word trees, posters and displays. Be mindful that instruction in *tricky words* must include the practical application of knowledge supported by continual revision and repetition.

Students also need to build a strong lexicon developing a bank of words that are recognised without the need of decoding. A strong lexicon reduces the cognitive load required for reading and allows for a greater opportunity to extract meaning for reading.

Alphabet decoding and vocabulary building combined with reading decoding and writing coding will continue throughout the primary school years and for many well into adult hood. The key is that instruction adheres to a structured program of work that provides constant revision and continual practice encouraging a level of comfort with language and reading and self directed learning.

The Literacy Challenge: Program

While individual schools present their own unique learning environment, there are some relatively consistent challenges when teaching literacy including children entering school without the expected vocabulary or introductory print awareness.

The Literacy Challenge is an intentional strategy designed to engage teachers and students in the teaching and learning of literacy skills. Critical domains of literacy development are identified and individual and school rewards will be achieved at key literacy developmental levels.

Each of the key developmental domains will be scaffolded according to developmental milestones and individual student awards will be available at each milestone.

Table one: Domains of literacy achievement and awards

Domain	Red	Blue	Yellow
Vocabulary building	Employ strategies to identify the meaning of words	Uses new and varied words in oral and written language	Demonstrates a range of synonyms for multiple words
Alphabet decoding	All 26 letter sounds	Identify common phoneme blends	Identify vowel sounds
Reading decoding	Decode CVC words	Decode words using common phoneme blends and vowel sounds	Read for meaning with fluency. Lexicon is developing.
Writing coding	Code CVC words	Code words that use common phoneme blends and varied vowel sounds	Write freely in structured sentences and paragraphs

Students are essentially in competition with themselves to develop key literacy skills. However, Inter-school competition will be facilitated through a school points system where the individual achievement of each developmental stage will be rewarded with literacy points. Individual students will receive literacy badges for their achievement.

School points will be tallied to achieve a school total. The highest school total achieved by participating schools will be deemed the Literacy Champion (statistical techniques will be employed to account for differing enrolment numbers in participating schools). A Literacy trophy will be awarded and localised inter-class completion will be encouraged.

Table two: Whole school literacy point schedule

Domain	Red	Blue	Yellow
Vocabulary building	10	20	30
Alphabet decoding	10	20	30
Reading decoding	10	20	30
Writing coding	10	20	30

In this way the purpose of learning to read is made clear to students in a consistent and fun way, while empowering the teachers to actively engage with the teaching of essential

literacy skills. Students (and in some way teachers) are rewarded for their progress in reading development.

Schools are encouraged to employ a variety of strategies to promote literacy development and to avoid the unhelpful *reading wars*. Teachers are encouraged to keep in mind that quality teaching and learning is context specific, there is no *silver bullet* or *one size fits all* solution in teaching and learning. Employ the strategy or technique that works for you.

Teachers, AIEO's and Education assistants at the local school will be responsible for monitoring student progress in each of the domains. This requires the maintenance of fine grained and detailed records that will inform student learning progression, report writing and will provide a general statement on the state of literacy development in each school.

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