Ensuring that all children learn to read

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Literacy is at a premium. While it may still have been possible in the twentieth century, it is increasingly difficult to gain employment in the twenty first century without having acquired, at the very least, basic functional literacy. Most of the manual labouring jobs of the past that required little or no literacy skill to perform them satisfactorily have become obsolete, first with increasing mechanisation and automation, and latterly with the near universal application of information technology to employment related, as well as social and recreational, activities. Contrary to the earlier popular myth that IT would somehow make traditional literacy less necessary or important, it is now clear that the advent of IT into all spheres of human activity requires greater literacy skill, not less, and from a far wider spectrum within the population. In spite of the development of speech recognition software and simple point and press procedures, most of the internet, for example, is predicated upon reading written text and entering information in written form via a keyboard. Someone who struggles to read and spell is severely disadvantaged in such an environment. Consequently, proficiency in reading and spelling has never been such a priority as it is today.

Given these considerations, it is particularly disturbing to find that unacceptably large proportions of the population still struggle with reading and writing, as recent surveys have repeatedly shown. That there is a bottom quartile (twenty five per cent) of the population who continue to struggle in this way is a cause for shame; and this may even be an under-estimate of the problem.

What does reading entail?

In order to be able to read written text, there are two basic, vital processes to be mastered. First, we need to be able to translate or decode the marks on the page or screen into words and secondly we need to be able to make sense of those words. There is no point being able to decode, even to decode fluently, if we have no idea of what the words actually mean. Similarly, no matter how vast our vocabulary, general knowledge and facility with the English language, we shall make no sense of the written word if we cannot decode the letter strings into words in the first place. This sounds painfully obvious, in fact it is known as 'the simple view' of reading, but its importance is all too often ignored or under-emphasised.

We can unpack this 'simple model' into five key factors, sometimes known as the five pillars of reading instruction or the five 'big ideas', which scientific research has shown to be essential in learning to read. The first of these is *phonological awareness,* which refers to the ability to chop up the stream of continual sound that constitutes speech into recognisable and meaningful units. Children need to learn where words begin and end in the speech stream and, equally importantly, how these words are made up of smaller units of sound. They need to be able to recognise the syllables within words and, especially, the phonemes that make up syllables and words. For example, they need to be able to appreciate that the spoken word 'dog' comprises three separate sounds (or phonemes) that we, in English, associate with the letters D, O and G. To show their understanding of this, they should also be able to say the word dog without the 'D' sound or to replace the D sound with a B sound and say bog. This ability to break up spoken words into their constituent sounds and to reassemble them has been found to be an essential prerequisite for learning to read.

The second 'big idea' that children have to master is what is known as the alphabetic principle. They have to learn the common sounds associated with the letters of the alphabet; that the letter M is sounded out as in man; that the letter P is sounded out as in pat; and so on. Moreover, they need to learn that printed words can be decoded by using this letter sound knowledge to sound out written words; that the written word comprising the letters C, A and T can be sounded out as the word 'cat'. A focus on teaching these letter sounds explicitly and directly as a part of early reading instruction is known as *phonics* and has been the subject of considerable controversy among reading educators. The scientific evidence is unequivocal, however, regarding the centrality of phonics instruction in the effective teaching of reading to children from all backgrounds.

The third pillar of effective reading instruction identified by the research is *fluency*. Being able to decode written words into spoken words is an important skill but, like all skills, it needs to be learned to the level of automaticity so that decoding written words becomes literally effortless. When children can decode fluently and effortlessly, they can give all of their attention and mental capacity to understanding what it is that they have decoded.

This brings us to the fourth 'big idea', *vocabulary*. There is little point being able to decode words if you do not know what the words mean. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, often have restricted vocabularies compared to their more advantaged peers. This is why, in the interests of equity, it is important to include specific instruction in vocabulary knowledge as part of any program of initial reading instruction, so that all children can learn to read with understanding from the outset.

This brings us to the fifth and final pillar of reading instruction; the fifth big idea. Being able to decode, even to decode fluently, and even given a good vocabulary is not enough for children to make good sense of what they are reading. They also need to have developed good *comprehension* skills. As well as knowing the meanings of words, they also need to know how words are put together in sentences and how to relate their knowledge of the world to the words they are reading, if they are going to be able to read with understanding. A sound general knowledge of the world is, then, also important in learning to read.

How should reading be taught?

As well as identifying the critical components of learning to read, the five big ideas, research has also informed teaching practice of the most effective ways of teaching these five pillars of reading. In essence, it has been shown that, to be the most effective, reading instruction should be *direct, explicit and systematic*; that the five big ideas should not only be recognised as such but should also be taught directly and explicitly and in a systematic way.

This sounds painfully obvious to the layman but classroom practice in recent decades has tended to favour a more implicit approach to teaching reading where children are expected to pick up these ideas largely for themselves by being bathed in a rich environment of spoken language, story and exposure to books. While such an environment is very important for young learners, it is not enough for these key skills to be readily learned and this is particularly true for those children coming from less advantaged backgrounds. It is true that some (fortunate) children seem barely to need much by way of formal instruction before they are off and reading on their own in a very short space of time; but this is not true for the vast majority. Moreover, we do not know beforehand, until they have actually learned to read, just which children will

learn to read quickly and easily with little instruction. This is why we need a direct, explicit and systematic program of reading instruction in place to ensure that all children learn to read. We also need to build in failsafe procedures to make sure that no child is left behind in the learning of this all-important skill of learning to read.

How then do we ensure that all children learn to read?

If we are to ensure that all children learn to read to a good level of proficiency in the first few years of schooling, we need to have a clear plan in place to make sure that no child falls though the net. Such a plan needs to be both effective and cost-effective. In recent years, it has become increasingly accepted that a three tier, phased model of reading instruction, known as *Response to Intervention (or RtI)* is the best means of achieving this. Before detailing this model of effective school instruction, however, it is worth considering the role of pre-school education and its place in ensuring that all children learn to read.

Pre-school literacy instruction

If we are serious about our aim of ensuring that all children learn to read within their first few years of schooling, we should ensure that the basic building blocks of literacy are in place for all children when they begin formal schooling. The research shows that children commencing school with both phonological awareness and well developed general language skills are far more likely to learn to read easily and quickly. If all children were to receive a program of instruction in these essential pre-requisites in the year prior to commencing school, far fewer children would struggle to learn to read. It would also mean a levelling of the playing field so that all children, regardless of their family background, would be starting to learn to read from a more similar knowledge base. It is currently the case that many children from less advantaged home backgrounds beginning school are already way behind their more advantaged peers in these key pre-literacy skills.

The idea of teaching these skills to pre-school children may sound off-putting to some but there is no reason why these skills may not be taught effectively in an engaging and play-based way that is more appropriate for young children and more comfortable for early childhood educators. An effective pre-literacy program for pre-school children should comprise instruction in the two key areas identified by research as the most important pre-requisite skills for learning to read. First, they should be engaged in games and play-based routines that teach systematically the skills of phonological awareness so that children come to school already able to break up words into their component sounds and to manipulate the sounds in words. The second key component is an emphasis on developing good oral language skills more generally, including vocabulary instruction. The best means of achieving this is by structured book reading activities where children are encouraged to engage with the story being read, to answer questions about the story and to relate the events in the story to their own lives. A focus on these two prerequisite skill sets provides an excellent foundation for learning to read.

Response to Intervention – Tier 1

The three tier RtI model is predicated upon a first tier of exemplary, quality initial instruction in reading for all students during their first year of schooling (Kindergarten in New South Wales). This first tier of instruction offered to all children beginning school should essentially comprise scientific evidence based best practice instruction; we should base our initial teaching on what scientific research

conducted internationally has shown to be most effective. Again, to the layman, this sounds patently obvious but this is not what is currently the case in most Australian schools where an *implicit* model of reading instruction has held sway for the last few decades. As already mentioned, much of what occurs as part of this implicit approach to reading instruction is highly desirable as a bedrock upon which to build effective reading instruction; but it is not enough if we are to ensure that *all* children learn to read. It may be enough for a minority of children but most will need *direct, explicit and systematic instruction* in the five pillars, the five big ideas, of reading instruction, as previously described. What is often lacking in initial reading instruction, in particular, is effective instruction in what is known as *synthetic phonics*; specific instruction in how to relate letters to sounds and to blend letter sounds into words. There are a number of commercial programs that teach synthetic phonics systematically and that have been shown to be very effective. These include Jolly Phonics and Read-Write Inc, for example.

Response to Intervention – Tier 2

Even when afforded exemplary reading instruction, there will always be some children who take longer than others to catch on to what reading is all about. We call these children low-progress readers and it means just that and nothing more. By using the term low-progress reader we are making no assumptions about why the child is not progressing as quickly as others in learning to read. An over-emphasis on attempting to diagnose the causes of reading problems has been shown to be of relatively little use in actually providing effective instruction for low-progress readers. The research has shown clearly that what all of these children need is effective reading instruction as already described, albeit at a greater level of intensity.

It is important, however, to identify these low-progress readers as early as possible so that they do not fall too far behind their peers. Children who do not learn to read in the first few years of schooling are typically destined to a school career of educational failure, as their difficulties compound, because reading underpins almost all subsequent learning. A safe strategy is to target the bottom quartile of the population (the bottom twenty five per cent) for remedial reading intervention as soon as their difficulties become apparent. These may become apparent at some point during the first year of schooling but it is certainly important to check on students' progress, *at the very least*, at the end of Kindergarten so as to be able to provide remedial intervention from the beginning of Year One.

In New South Wales and some other states, many schools typically screen students at the beginning of year one for possible placement in Reading Recovery, probably the most well known and most widely utilised remedial reading program in the world. This is not the place for a thorough critique of Reading Recovery but it should be noted that doubts have been expressed by very many reading scientists regarding its efficacy, its popularity notwithstanding. Whatever the debate about the efficacy of Reading Recovery, what is not in doubt is that it is necessarily very expensive because it is predicated upon a daily, half hour, one-to-one session with a highly trained Reading Recovery teacher, for two or more terms. Reading Recovery teachers typically manage to teach only four students per morning.

The RtI model recommends that struggling readers, the low-progress readers comprising the bottom quartile, should be offered intensive Tier 2 intervention but in *small groups* of three to four students. Again the instruction provided to these students is based on what the scientific research evidence has shown to be most effective. In effect, this is essentially the same emphasis on the same five big ideas of

reading instruction but it is more intensive and more individualised, and teachers are able to be more responsive to the specific idiosyncratic needs of the students with whom they are working. Clearly, if this approach were to be shown to be effective, it would be much more cost-effective than one-to-one alternatives such as Reading Recovery. The research evidence, in fact, suggests that this is the case: good small group instruction can be just as effective as one-to-one instruction.

Response to Intervention – Tier 3

Even with a solid Tier 2 small group reading intervention in place for young low-progress readers, there will still be a very small number of students who 'fail to thrive', perhaps about 3-5% of the total population of Year 1 students. This small number of students whose reading problems seem to be more entrenched and who are resistant even to specialised intensive small group instruction are the ones for whom we should reserve Tier 3 *one-to-one intensive* reading instruction, preferably with a specialist reading teacher with a sound background in special education teaching. Apparently 'treatment resistant' students like these are sometimes referred to as being 'dyslexic' but this group might also include some children with an intellectual disability or, more likely, specific language impairment. (Intellectual disability is not typically a bar to being able to learn to read although progress may be somewhat slower.)

By now it will come as no surprise to note that the general nature of the instruction provided in a one-to-one Tier 3 intervention is no different in kind from that offered at Tier 1 and Tier 2. The same five big ideas are still critical to learning to read. What is different, of course, is the intensity of instruction provided to this very small minority of students. Because we have successfully taught the vast majority of Year 1 students the basics of learning to read by Tier 1 and, where necessary, Tier 2 teaching, we can afford to provide these remaining students with the support that they will need to learn to read. Some of these students may need support for some time, taking far longer to learn what the vast majority learn quickly and easily, but this is a far more manageable proposition.

With this three tier Response to Intervention model in place, predicated upon scientific evidence based reading instruction, almost all, if not all, children will learn to read, given the necessary time and resources. Of course, the RtI model does not stop at the end of Year 1, it is important to monitor reading progress closely for all students, especially for the first three years of schooling during which children learn to read. By continually monitoring progress over these three years, students who are slipping behind may, at any point, be readily identified and offered the appropriate tier of supplementary support. By employing these procedures rigorously and teaching scientifically, it is not too much to ask to expect (almost) all of our children to learn to read.