

Parents call for reading instruction reform in ACT schools

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Sue White's son Ollie loves nothing more than having a story read to him. But when he started at an early childhood school, she suspected something wasn't quite right.

"Learning to read at school for him just didn't happen. It was a real surprise. I'm a writer. My mum was a teacher," Ms White said.

"I read to him every night since he was six months old, did all the things he was supposed to do and he just wasn't learning to read."

The school was teaching him to read using the three cueing system. In this method, when children come across an unfamiliar word, they are encouraged to think about what the word could be and ask themselves: Does it make sense? Does it sound right? Does it look right?

Ms White suspected something was awry from age five but it took until age seven to confirm a diagnosis of dyslexia. The school offered one-on-one help for Ollie but it wasn't helping him learn to read.

"It was a lovely little school but the way they taught reading just didn't help him at all to learn to read," she said.

"Some children can learn in that way, although it doesn't make them the most efficient reader, but there's a large cohort of children who can't learn anything in that way. They just get really stuck and they resort to guessing."

Unable to move to a school outside of their priority enrolment area, Ms White took the drastic step of homeschooling her son and paying for private tutoring sessions.

"My mother was a public educator and I really believed in the school system and I really support teachers. Teachers do a great job and it's a hard job and I had no desire to home school."

Calls for reform

Learning to read proficiently is critical to a student's success in the rest of their education and is a predictor for their future education, health and employment outcomes.

Despite being an affluent community, 30 per cent of Canberra's year 9 students were below the proficient reading level in the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

[A new report by Equity Economics](#) has called for all ACT schools to implement a high-quality, low-variance curriculum with effective training and coaching for principals and teachers to change the way children are taught to read.

It calls for the ACT to [follow other states](#) in implementing a year 1 phonics check and to provide small-group tutoring and one-on-one support for students who are falling behind. It also calls for universities to train preservice teachers to only use [evidence-based literacy instruction](#) in their degrees.

But the report has caused controversy across the Canberra education community. This is because there are deeply held views among educators about the best way to teach children to read.

[A survey of 284 Australian primary school teachers](#) found there was little consensus as to how reading comprehension was taught.

Respondents were split with 31.4 per cent identifying with student-centred instruction - lessons being developed by individual teachers guided by a student's interest to maximise engagement - and 33.4 per cent identifying with content-centred instruction - an emphasis on learning skills and knowledge as a class, guided by the teacher or curriculum. The remainder used a combination of the two.

While almost all respondents rated decoding skills and phonics instruction as important, almost 55 per cent of participants indicated they spent no time on these skills during the week.

When asked about their primary source of knowledge about reading instruction, the most common source was teachers' own research (42 per cent) followed by professional development (23.1 per cent). Only 3.7 per cent of respondents nominated their preservice education at university.

The study was led by Reid Smith, a PhD student in La Trobe University's Science of Language and Reading Lab, and was published in the journal, *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*.

Mr Smith said the researchers expected to see some variation but they were surprised at the wide range of responses that were sometimes diametrically opposed.

"We would have expected a greater proportion of teachers to report using phonics strategies of some sort, particularly given how prominent it's been in the media and also in general education discourse," Mr Smith said.

"I think that that's one of the most substantive aspects of our educational research is this strong, positive impact of phonics instruction on the reading of children."

Science of reading

The [science of reading](#) identifies five specific reading sub-skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, which should be taught explicitly and systematically so all children become capable readers.

According to the [Australian Education Research Organisation](#) (AERO), explicit teaching of these important skills is not yet consistently happening in Australian schools.

"It is important teachers and school leaders are supported to implement this evidence-based approach if all young Australians are to achieve the success in reading they deserve," an AERO spokesperson said.

[Version 9 of the Australian curriculum](#) has removed all references to the cueing system and predictable texts.

Predictable texts refer to home readers, often referred to as PM readers or levelled readers, which are sent home with children to practice reading. Often these books have pictures which correspond to sentences to prompt children to understand the words.

One Canberra mother, who did not wish to be named, said her daughter was initially enrolled at a public primary school where they were using PM readers.

"If you hand her a different book at the same level, she would have to be told what the words were and then she would remember them. It just felt masked, like she was masked in that literacy space," the mother said.

"This idea that schools are fighting against each other around the right way to teach kids to read and I guess as a parent, you're like, far out, let's just ... go to the science."

She enrolled her daughter in tutoring where they used decodable readers. These books are sequenced depending on the phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters and groups of letters

which make sounds) the child has learned. They eventually moved her to a systemic Catholic primary school where the teachers were [following this approach](#).



An Education Directorate spokesman said public schools followed the 10 Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy to provide a systematic, evidence-based approach to early literacy instruction.

"Our teachers are highly-qualified experts in the field, and have a range of tools and teaching methods at their disposal to meet students at their point of need," he said.

ACT public schools will be required to teach to version 9 of the Australian curriculum from 2024 and will be supported through a suite of professional learning, in-school consultancy and targeted coaching.

But there are some educators who stand by the cueing system and PM readers.

Pam Bennett was a learning assistance and Reading Recovery teacher for 36 years in the ACT public school system. She believes the cueing method works well for struggling readers and that decodable readers were boring and would turn children off the pleasure of reading.

"You cannot teach a child to read by using only phonics because reading involves a lot of other things: meaning, sentence structures, lots of different things that you have to sort of pull together to actually do self-correcting and monitoring of your reading," Mrs Bennett said.

The [Australian Education Union resoundingly rejected the Equity Economics report](#), arguing that teachers should be able to use the methods they felt were best for their students. They blamed socio-economic factors for poor reading outcomes. But private tutors across Canberra are struggling to keep up with demand from those who can afford the going rate of \$50-\$180 per session.

Ms White's son is now working through the last series of decodable books before hopefully rejoining his peers in mainstream classes. She said half a dozen friends have asked her advice for their own children who struggle with reading.

"I say, 'no, no, you have to take this into your own hands because the system won't catch up with them until they're in grade three or four'. And by the time they're in grade three or four, it's so much work to catch them up."

