

Phonics are the modern method to teach children how to read, but educators are still locked in debate about how best to use them, writes **Bethany Hiatt**

**'M**uscles pointing, strong arms!" says Year 1 teacher Sarah Bihary as her pupils stretch out their arms and point at the white board. "Track along and read with me."

As she points to the words, 14 focused students chorus: "We are learning to read words and sentences with the digraph Wh."

Ms Bihary tells her class she is looking for confident readers who decode unknown words.

"Un means not, so unknown means you don't know the word. And if you don't know it, you decode — you break the word into the sounds — you don't guess any words."

The children, from Warriapendi Primary School in Balga, one of Perth's poorest suburbs, quickly launch into a song about vowel sounds, gleefully jumping into different positions to show if they've heard a long or short vowel.

And they recite the digraphs — two letters that go together to make one sound — they have already learnt this year, including Sh, Th and Ck.

All of this revision, which helps cement the knowledge in their long-term memory, takes less than 10 minutes before they get on to today's task.

Ms Bihary reads a book featuring the Wh sound on the white board as the children track the words.

Then they read the book together before each child reads individually to a partner, each with impeccable attention to punctuation and expression.

Afterwards they play a game, quickly picking out the sounds that go with Wh to make the words Ms Bihary calls out, switching which to whip, whisk, whizz, what and when.

During this half-hour of intensive, fast-paced instruction, students have revised months of work, learnt a new letter combination and read a book four times to practise those skills.

Held last Wednesday, the lesson is an example of what is happening in schools across WA as teachers help drive a grassroots revolution in the way reading is being taught.

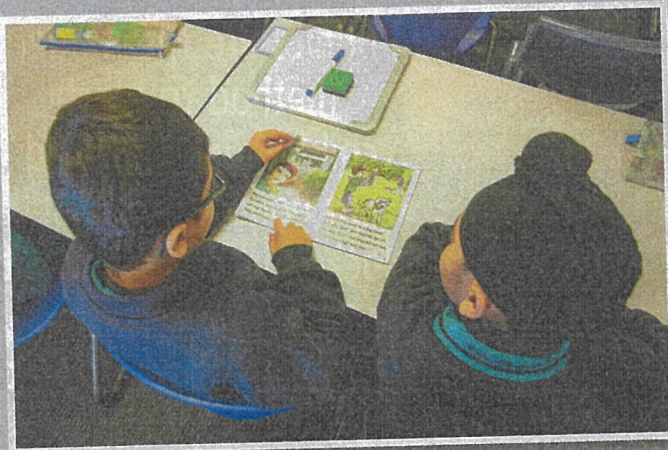
In contrast, a visitor to a Year 1 lesson held 15 years ago might have seen a teacher read a picture book to children, pointing out punctuation and explaining the meaning of words or highlighting sounds such as Sh. Typically, the students would have then spent days doing activities based on the book, including learning words in the story or doing art work.

The changes, which have gained rapid momentum in recent years, mark a step beyond the reading wars which first erupted in the 1970s and dragged on for decades.

The reading wars were a philosophical split between those who favoured teaching children to "decode" words — by connecting sounds with letters using phonics — and those who took the whole language approach, which assumed learning to read was a natural process that could be picked up as easily as children learn to talk.

While some would argue the reading wars are now finished, with numerous inquiries concluding that schools should systematically teach phonics,

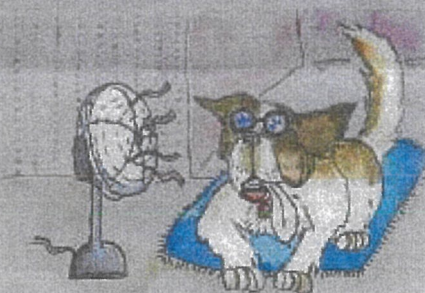




From P25



Ned has a red tag.



Ned can get hot.



Ned can rip a rag.



I pat him a lot.

there are still contested areas where educators are fighting rearguard skirmishes. Those issues are under the spotlight, with debate around a controversial phonics screening test for all Year 1s and the release of a draft Australian curriculum which still retains elements of a whole language approach.

Already mandated in NSW and South Australia, the phonics check being pushed by the Federal Government involves children reading aloud a list of 40 words to make sure they can identify and blend letter sounds.

Before the State election in May gave the McGowan Government its landslide victory, WA Education Minister Sue Ellery said she would consider introducing a phonics check if the Premier was re-elected.

Asked again this week, she would not give a firm indication either way.

"We know the early years in a child's development are critically important and that we must equip them with the literacy skills they need to be successful learners and productive citizens," she said.

"That's why it is imperative that teachers assess the development of their students' knowledge of phonics and ensure that they are on track. I am considering options on the most effective way to do this in the WA context."

Released in April, the "decluttered" national curriculum, out for public consultation until July 8, has been criticised for missing the chance to throw out references to teaching methods that encourage children to guess at words.

Experts say it is a problem the draft curriculum calls on teachers to use both predictable and decodable early reading books.

Decodable books aligned with phonics programs use only the letter-sound patterns a child has already been taught. For example: "Red Ted met a fat hen."

Predictable books, which until recently were the most commonly used early-readers in schools, repeat certain words and encourage children to use picture and story clues to guess or "predict" words. For example, "here is a chicken, here is a cow".

Research shows that

learning to read is not a natural process and children are far more likely to learn successfully if taught using phonics in a systematic, structured way.

And yet decades of teaching in universities by academics who had not been trained in phonics themselves means change has been slow.

Debate on the effectiveness of each approach has always been passionate, with the reformist zeal of some phonics supporters too much for some.

Around four years ago a new term started gaining traction, the "science of reading", which reframed the "war" to instead focus on all the precursor skills a child needs to read, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

It stemmed from influential articles by US-based education reporter Emily Hanford, who pointed out that prevailing approaches to reading instruction in American schools were inconsistent with basic things scientists had discovered about how children learn to read.

"Many educators don't know the science, and in many cases, actively resist it," she wrote.

"As a result of their intransigence, millions of kids have been set up to fail."

Australia has also become used to poor reading outcomes. In the latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which is done every five years, 19 per cent of Year 4 students — or nearly one in five — performed below a proficient standard in 2016.

But that figure was an improvement on the 24 per cent who failed to meet the benchmark in 2011, with WA showing the most gains. The next round of testing is scheduled later this year.

Schools such as Warriapendi have benefited from the support of Fogarty Foundation's EDvance program, which provides evidence-based strategies to disadvantaged schools, and the work of literacy experts such as Edith Cowan

University's Lorraine Hammond.

But the uptake in structured phonics programs has also been driven at the grassroots level in WA by frustrated teachers taking things into their own hands.

Exhibit one: the Facebook group, Reading Science in Schools. With about 37,000 members at last count from across Australia and New Zealand, the site allows teachers to share evidence-based resources.

Teacher Natalie Campbell, one of three West Australian co-founders who started the group two years ago, said their aim had been to improve literacy practice according to evidence.

They were surprised but overjoyed by its rapid growth.

"It's a space that teachers obviously really need," she said. "Teachers are always bringing more of their colleagues on board."

Dr Hammond, who is also president of Learning Difficulties Australia, said a growing number of WA schools were using evidence-based, high-impact reading instruction.

But there was still wide variation in how well reading was taught. Even though most primary school teachers would see teaching reading as their main job, she said very few understood how that actually happened.

Many teachers had been taught only how to use the whole language approach or

its hybrid cousin, balanced literacy, and did not understand how the human brain works.

Lots of schools had jumped on board and bought decodable readers.

"But they're not necessarily being used that well," she said. "It's not a good idea to use decodable readers if you haven't taught children how to decode. And you can't be teaching decoding and giving them predictable texts."

Dr Hammond said schools had only a few years to build the "reading circuit" in children's brains, so they should only use decodables during that time.

"They're a means to an end — like trainer wheels on a bicycle," she said. "As soon as children can read, then you move them off them."

ECU PhD candidate Simone Pogorzelski, who has been researching schools' use of different types of reading books, said the draft curriculum was ambiguous.

Mixing and matching different methods of teaching reading was confusing for both teachers and younger readers.

"Predictable texts are incompatible with phonics, resulting in a disconnect between code instruction and the use of texts to practise reading skills," she said.

Even though WA's version of the national curriculum has mandated schools to provide "instruction in synthetic phonics in the early years" since 2016, she said teachers were given very little advice on how to use decodable books in their classes.

In fact, an Education Department information booklet for parents of Pre-Primary children, Hello Pre-primary, promotes predictable books only. "Your child reads a variety of short, predictable texts with familiar words and supportive pictures," it states.

The department's deputy director-general Jim Bell said it provided a phonics toolkit to support kindergarten to Year 1 teachers with detailed advice on how to teach phonics and all schools were expected to take an evidence-based approach to teaching literacy.

Ms Pogorzelski, who also works for decodables





The children at Warriapendi Primary School get busy learning to read. Pictures: Ross Swanborough and Nic Ellis



publisher MultiLit, said her research showed it was important to focus on decodable books in the early stages of learning to read. Giving children access to both decodable and predictable books could even be harmful for some children, she explained, because they may try to use guessing strategies which could delay their reading development. It was also difficult for children who were being taught to decode to be given predictable books at the start, because they used irregular words that were too hard in the very early stages. "The problem is if they don't sound it out, the word doesn't get permanently stored; which means they need to keep guessing or trying to remember each word — not effective strategies in the long term," she said.

Academic results have rocketed at Warriapendi since Natasha Doyle was appointed principal four years ago, even though half of its 240 students are in the most disadvantaged quartile for socio-educational advantage and more than 60 per cent are from non-English speaking backgrounds. According to 2019 NAPLAN results, Warriapendi's Year 3 reading results were well above those of students from similar backgrounds and close to the national average for all Australian students. "Considering many start kindy not even speaking English, it's quite amazing," Ms Doyle said. "Yes we do well on NAPLAN, but we're more about getting the kids reading. My big thing has

always been if you can't read, you can't do maths or any of the other subjects." The school has been so successful that parents are moving into the area so their children can attend and teachers are putting up their hands to work there. Ms Doyle's first introduction to the science of reading came 20 years ago, when she began teaching in Port Hedland. "The whole notion of explicit teaching is not new — it's been around for a long time. But I think what got in the way was the notion of immersing children in language, the whole language approach, where if we read a book and we immerse them in good quality literature, they will learn to read. "I realised very quickly in Port Hedland, with my students in Year 1 who had never attended Kindy or Pre-primary, that I could read all day long but they weren't going to learn to read. You actually have to teach them how to read." While many children will learn to read no matter how they are taught, experts say a significant proportion simply won't grasp it if they are not explicitly taught how to decode words. Lara Toomath, 13, right, could have been one of those children who slipped through the cracks. Her mother, Ros, said Lara appeared to be doing well at reading in Pre-primary and Year 1. But she did not realise that her bright daughter was picking up cues from pictures in predictable books to "read" the words. "The book would be, 'this

is a blueberry, this is a strawberry', and I'm looking at it thinking, 'This is amazing, our daughter's such a good reader,'" she said. It wasn't until Year 2 that a teacher realised Lara was not able to sound out or write words like strawberry. "She didn't have the ability to dissect a word at all," Ms Toomath said. Lara was assessed by DSF Literacy Services and started on tutoring to fill the gaps in her phonics knowledge. Finally diagnosed as mildly dyslexic in Year 5, Lara has not looked back.



She is now in Year 8 and loving high school, but Ms Toomath said she hates to think what might have happened without the phonics intervention. "Because if you can't read in high school, and if it's a struggle every time you have to read something, I really don't know how high school would be for her," she said. DSF Literacy chief executive Mandy Nayton, who was on the committee that recommended the Federal Government promote the phonics screening check, said it was a simple way to stop children falling through the gaps. "Early intervention will reduce the number of children falling NAPLAN in Year 3," she said. But the phonics check would only be of value if its introduction was coupled with teacher training and support, she added.

Despite teachers in schools calling for the phonics check to be mandated, their union is bitterly opposed to the introduction of another test. State School Teachers Union president Pat Byrne said mandated tests had a tendency to be warped from their original purpose, as a diagnostic test to help teachers, to becoming another high-stakes assessment on which schools' performance could be judged. "Our objection was about the imposition of another mandatory test — we're not opposed to the teaching of phonics," she said. "We maintain (the check) isn't necessary. Phonics is an

integral part of early childhood teaching and teachers do need to know how to teach it. But we would say it's adequately catered for and assessed in the on-entry testing that happens in schools." Ms Nayton said there had been a big improvement in the past decade in the way structured phonics was taught — but suggested there was still some way to go. She believed changes at grassroots level, such as the rise of the Science of Reading Facebook page, reflected actual conversations going on in school staffrooms across the State about how they could best improve outcomes for children in their classrooms. "There is a strong desire and drive for change coming from the ground up as well as from the top down," she said. Far more WA schools were doing a "fantastic job" in the early years, laying the foundations for successful reading. "But there are still, unfortunately, too many schools where the components of a high-quality literacy program are not well-understood, there is not a coherent and evidence-based whole-school approach, and too many children are not reading nearly as well as they could be." DSF Literacy is one of WA's biggest providers of training to schools for teaching reading, providing professional learning to nearly 10,000 teachers in the past year. "Some of this training, I would suggest, should have taken place before teachers leave university," Ms Nayton said. Not everyone is in

lockstep with the view that teachers are not being equipped by universities with the skills they need to teach reading. "I don't buy that argument," Ron Gorman, deputy director of the Association of Independent Schools of WA, said. "To imagine that our teachers aren't prepared, in my experience just isn't true." But one thing that many graduates were not prepared for, he said, was the commercial side of reading instruction, with the plethora of different packages available. "It's the commercial world that alters the perception of what counts as reading," he explained. Mr Gorman said early childhood educators were over the reading wars, because phonics was an integral part of every literacy program. "Schools know their business, and they know the range of phonics instruction that individuals need, and it varies from kid to kid," he said. "I would question having all children doing cookie-cutter reading instruction." Speaking on behalf of the WA Deans of Education, ECU executive dean of education Stephen Winn said they were committed to ensuring graduates met revised standards and requirements in relation to early reading instruction and phonics. In Ms Doyle's mind, there is no debate about the best way to teach reading. "I think the world's getting out," the Warriapendi principal said. "If there's evidence behind it, you can't really dispute that that's the best way to teach."