What happened to the 'D' word?

Berys Dixon

When the latest version of the Australian Curriculum was released last year, it was very encouraging to read this: ***Foundation and Year One**: Read **decodable** and predictable texts…* 'Hurray, at last!' I thought. 'Things are looking up!'

I was excited because it looked like the authorities were at last absorbing the plethora of evidence-based research on best practice in reading instruction. Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and synthetic phonics are fundamental components of instruction. Decodable texts then provide students with the opportunity to read words using their knowledge of phonic patterns, an approach that may assist early literacy acquisition and reduce the number of students at risk for reading failure.

But it was not to be. On examination of the Qld, NSW and Victorian versions of the curriculum, I noticed that something was missing…

Victoria: They read short predictable texts with familiar vocabulary and supportive images…

New South Wales: …demonstrates developing skills and strategies to read, view and comprehend short, predictable texts on familiar topics in different media and technologies

Queensland: …Read predictable texts, practising phrasing and fluency, and monitor meaning using concepts about print and emerging contextual, semantic and phonic knowledge. (ACELY 1649)

Ironically, Queensland even provides the link back to the ACARA website 'ACELY1649' where we can see the identical paragraph (save for that one vital word).

Why is this so?

Why must the children of Qld, Vic and NSW be deprived of texts that all of them really can read? Once again, a significant number of children, faced with texts that overwhelm their phonic knowledge, will become entrenched in the reading behaviours of poor readers: predicting (also known as guessing) from pictures and first letters, 'getting their mouths ready' and, when all else fails, skipping words altogether.

Although there is not yet consensus on the importance of decodable texts, there are a growing number of studies that support their use. In 2000 Bevins (2016) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of decodable text in promoting word identification skills, phonics, and spelling abilities as well as positive reading attitudes in early readers. His research questions included:

- Does practice with decodable text in conjunction with a systematic phonics program accelerate word identification skills for first-grade students (USA study)
- Do first graders who use decodable text demonstrate significantly greater gains in word identification skills than a comparison group of students who use trade literature *[we would call these predictable text]*.

Two first grade classrooms participated in this study: one was the experimental classroom which used decodable text; the other used patterned and predictable text. Both schools were carefully supervised to ensure that they used the same systematic and explicit phonics instruction covering the identical scope and sequence. Students were assessed on measures of reading using the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test, the Blevins Phonics-Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment, a decoding test and a reading attitudes survey.

Students using decodable texts significantly outperformed students in the control group on all measures and were more prepared to transfer their phonics skills to new words in formal assessments. As well, their confidence in their reading abilities and enjoyment for books grew. In contrast, the control group actually reported an increase in their *dislike* of reading.

Other studies have reached similar conclusions. Cheetham and Allor (2012), reporting on their own study, noted that 'collectively the results indicate that decodability is a critical characteristic of early reading text as it increases the likelihood that students will use a decoding strategy and results in immediate benefits particularly with regard to accuracy'.

And while all children will benefit from explicit instruction in the workings of the alphabetic code, for some children this is vital. According to Cheetham and Allor (2012), 'research asserts that most children benefit from direct instruction in decoding, complemented by practice with simply written decodable stories. Further, for some children this is critical. Stories should 'fit' the child's reading level. Beginning readers should be able to read easily 90 percent or more of the words in a story."

Asking the policy makers:

Many months ago, I sent a polite enquiry to the Victorian Curriculum Authority, about the *decodable* word's conspicuous absence. While I await their reply, I have attempted to use my 'predicting' skills to guess the answer.

One guess is that the people in charge of these things believe that decodable texts are still of the *Fip did sit a bit on the hip of Mit* variety and therefore of no educational merit whatsoever.

They may still be of the erroneous belief that predictable or 'authentic' texts will expose children to a greater variety of words than phonic based books (See Table 1 below). They may assume that

children can 'learn to read well by being encouraged to use a variety of skills, processes and behaviours, rather than a particular method or approach' (from the PM Website). The teachers might also adopt the 'feel-good' idea that using predictable texts is more likely to provide 'success, enjoyment and understanding.' (from the PM Website).

I would also guess that some curriculum writers are unaware that reading is not a natural skill, and that most children do not just 'get' reading. They might not be aware that most students benefit from being taught explicitly and sequentially just as they would if learning to play an instrument, or to swim without drowning. And furthermore, I would predict that the plethora of literature on the science of reading acquisition has not yet made its way into the offices, minds and hearts of our educational decision makers. It's a shame that the people from the Victorian Curriculum Authority haven't got back to me because I'm very keen to talk to them.

I'd like them to imagine learning to play the piano. If they had learnt just middle C, I would ask if they would then expect to be given, "Pop Goes the Weasel" to practise? I'd like to ask them what *they* do when confronted by a word they've never seen? I'd like them to realise that any text is decodable as long as you know the relevant parts of the code, and that the use of context and pictures is for interpreting *meaning* and not for deciphering.

I'd like to tell them that decodable texts have moved on from the crazy old tongue twisters; that there are now plenty of funny, interesting and comprehensive stories out there with good plots and engaging characters- books children love to read and can read. And I'd like to ask them to think again about Table 1, which compares the vocabularies of similarly levelled decodable and predictive stories. Which would you choose for enjoyment, engaging plot, understanding, richness of vocabulary, interesting discussion and likely reading success?

References

Dixon, B. (2013). *The Pip and Tim Zoo*. Australia: Little Learners Love Literacy.

Lea, L. (2013). *Tim's Quiz*. Australia: Little Learners Love Literacy.

Randell, B. (2007). *Clever Fox*. [PM Plus Yellow Level 6]. Australia: Thomas Nelson.

Smith, A. (2011). *Harry and the Little Robot*. [PM Stars Red Narrative]. Australia: Thomas Nelson.

Berys is a qualified primary teacher who, in 2008, switched from whole language to the explicit teaching of synthetic phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. Results for all students, including those with learning difficulties, markedly improved. She now dedicates her time to writing engaging decodable stories for Little Learners Love Literacy and Pocket Rockets as well as educating teachers in this approach.

Table 1. A comparison of popular predictable and decodable texts for beginning readers

	PREDICTABLE	DECODABLE
Title	Harry and the Little Robot	Tim's Quiz
Series	PM	Little Learners
Level	3	3
Total Words	65	65
Different words	18	28
Summary	Harry finds a robot in the shop and they become happy to have found each other.	Tim is a quiz master and is entertaining everyone with his magic tricks.
Nouns	Harry Robot Mum box	Tim's Tim quiz hat bag bat rod pig
High frequency words	is here A The in at too comes and (only in the title)	I It is my am in Yes not He Can on the
Verbs	Click Look looking comes	hop can zim zap
Adjectives	little happy	big top red pet
Title	Clever Fox	The Pip and Tim Zoo
Series	PM	Little learners
Level	6	6
Total Words	114	137
Different words	19	56
Summary	A fox is running away from a dog. He goes over the trees and hills. He finally hides in the reeds.	Pip and Tim set up an unusual zoo in the back yard. There are lots of interesting creatures for the family to see. Unfortunately there is a bit of a disturbance and gran gets a surprise visitor in her handbag.
Nouns	trees hill fox home dog water river	Pip Tim zoo tent mum dad gran slug ants nest rock grubs elephant rabbit frog possum pup flap kitten handbag end
High frequency words	comes see looks go goes	the and have had up in come see look at do you we no a can went will into that was of
Verbs	running runs looks comes see hiding stays go goes	set visit see look lift hold pat cost went bit hop
Adjectives	good safe clever (only in the title)	fun big biggest fat quick