

Phonics and the literacy journey, part 1: Start with quality, literary texts

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The purpose of reading is to make meaning of text in the broadest sense, so that should be a priority from the moment a child is born, Professor Robyn Ewing told K-6 teachers at a Centre for Professional Learning literacy course recently.

Professor Ewing suggests the teaching of reading must start with listening, talking and shared reading and writing opportunities first, “because understanding what the process is and understanding why we are reading is a key to engaging children in the process right from the beginning”.

“We can listen to stories, we can read books, we can engage in interesting conversations about the text and we can enjoy the reading process — taking great pleasure from the beginning,” she said.

Professor Ewing doesn't like to see single reading strategies such as recoding (translating the printing code to the oral code) emphasised to the exclusion of others such as decoding (making meaning) and analysing.



Just sounding out and blending doesn't find meaning, Professor Ewing said.

“There are so many words that even if we know how to sound out and blend, we can't actually pronounce them properly unless we have the words in context,” she said. “English is not largely phonetic because we have so many words from so many different languages and if you look at the words that [phonics programs] choose to privilege in those first lessons, they don't even cover the words that we use most often.

“We need to make sure that our readers have an understanding of using semantics as well as graphophonic (letter-sound relationships and print conventions) and lexicogrammatical cues. They need to be taught simultaneously, in an integrated and meaningful way.”

She champions the sharing of quality, literature, which provides opportunities to imagine, question and wonder about the world. They use real language in contrast to artificial texts (for example to focus on particular word blends) with contrived language that makes no sense.

Robyn Ewing is Professor of Teacher Education and the Arts at the University of Sydney and the author of *Exploding SOME of the myths about learning to read: A review of research on the role of phonics*. Earlier this year the union published her review of relevant research into teaching reading and literacy, and the role phonics plays within it. Visit bit.ly/PhonicsEwing

— Kerri Carr

- [Phonics and the literacy journey, part 2: Go from the meaningful to the abstract](#)
- [Phonics and the literacy journey, part 3: A compelling case for poetry every day](#)