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## A survey of Western Australian teachers' use of texts in supporting beginning readers

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Connected text reading is crucial to beginning reading development as this is where children apply the reading skills they are learning. The most recent version of the Australian Curriculum includes the requirement that teachers use both predictable and decodable texts in early reading instruction. As each text type is underpinned by a different approach to reading instruction, this creates a potential dilemma for teachers when implementing the curriculum. A preliminary study of the instructional practices used to teach reading in the first two years of schooling was therefore conducted to investigate how early years teachers make use of two different text types that are arguably incompatible. An online survey regarding approaches to reading instruction and use of different text types was distributed to Western Australian Pre-primary and Year 1 teachers via several social media platforms. A total of 138 teachers responded. Survey responses indicated that these teachers do not have a coherent understanding of the purpose of different text types in beginning reading instruction. The findings highlight the need to improve early years teachers' knowledge of the instructional strategies aligned to each text type so that they can make informed decisions when supporting children's reading development.

### Introduction

Teachers are experiencing unprecedented change in the landscape of reading instruction, with many required to employ instructional strategies that they were previously discouraged from using (Turbill & Cambourne, 2007) or were not taught as part of their initial teacher education (Meeks, Madelaine & Stephenson, Kemp, 2020; Meeks & Kemp, 2017). A renewed focus on evidence-based practice in reading instruction has seen education authorities and literacy advocacy groups promote the *explicit* and *systematic* teaching of phonics in early reading programs (Department for Education, 2013; International Literacy Association [ILA], 2019); two characteristics identified by the US National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) as contributing to successful reading acquisition. Departure from the whole language approach that has dominated early reading instruction for decades (Coltheart & Prior, 2006), and its most recent iteration known as balanced literacy (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013), is evident in the recent recommendation by the ILA (2019) to support beginning readers with decodable texts during connected text reading.

Within Australia, the inclusion of decodable texts in the Foundation and Year 1 content descriptions of the Australian Curriculum for English (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2015) is also a significant development. Prior to 2015, the English learning area in the Australian Curriculum (AC: English) only referred to the use of *predictable* texts in the first two years of schooling. Predictable, also referred to as levelled, texts align with a whole language approach to reading (Cunningham et al., 2005;

Murray, Munger & Hiebert, 2014) that is underpinned by the notion that learning to read is biologically driven, acquired naturally and similar to the processes involved in learning to speak (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018). In contrast, *decodable* texts align more closely to a code-based approach (i.e. systematic phonics instruction). While the evidence base for using decodable texts *only* is inconclusive (Mesmer, 2009; Price-Mohr & Price, 2017), research has shown that they benefit children in the beginning stages of learning to read (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Juel & Roper Schneider, 1985; Mesmer, 2000). Reading phonically regular words in texts, it is argued, makes the process of reading an alphabetic language transparent to the beginning reader and serves as a “conduit for the application of phonics instruction” (Mesmer, 2000, p. 130).

The content descriptors that refer to decodable texts in the AC: English are within the “Interpreting, analysing, evaluation” sub-strand of the “Literacy” strand. The Foundation descriptor states: “Read decodable and predictable texts, practising phrasing and fluency, and monitor meaning *using concepts about print and emerging contextual, semantic, grammatical* [emphasis added] and phonic knowledge” (ACARA, 2015, p. 12). The Year 1 descriptor is similarly worded, but also refers to “*prediction, monitoring meaning and re-reading* [emphasis added] (ACARA, 2015, p. 12). Notably, these strategies (italicised) prioritise the three-cueing system of reading, a set of processes that aligns with the purpose and use of predictable rather than decodable texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2012). The mandate for teachers to use both decodable and predictable texts in the AC: English (ACARA, 2018) is, therefore, potentially confusing for teachers, since these texts are underpinned by different models of reading and are arguably antithetical (Adams, 2009; Chapman, Greaney, Arrow & Tunmer, 2018).

Although Australia has a national curriculum, individual states and territories are responsible for how the curriculum is implemented (ACARA, n.d). In Western Australia (WA), teachers are mandated to provide “instruction in synthetic phonics in the early years” (Department of Education Western Australia [DoEWA], 2016a, p. 3). The WA School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) has identified that “the inclusion of decodable texts allows the application of phonic knowledge and skill” and advises that teachers should “consider the different selection of reading texts ... for in-class and home reading” for Pre-primary students (2015, p. 2). However, there is no advice for how teachers should accommodate the addition of decodable texts and, notably, an information booklet for parents/carers of children starting formal schooling (Pre-primary) distributed by DoEWA (2016b) promotes the use of predictable texts only.

## The current study

The long term impact of reading failure both on individuals and the wider community has been well documented (see, for example, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011; Daniel et al., 2006; Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009). Hence, there is a clear imperative to ensure that early years teachers are well supported to provide effective reading instruction. In light of the ambiguity in the AC regarding text use with beginning readers, this preliminary study investigated Pre-primary and Year 1 teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about the use of text types and strategies for supporting children’s reading. Phonics

instruction was also examined, given the directive to teach synthetic phonics in WA early years' classrooms. The research was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What approach to phonics instruction do Pre-primary and Year 1 teachers take?
- RQ2: What text types are used by Pre-primary and Year 1 teachers for guided reading when teaching beginning reading?
- RQ3: What strategies do teachers use when supporting children's connected text reading?
- RQ4: Do teachers' instructional approaches align with the text types they use during reading instruction?
- RQ5: Do teachers' beliefs about the purpose of different text types influence which texts they use to support beginning reading development?

Our interest in these questions was prompted by work within schools that revealed some confusion among early year teachers as to when and how to use the different text types.

## **Research on beginning reading instruction and text types**

### **Approaches to phonics instruction**

Decades of research on the development of beginning reading skills shows that children's acquisition of phonemic awareness and phonics predicts later reading success (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2005; Ehri, 2020; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl & Willows, 2001; NICHD, 2000; Rose, 2006). Furthermore, there is large-scale consensus that teaching phonics *explicitly* and *systematically* helps children to map the visual symbols of a written code to the spoken sounds of language (Buckingham, Wheldall & Wheldall, 2019; Castles et al., 2018). The 'synthetic phonics approach', a method of teaching phonics whereby letters or letter patterns are mapped on to spoken sounds and blended to produce a spoken word, and the analytic approach, which focuses on larger orthographic units such as onset-rime, are the two most commonly used approaches (Castles et al., 2018). Studies have shown that a 'systematic synthetic phonics' approach results in better reading outcomes in whole class instruction (Johnston, McGeown & Watson, 2012; Machin, McNally & Viarengo, 2018) and small group intervention (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Foorman et al., 1997) when compared to analytic or business as usual approaches (Quach et al., 2019). Moreover, a synthetic phonics approach has been shown to be more effective for teaching beginning reading than the whole word and incidental strategies featured in whole language methods (DEST, 2005; Ehri et al., 2001; NICHD, 2000; Rastle, Lally, Davis & Taylor, 2021). While these findings support the use of a systematic synthetic phonics approach, reading instruction methods remain a contested space in the research literature (Bowers, 2020; Buckingham, 2020).

### **Text type features**

Predictable texts, the first level of a gradient of book levels that have been specifically written for beginning readers, are characterised by text that has been constructed based on

meaning (Cunningham et al., 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). The beginning levels incorporate predictable and repetitive sentences supported by topics that are familiar to young readers and pictures that are closely matched to the text (Cunningham et al., 2005). Reading predictable texts encourages whole word reading strategies, as high frequency words are repeated throughout the text to scaffold reading development (Johnston, 2000; Murray et al., 2014). The reading approach that underpins predictable texts is informed by the three-cueing system, which is based on the idea that children learn to read through immersion in, and exposure to, print and make meaning by using three cues featured in the text: phonological, semantic, and syntactic (Johnston, 2000). Based on this three-cueing system, readers are prompted to consider whether a word looks right, sounds right and makes sense (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2006).

In contrast, decodable texts focus on making the alphabetic code transparent to beginning (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2000) and older struggling readers (Cheatham, Allor & Roberts, 2014). Decodable texts contain a high number of phonically regular words and are allocated to readers based on their existing letter-sound knowledge (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2000, 2005). The theoretical underpinning of this approach is the *Simple View of Reading* (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). In this model, proficient reading is the product of two key processes: decoding and language comprehension. That is, children need to be able to recognise the sound symbol relationships and have the requisite language skills to make meaning and read proficiently (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Rose, 2006; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). The evidence suggests that beginning readers benefit from decodable texts as they allow children to immediately practise the decoding skills acquired through systematic phonics instruction (Mesmer, 2000). Application of alphabetic knowledge, without the need to rely on memorisation and prior knowledge of language as strategies during text reading, promotes self-teaching of the phonic code and has been shown to facilitate the development of children's orthographic knowledge (Ehri, 2014; Juel & Roper Schneider, 1985; Share, 1995, 1999) which is necessary for reading fluency (Kilpatrick, 2014).

### **Timing of text type use**

The eventual goal for all readers is to recognise whole words instantly or by sight. The model of word reading developed by Ehri (2005, 2014, 2020) suggests that children progress through four distinct developmental phases before they can read words automatically: *pre-alphabetic*, *partial-alphabetic*, *full-alphabetic* and *consolidated alphabetic*. Exposure to words via connected text reading facilitates children's progress from the pre-alphabetic to the consolidated reading stage (Mesmer, 2000). Hence, reading the right text at the right time can have a significant effect on children's reading outcomes (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). In the pre-alphabetic stage, exposure to predictable texts might allow children to develop some insight into how print represents spoken words in texts while also enabling "the development of a sight word vocabulary" (Murray et al., 2014, p. 495). There are also studies providing support for a relationship between the repetition of high frequency words, predictable text and oral reading fluency in beginning readers (Compton, Appleton & Hosp, 2004; Jenkins, Peyton, Sanders & Vadasy, 2004; Mesmer, 2009). Continued use of predictable text beyond the pre-alphabetic reading stage, however, can

make it difficult for children to establish a connection between the texts they are reading and the phonics instruction they are receiving in the classroom (Adams, 2009; Chapman et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has been argued that predictable texts, especially for at risk readers, do not provide sufficient practice in applying the alphabetic code. As a consequence, children with weak phonological recoding skills compensate by drawing on language strategies and picture cues to guess words rather than using decoding skills (Hempenstall, 2004; Johnston, 1998, 2000; Murray et al., 2014). As pictures become less frequent and text difficulty increases, a reliance on visual memory, context, and language structure is not sustainable in supporting reading development in the long term, especially for children at risk of developing reading difficulties (Stanovich, 2009).

The available evidence supports the use of decodable texts when children are in Ehri's (2005) partial or full alphabetic stages of reading (Castles et al., 2018; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2000, 2005); developmental stages that span the first two years of formal schooling. Beyond the beginning stage of learning to read, however, the benefits of decodable texts appear to be limited (Beverly, Giles & Buck, 2009). Once the essential phonics code for reading has been mastered, children should be exposed to texts with more complex vocabulary and more diverse language structures (Castles et al., 2018; Solity & Vousden, 2009).

Teachers are tasked with using texts that are underpinned by different models of reading and aligning instructional strategies to the correct text type. This requires them to have a sound understanding of how reading develops, including which text and strategy might be appropriate for a child's stage of reading development. Teacher knowledge has been identified as a significant contributor to children's literacy outcomes (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012). However, Chapman et al. (2018) have shown that teachers' knowledge of linguistically related concepts is weak, and Moats (2009, 2014, 2020) and others (see, for example, Meeks, Stephenson, Kemp & Madelaine, 2016; Meeks et al., 2020) have questioned how well-equipped teachers are to teach reading.

Findings of a recent study involving 55 teachers from New Zealand suggested that teachers lack the knowledge to implement appropriate instructional strategies to address children's errors when reading connected text (Chapman et al., 2018). Teachers were required to provide a prompt to assist the readers' attempts at word recognition. The study found that 40% of teachers used "word-level information" to correct word errors, while 45% used contextual prompts consistent with the three-cueing system. Use of the latter, it is argued, contributes to New Zealand's "large disparity between good and poor readers" (Chapman et al., 2018, p. 2).

There is evidence that other factors, such as beliefs about texts and the instructional purpose for which the text is most suited (Mesmer, 2006), also influence teachers' choice and use of text. In a survey of 300 early years teachers in the US, Mesmer (2006) found that teachers tended to use both predictable and decodable texts for "specific instructional purposes" (p. 407), but used predictable texts much more broadly. Overall, the teachers in Mesmer's study placed a lot of value in using a range of texts and preferred levelled and predictable texts to decodable texts. Decodable texts were seen to have a very specific, but

limited, role in teaching sounding out and phonics to beginning readers and/or struggling readers and were generally viewed more negatively.

## Method

For the current study, an online survey was developed to investigate the instructional practices teachers use with beginning readers in WA Pre-primary (4-5 year olds) and Year 1 (5-6 year olds) classrooms. This approach was chosen since surveys are an effective tool for the assessment of facts, opinions, and trends (Siniscalco & Auriat, 2005) from a predetermined population over a fixed or short timeframe (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012).

The survey instrument comprised 21 questions, including some broad demographic information such as years of teaching experience and current year level of teaching. Questions regarding phonics instruction included the type of programs taught, how often, and for how long. Teachers were also asked about the type of text they use in guided reading (i.e. when supporting small groups of children to read independently) and how long and how often guided reading is implemented. The final survey question asked teachers to indicate, on a four-point Likert scale, their beliefs about the role of text types in beginning reading development.

Following ethics approval from the university human research ethics committee, the survey was delivered via the *Qualtrics* online survey platform and teachers were invited to complete the survey via three main forums: an early childhood closed *Facebook* group (6,000+ members), a primary teaching *Facebook* group (2,900+ followers) and via an announcement (shared link) through a literacy organisation. The survey link was also posted on the first author's *Twitter* feed and made available for six weeks. Consent to participate was indicated by participants selecting the *Yes, I agree to participate* option following the information letter on the survey.

## Participants

A total of 214 WA Pre-primary and Year 1 teachers viewed the online survey; however, only 138 teachers responded. Missing data across most variables was relatively small (0-4%), except for the questions relating to guided reading (approximately 20%) and reading levels (67%), suggesting that teachers found these questions more difficult to answer, although the reason for this is not clear.

Table 1 shows that most of the respondents were Pre-primary (PP) teachers (70%) who typically had less than six years' teaching experience (53%). One quarter of the sample had more than 15 years of teaching experience. There was only one male respondent.

Table 1: Distribution of teacher survey sample by school year taught and teaching experience (N = 138)

Teacher characteristics		n	%
School year taught	Pre-primary	97	70.3
	Year 1	26	18.8
	Combined Pre-primary/Year 1	15	10.9
Years of teaching experience	Less than 2 years	25	18.1
	2-5 years	48	34.8
	6-10 years	24	17.4
	11-15 years	6	4.3
	>15 years	35	25.4

## Results

### Phonics instruction (RQ1)

Of the teachers surveyed, 97% indicated that they taught phonics. Almost 85% reported they taught at least four phonics lessons per week, with 35% teaching five lessons per week. This was consistent across year levels, with most teachers of PP (82%), Year 1 (88%), and combined PP/Year 1 (93%) classes implementing at least four phonics lessons per week.

Respondents were asked to indicate the reading program they use to teach phonics. The response categories included a choice of six synthetic phonics programs plus the opportunity to name other programs or indicate whether they developed their own program. The majority (83%) of respondents indicated they used one of the synthetic phonics programs listed (e.g. *Letters and Sounds*, *Jolly Phonics*, *Get Reading Right*) and only a small proportion (8%) developed their own program. Analysis of the *other* programs nominated by teachers showed they were either using other commercially available synthetic phonics programs or combining two or more of the listed programs. The *Letters and Sounds* program (Department for Education and Skills [DFES], 2007) was most commonly used by PP (47%) and Year 1 (40%) teachers.

Responses to the series of questions about teaching phonics suggest that most teachers (93%) use a synthetic approach to teaching phonics. Only one teacher seemed to use an analytic approach, two teachers used an implicit/embedded approach, and six teachers used a somewhat eclectic approach.

### Instructional text reading (RQ2)

Most of the PP (80%), Year 1 (85%) and PP/Year 1 (87%) teachers indicated that *Guided Reading* (GR) was part of their literacy program. In WA PP classrooms, GR is typically delayed until after Term 1, so it is not surprising that most of the PP teachers (87%) indicated they start GR in Term 2 or 3. At Year 1 level, it is generally expected that reading instruction will commence from Term 1; however, more than one-third (36%) of the Year 1 teachers indicated they delay this until Term 2.



Regarding the frequency of GR lessons, 20% of teachers worked with the GR groups at least three times per week. The PP/Year 1 teachers reported the greatest frequency of GR (i.e. 30% ran GR groups 3-5 times per week). Across all year groups, a majority of teachers (56%) reported using both predictable and decodable texts in GR lessons. The PP teachers (60%) were somewhat more likely to use both text types than the Year 1 (45%) and PP/Year 1 teachers (46%).

### Strategies to support connected text reading (RQ3)

Teachers were asked to specify which prompts or strategies they used to help children decipher unknown words during text reading. As shown in Table 2, a large majority indicated that they prompted children to “sound out” words when they came across an unknown word. Other strategies used by more than half of the teachers were: look at the picture, rereading, think about what word would best fit, look at the first letter, and look for a smaller word within the word. Strategies such as finding a word with a similar pattern and guessing were much less likely to be used as prompts during reading.

Table 2: Reading prompts/strategies used by teachers to help children read unknown words disaggregated by text type used

Prompt/strategy	Predictable texts		Decodable texts		Both text types		Not specified		Full sample	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sound out each letter	19	95.0	28	100.0	60	95.2	25	92.6	132	95.7
Look at the picture	18	90.0	19	67.9	52	82.5	23	85.2	112	81.2
Reread the sentence	16	80.0	20	71.4	52	82.5	18	66.7	106	76.8
Think about what word would best fit	15	75.0	13	46.4	44	69.8	17	63.0	89	64.5
Look at the first letter in the word and say the sound	18	90.0	14	50.0	38	60.3	17	63.0	87	63.0
Look for a smaller word within the word	10	50.0	17	60.7	40	63.5	15	55.6	82	59.4
Find a word with similar spelling or pattern	8	40.0	5	17.9	19	30.2	7	25.9	39	28.3
Have a guess	5	25.0	3	10.7	11	17.5	8	29.6	27	19.6

Notes.  $N = 138$ . Multiple response item. Predictable texts:  $n = 20$ ; Decodable texts:  $n = 28$ ; Both text types:  $n = 63$ ; Not specified:  $n = 27$ .

### Text type used vs prompting strategies (RQ4)

Table 2 shows that all of the teachers in the decodable texts group reported using “sounding out” as a prompting strategy. However, all but two of these teachers also used other strategies which do not align with the instructional approach for decodable texts. For example, more than two-thirds said they asked children to look at the picture for clues and a small number reported using the “have a guess” prompt.

Two relatively common strategies when using predictable books are to ask children to “look at the first letter and say the sound” and “look at the picture” (Brown, 2003). Consistent with this, a large majority of the predictable text group ( $\geq 90\%$ ) indicated they use these reading prompts. These teachers also reported prompting children to “sound out each letter”.

Since we might expect that the teachers who indicated they solely use predictable or decodable texts would use reading strategies that more strongly align with the underlying instructional approach of these texts, a series of Pearson chi-square tests of independence were run for each reading prompt. A Bonferroni adjustment of the alpha level ( $0.05/8 = 0.006$ ) was applied to account for multiple tests. A significant difference between the predictable and decodable groups was only found for the “first letter” reading prompt ( $\chi^2(1, n = 48) = 8.4, p = 0.004$ ), with substantially more of the predictable text group (90%) using this prompt than the decodable text group (50%).

To determine the association between the reading prompts/strategies used by teachers, a series of phi coefficients were calculated. The phi coefficient is appropriate for dichotomous variables and can be interpreted similarly to the Pearson coefficient, with a phi coefficient above 0.5 considered to be a strong association, and 0.3-0.5 considered to be a moderate association. A Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level (i.e.  $0.05/28 = 0.00178$ ) to account for multiple tests. As shown in Table 3, there were statistically significant ( $p < 0.0018$ ) moderate associations between the reading prompts consistent with instructional approaches for predictable texts. For example, the prompt to “think about what word would best fit” was significantly associated with rereading (.382), looking for a smaller word within the word (.435), looking at the picture (.340) and looking at the first letter (.310). This alignment with the strategies promoted by the curriculum documents suggests these are well-used and practised prompts for supporting beginning readers.

### **Influence of teachers' beliefs (RQ5)**

The final section of the survey investigated the teachers' beliefs about the purpose and use of decodable and predictable texts for beginning readers. Overall, there was a high level of agreement for each belief statement. The majority of teachers (96%) either strongly agreed or agreed that decodable texts allow children to practise newly acquired phonic skills, indicating that teachers do understand the purpose of decodable texts. Most teachers also agreed or strongly agreed (92%) that decodable texts are most suitable when using a synthetic phonics approach.

Regarding predictable texts, more than half (56%) of the teachers agreed they are more appropriate for beginning readers and two-thirds (67%) agreed that predictable texts promote fluency. Most of the teachers (93%) indicated they believe beginning readers should be exposed to a wide range of reading material.

Table 3: Phi coefficients for reading prompts/strategies used by teachers

Prompts/strategies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Reread the sentence	—							
2. Find a word with similar spelling or pattern	.307*							
3. Look for a smaller word within the word	.420*	.322*						
4. Sound out each letter	-.033	.134	.113					
5. Look at the picture	.218	-.027	.055	-.012				
6. Look at first letter in word and say the sound	.255	.180	.162	.205	.245			
7. Think about what word would best fit	.382*	.163	.435*	.065	.340*	.310*		
8. Have a guess	.098	.218	.147	.016	.238	.226	.251	—

Notes: \* correlation is significant at the 0.00178 level (2-tailed) after Bonferroni adjustment of the alpha level (i.e.  $p = 0.05/28 = 0.00178$ ) to account for multiple tests.

Given the recent changes in reading instruction practices within Australia, it might be reasonable to assume that length of teaching experience could be a key factor influencing teacher beliefs about reading instruction. To test this, Pearson's chi-square tests were run for each belief statement, differentiating between teacher length of service. Teachers were grouped on the basis of years of teaching experience (i.e. <2, 2-5, 6-10, 11-15, >15). Perhaps surprisingly, there were no significant differences in beliefs about reading instruction practices based on classroom teaching experience.

Associations between the teachers' beliefs about predictable and decodable texts and the texts they actually use in the classroom were also explored. Table 4 shows the distribution of teachers by the type of text they reported using and level of agreement/disagreement with each of the belief statements. Pearson's chi-square tests were used to test for statistical significance. Only the belief statements about decodable text were significantly associated with text type used. Here the differences were due to the "decodable" teacher group being more likely than the "predictable" or "combination" groups to *strongly agree* that decodable texts "... allow beginning readers to practise their newly learnt skills" ( $\chi^2(6, N = 108) = 14.04, p = 0.022$ ) and "are more appropriate when using a synthetic phonics approach..." ( $\chi^2(6, N = 108) = 15.03, p = 0.020$ ).

To further explore the association between the beliefs that teachers hold regarding the use of predictable and decodable texts, a series of Kendall's tau-b coefficients were calculated, and the alpha level was adjusted to account for multiple tests using a Bonferroni correction (i.e.  $0.05/10 = 0.005$ ). Kendall's tau-b is appropriate for variables measured at the ordinal level. As shown in Table 5, there was a moderately strong, statistically significant association (.345) between the belief that "predictable texts, with a focus on meaning, are appropriate for beginning readers" and "predictable texts promote fluency in early reading". There was also a strong and statistically significant association between the belief that "decodable texts, which have a high percentage of phonetically regular words,

Table 4: Teacher beliefs disaggregated by type of text used with beginning readers

Belief statements	Text type used	%			
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Predictable texts, with a focus on reading for meaning, are more appropriate for beginning readers	Predictable	5.3	26.3	52.6	15.8
	Decodable	26.9	34.6	34.6	3.8
	Both text types	11.1	30.2	46.0	12.7
2. Predictable texts promote fluency in early reading	Predictable	11.1	11.1	66.7	11.1
	Decodable	20.0	24.0	52.0	4.0
	Both text types	10.0	26.7	53.3	10.0
3. Decodable texts, with a high percentage of phonetically regular words, allow beginning readers to practise their newly learnt skills	Predictable	—	—	63.2	36.8
	Decodable	3.8	—	11.5	84.6
	Both text types	4.8	1.6	41.3	52.4
4. Decodable texts are more appropriate when using a synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction	Predictable	5.3	10.5	68.4	15.8
	Decodable	3.8	—	30.8	65.4
	Both text types	4.8	3.2	58.7	33.3
5. Beginning readers should be exposed to a wide range of reading material	Predictable	—	—	42.1	57.9
	Decodable	—	7.7	53.8	38.5
	Both text types	6.3	3.2	36.5	54.0

*Notes.* N = 108. Excludes teachers who did not specify the type of texts they use.

Table 5: Kendall's tau-b coefficients for teacher beliefs about the use of decodable and predictable texts

Teacher beliefs	1	2	3	4	5
1. Predictable texts, with a focus on reading for meaning, are more appropriate for beginning readers	—				
2. Predictable texts promote fluency in early reading	.345*				
3. Decodable texts, with high percentage of phonetically regular words, allow beginning readers to practise their newly learnt skills	-.141	-.097			
4. Decodable texts are more appropriate when using a synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction	-.157	-.128	.542*		
5. Beginning readers should be exposed to a wide range of reading material	.107	.171	.028	.041	—

*Notes.* n = 133 for belief statements 1, 3, 4, and 5; n = 127 for belief statement 2.

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.005 level (2-tailed) after Bonferroni adjustment of the alpha level (i.e.  $p = 0.05/10 = 0.005$ ) to account for multiple tests.

allow beginning readers to practise their newly learned skills” and the belief that “decodable texts are more appropriate when using a synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction”. Hence, the teachers demonstrate some level of consistency, despite not correctly aligning appropriate instructional approaches to the different text types.

## Discussion and conclusion

A larger research project examining the relationship between text type and reading progress in the first year of school was the impetus for this study. This led the authors to consider how the theoretical differences underpinning the two text types and the ongoing debate around methods of instruction present a challenge for teachers who must navigate a curriculum that is ambiguous, and potentially confusing. We were interested in knowing how teachers used these texts in classrooms and whether their employment of strategies to support children's connected text reading aligned with their instructional approach to teaching phonics. We were also interested in teachers' beliefs about different text types and whether this was reflected in their use of texts during reading.

### Use of phonics

Teachers were asked if they taught phonics, even though it is a requirement of the Australian Curriculum. Surprisingly, two teachers reported that they did not teach phonics; however, most teachers reported that they taught four phonics lessons per week (85%). The majority of teachers used some form of synthetic phonics with almost half reporting that they used the freely available *Letters and Sounds* program (DFES, 2007). Based on these findings, the available research (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2000, 2005), and the recommendation by the ILA (2019) to use decodable texts alongside phonics instruction, we would expect to see decodable texts predominantly used for reading instruction, with the appropriate reading strategies applied. This, however, was not the case as indicated by the approach to GR where both predictable and decodable texts were used. Teachers' reported use of strategies also indicates some confusion in the use of texts and their understanding of the corresponding underlying models of reading.

### Use of texts and strategies

All teachers who reported only using decodable texts prompted children to "sound out each letter", which is an appropriate strategy for this text type. However, a substantial proportion of participants also prompted children to use strategies aligned with predictable texts such as "re-read the sentence", "look at the picture" and "think about what would fit best". Most teachers using only predictable texts also prompted students to "sound out each letter", which could be challenging for children as words in predictable readers are not chosen based on the teaching sequence for synthetic phonics instruction (Adams, 2009). This could result in children perceiving this as an ineffective strategy for reading and relying more heavily on visual, semantic and syntactic clues, rather than decoding strategies. A large majority of teachers who used predictable texts only, reported using "look at the first letter and say the sound" and "look at the picture". Children in the pre-alphabetic stage of reading may benefit from such word recognition prompts when exposed to books with repetitive sentence stems and strong picture support. But once they have gained alphabetic insight these strategies are unlikely to facilitate the development of fast and efficient word recognition processes (Brown, 2003; Hemenstall, 2004; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019).

The use of prompting strategies reported in this study is consistent with that reported in Chapman et al. (2018). The findings provide evidence that teachers in WA continue to use strategies that are more aligned with a meaning-based than a code-based approach to reading, even when using decodable texts. In New Zealand, Chapman et al. (2018) contended that teachers' practice "reflects the advice presented in publications on literacy teaching for beginning readers" (p. 13). In Australia, it is likely that the merging of text types in the curriculum, without sufficient direction in their use, is the greatest barrier to implementing code-based strategies.

### **Beliefs about texts**

Teachers' beliefs about the purpose of texts indicated that the majority were aware that decodable texts allow children to practise newly acquired phonic skills and are most suitable when using a synthetic phonics approach. This raises the question of why teachers are also using predictable texts when most indicated they are using a synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction. Some insight into this anomaly may be provided by two teachers who, in text responses, commented that they didn't have access to decodable texts, and a third who, in response to the question regarding the type of text used, stated "whatever I have in my storeroom". As decodable texts are a relatively new addition to the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2015), it is possible that teachers are still establishing a library of decodable texts and are making use of the texts to which they already have access. The current survey did not ask teachers about the practicalities of text selection, nor were there any questions regarding the perceived barriers to using decodable texts. As such, we are unable to say if teachers' responses indicate their text type preference or availability of resources.

There was a high proportion of teachers in this study who believed that beginning readers should be exposed to a wide range of reading material – a premise common to both models of reading acquisition. This response could provide some explanation for why more than half the teachers surveyed used both decodable and predictable texts in their early reading instruction; the mandate from the Australian Curriculum notwithstanding. In Mesmer's (2000) US study, teachers were using texts for different instructional purposes. Although not asked directly, open-ended responses from the current study suggest that attempts are being made to use decodable and predictable texts for different purposes, albeit incorrectly. One teacher commented that young readers were progressed to predictable texts when they knew "enough of the code". Another indicated that they used "decodables for those not already levelled" and one teacher explained how they introduced "concepts and conventions" in children's storybooks in the first instance, before moving students on to both predictable and decodable texts.

Despite support for decodable texts, more than half of the participants believed that predictable texts are more appropriate for beginning readers. One teacher made her distaste for decodable texts apparent by asserting "I don't believe in Dandelion Books! They stunt good readers' comprehension, fluency and expression". The idea that predictable texts promote reading fluency has some support in the literature (Compton et al., 2004; Jenkins et al., 2004; Mesmer, 2009), but there is also evidence that the use of the

three-cueing system with these texts is ineffective for beginning reading instruction, especially for children considered at risk for later reading difficulties (Johnston, 2000; Murray et al., 2014; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). The fact that two-thirds of teachers in this study agreed that predictable texts promote fluency suggest it is a prevalent belief in this group of respondents. This may go some way to explain the continued use of predictable texts despite the majority of teachers using a synthetic phonics approach to teach reading.

Although the results of this preliminary study suggest that teachers hold several beliefs and opinions about the use of texts in early reading instruction, it is not possible to determine whether these beliefs are influencing their selection and use of texts in classrooms. The combined survey results and teacher comments are, we believe, evidence of confusion. It appears that teachers are generally using both types of texts, as prescribed, but most seem unaware of the different instructional approaches required for each text type. These findings bring into question the appropriateness of the content descriptors in the Australian Curriculum that require teachers to employ text types underpinned by different models of reading to support early connected text reading. While some effort has been made by SCSA (2015) to provide WA teachers with guidance in incorporating both decodable with predictable texts in early reading instruction, the survey results indicate that more support is required.

It is our contention that ambiguity in the Australian Curriculum documents regarding text types has contributed to teachers' confusion about the role of text type in beginning reading instruction and inconsistencies in the strategies they use. A notable exception was the finding that teachers' belief statements about decodable texts were significantly associated with text type used. It appears that teachers who strongly agree with the statements that decodable texts align more closely with a synthetic phonics approach and provide support for children in the earliest stages of learning to read are more likely to only use decodable texts to support connected text reading.

### **Limitations and future directions**

A limitation of this study is that participants self-selected and as such may not be representative of the general teaching population in WA. The number of participants was also small in relation to the number of teachers who had access to the survey. Restricting the survey to WA may also be a limiting factor. Despite a national curriculum, each state and territory's education system operates independently, and the results may not reflect practices and beliefs in other parts of Australia. However, as a pilot study, it suggests that some confusion about the use of text types does exist and warrants further investigation in a full-scale study of a larger sample of teachers in Western Australia and nationally.

In conclusion, it appears that early years teachers lack knowledge about the purpose of predictable versus decodable texts and need guidance about how and when to use the different text types in beginning reading instruction. The results of this preliminary survey are timely as ACARA (2020) undertakes its second review of the Australian Curriculum. Our findings suggest curriculum changes are needed to provide clarity for teachers, which will allow them to employ pedagogy more aligned to the recently available evidence on

how children learn to read. In the meantime, more needs to be done to address teachers' misconceptions about the role and purpose of decodable and predictable texts in the development of beginning reading skills so that they can more effectively implement the curriculum content.

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