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# Are Tasmania's 'Reading Wars' over?

**Marshall Roberts**



Experts seeking distance from \$1M report suggests issues run deep.

The Premier's Literacy Advisory Panel is set to hand down its final report to Tasmania's Department for Education, Children & Young People (DECYP) any day now. The Panel's [Final Consultation Report](#) was brimming with recommendations rooted in the scientific consensus of reading and writing research, so you'd be forgiven for thinking Tasmania is taking a bold new path, which will lead to better outcomes for all students. We could even set a precedent that evokes envy in mainland jurisdictions.

I suspect, though, that the battle is far from over. There have been multiple reviews of literacy instruction which have recommended the adoption of science-based approaches and, so far, DECYP and its earlier manifestations has avoided any meaningful adoption. Whether the Department of Premier and Cabinet will follow through on this Panel's final recommendations in an oversight capacity to achieve more successful change, remains to be seen.

One thing is certain, though: the cultural resistance to adopting science in reading instruction remains in place and will come in to play – hard – in at least two ways. The first way is, unfortunately, through the social inertia that accompanies obliviousness.

This was made embarrassingly clear to me when I recently quizzed two literacy experts on their involvement in the earlier review of Tasmanian literacy instruction, carried out by the Peter Underwood Centre (PUC).

Professor Pamela Snow is the Co-Director of [La Trobe University's SOLAR \(Science of Language and Reading\) Lab](#). Rosalie Martin founded [Speech Pathology Tasmania](#), co-founded the [Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance](#), and was awarded [2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year](#) for her work promoting literacy in prisons. I was surprised to see their names in a list of acknowledgments for 'expert input into the 2019 final report of the [Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment](#)'s review into literacy instruction in Tasmania.

One of the findings of that review – [costed to taxpayers at \\$990k over three years](#) – was that a scientifically debunked approach to reading instruction was popular amongst Tasmanian teachers. While I was reading to inform my 'Merchants of Illiteracy' background paper, it became clear that the PUC had failed to recognise that this popular teaching strategy had actually been debunked by researchers, decades ago. Instead, the PUC effectively promoted the strategy, pumping more pseudoscience into the echo-chamber of Tasmania's scientifically naive literacy teaching landscape.

It was confusing, then, to see Professor Snow and Rosalie Martin listed for expert input into that report. I asked them about this and learnt that they were just as surprised as I was: they had been asked to suggest relevant scholarly research supporting good practice, which they did. But they were not offered access to a draft copy of the report showing how and whether that research was taken on board.



In Tasmania teachers recognised phonics as the 'cornerstone of reading'.  
Popular reading strategies were encouraging children to make their thinking visible; and to associate animals with specific sounding-out strategies to match graphemes to phonemes, such as Listening Lion, Chunky Monkey, Eagle Eye, and Stretchy the Snake.

A snippet from the [PUC fact sheet for teachers](#).

They didn't even know they'd been acknowledged for 'expert input' and were keen to reassure me that they didn't endorse the report's analysis and synthesis of the literature with the concluding content, adding that they were happy to go on record saying so.

Professor Snow's name appears to have since been removed from the report hosted on the PUC website, but it can still be [seen in an archived version](#) on the internet.

What issues could prompt such a distancing? An example is the flawed instructional approach in the PUC report, which is what alerted me to the apparent 'expertise mismatch'. The approach is called 'three/multi-cueing/MSV' (Meaning, Structure/Syntax, Visual). In classrooms, its influence is recognisable in posters of characters such as 'Skippy Frog' (skip the word and come back later), 'Peekin' Poodle' or 'Eagle Eye' (look at the picture), and 'Tryin' Lion' (try a word that makes sense). In a nutshell, it encourages children to use context to work out what a challenging word might be (see image next page).

What reading researchers found, decades ago, is that these techniques are actually the fallback coping mechanisms that poor readers resort to when they can't successfully decode a word using phonics-based approaches (quite often simply because they haven't been taught phonics adequately). Or, as [Perfetti and Helder](#) put it in *The Science of Reading*, this strategy, 'rather than supporting the child's developing word-identification system, encourages guessing' (p. 25).

In short, schools are *teaching* children to be *poor* readers – as comprehensively demonstrated in U.S investigative journalist Emily Hanford's 2019 podcast, [At a Loss for Words](#).

Unfortunately, despite that PUC report being three years

old, this isn't just old news. I was alerted to [Tasmanian school social media](#) proudly featuring Skippy Frog and friends in 'back to school' photos at the end of the summer holidays. These instructional methods are very much alive and well in Tasmania and, as the PUC noted, popular amongst Tasmanian teachers. Indeed, the PUC produced a fact sheet for teachers as one of the outputs of its literacy review, and this fact sheet effectively promoted the three-cueing system even more, as well as mischaracterising it as a phonics-style 'decoding' strategy, when it is usually anything but. Looking at a picture of a phone to guess 'phone' is not the same as knowing that 'ph' at the beginning of a word represents the /f/ sound. When reading researchers speak of 'decoding' in early reading, they're almost always referring to using known letter-to-sound correspondences to work out what sounds the word includes. So, in this fact sheet, the PUC has promoted a dodgy technique, *and* managed to blur the distinction between good and poor instruction, in one fell swoop (see graphic above).

No wonder, then, that Rosalie Martin and Professor Snow were keen to put some distance between themselves and that report.

Thankfully, the Premier's Expert Panel has finally called out this three-cueing approach in its [Final Consultation Report](#), though it doesn't go nearly far enough into the uncomfortable truth. The report states that "the information presented to the Panel was that current practices, such as balanced literacy approaches and the three-cueing systems do not work effectively for all students" (p. 29). Unfortunately, not only is three-cueing not *effective* for all students, it's *harmful* in terms of impacts on learning in fledgling readers. As noted

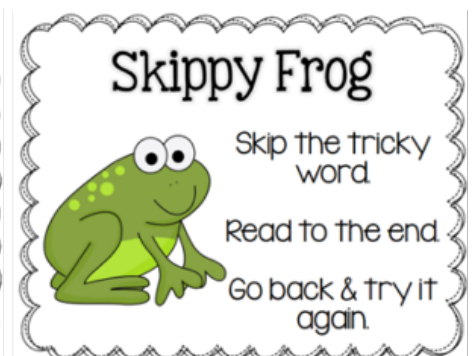
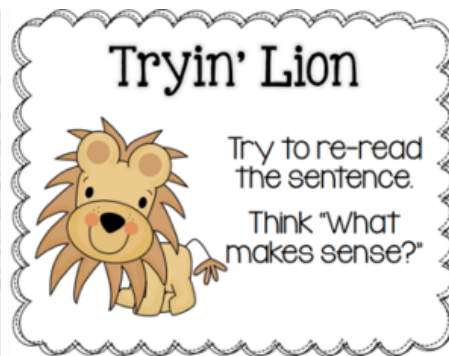
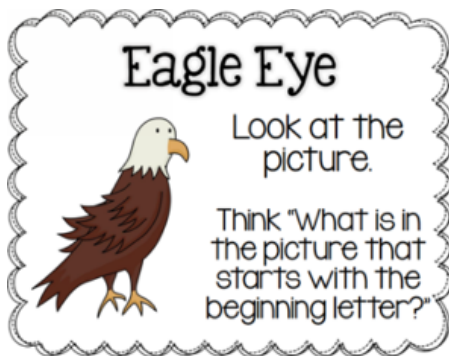
above, it encourages guessing, and takes the reader's attention off exactly the thing they most need to attend to – the word – to try to find clues about what the word may be, from other sources around the word.

Two luminaries in the reading research sphere, [Anne Castles and Kate Nation](#), describe the damage in their 2022 overview of the current science:

*"Is there evidence that attending to semantic and syntactic cues provided by context helps children to learn to read words? For beginning readers at least, the answer is no ... Consistent with our earlier discussion, children need to focus on the decoding process and in Landi et al.'s experiments, context detracted from this process and learning suffered."* (p. 155)

Tasmanian teachers are yet to be told this *en masse*. I like to think about what may happen when they are. Realising that despite their training and HECS debts, they've never been told the basic facts about what scientists know about how a child best learns to read, it may be teachers who are pursuing universities in class actions, rather than desperate parents looking for legal avenues to take the Department to task for the train wreck of their children's ill-supported foray into reading and writing.

Teachers who have 'seen the light' (I've personally heard from several) are now consoling themselves against the haunting memories of the children they've instructed with flawed approaches, with the slogan, '[when we know better, we do better!](#)'



*In the same way as a mining company can greenwash their horrific environmental impacts, Balanced Literacy consultants – and their publishers – can (and do) science-wash their unscientific approaches.*

Social inertia aside, the second way cultural resistance will weigh-in to the ongoing battle, is through wilful, informed resistance from those people who have already nailed their colours to the mast and staked their careers on the anti-science, Balanced Literacy approaches. It seems there may be at least one of these people sitting on the Expert Panel itself, since their [Final Report](#) notes, "there was some opposition expressed to only adopting Science of Reading in Tasmania, suggesting that there should be options for other teaching methods, however the majority of the Panel agreed with the body of evidence supporting the Science of Reading approach" (p. 29). One may well wonder if the other desired teaching methods include 'the homeopathy of reading'.

This is where, once the Panel's final recommendations are handed down to DECYP, Tasmania's reading war is

likely to devolve into 'black ops', covert skirmishes. My background paper was titled 'Merchants of Illiteracy' in a nod to the thoroughgoing [Merchants of Doubt](#) book and documentary. There are strong parallels between the apparent tactics of certain Balanced Literacy proponents and the tactics of other anti-science groups like tobacco industry lobbyists, which were excavated from recent history and exposed in *Merchants of Doubt*. The PUC's obfuscation of the science, in labelling the three-cueing system as 'decoding', was, I think, unintended and due mainly to ignorance of the nuances of the issues. I can't extend the same generosity to some of the consultants I examined in the background paper and, unless the whispers (and shouts) that we at [CODE REaD Dyslexia Network](#) are hearing from the coalface are exaggerated, this class of Balanced Literacy consultants is still very active in Tasmania.

Thanks to bodies such as the [Australian Education Research Organisation \(AERO\)](#), the words describing the characteristics of the approaches that are backed by the scientific consensus are starting to filter down into the consciousness of teachers: 'explicit', 'systematic', 'sequential', 'cumulative', 'direct', 'phonics' instruction, as part of a 'structured literacy' approach. The Balanced Literacy consultants who are happy to adopt more 'covert' approaches to spreading their influence, are misapplying these same words in their professional development advertisements, presumably because they want to attract those people actively looking for science-based approaches in line with new

recommendations. In the same way as a mining company can greenwash their horrific environmental impacts, Balanced Literacy consultants – and their publishers – can (and do) science-wash their unscientific approaches.

The challenge for whoever is brave enough to take the wheel to drive Tasmania's move to a science-based approach to literacy instruction, will be to get DECYP coalface staff informed, fast. Fast enough that they can, before the impetus is lost, tell the difference between approaches based on science and those that are based on pseudoscience or an outright undermining of the role science has in understanding how learning happens. If no-one takes up this challenge, nothing will change. Again.

*This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [Merchants of Illiteracy](#).*

*Since original publication, the Tasmanian Government has accepted all the 'priority' recommendations of the expert panel, and announced \$65M funding, with statewide implementation to occur.*

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