Making excellent progress in early reading: How can the identification of essential skills and concepts help?

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Abstract

The ability to read and understand text is fundamental to full participation in modern adult life (Olson, 1977; Elwert, 2001). It is essential to educational progress across domains, but increased literacy levels are also linked to positive outcomes in terms of employment and health. Given its critical role both in the facilitation of learning in all domains, and in many aspects of life beyond school, it is imperative that we give students the best possible chance to develop their reading skills. This paper uses early reading as a case study for examining how the identification and explication of essential skills and concepts might assist all students to make excellent progress.

Why should we identify essential skills and concepts?

One of the major findings of a recent review of the NSW curriculum (Masters, 2020) was that many syllabus documents are overcrowded and that, because of time constraints, important ideas can often only be taught a superficial way. If the criticism that many current syllabuses are overcrowded to the point where important ideas, although present, can be obscured, then one solution would be to clearly identify and articulate ideas that should be prioritised in the classroom. That is, making explicit the essential concepts and skills of a learning area means that peripheral content need not be a focus.

In addition to providing a way of addressing the issue of overcrowding, the identification of essential skills and concepts forces one to be clear in defining them: what are they, and what is their justification? How do they relate to the learning area as a whole? Can we articulate the key ways in which growth occurs in these essential concepts? The remainder of this paper is dedicated to offering answers to these questions in relation to early reading.1

What is reading?

Reading requires a broad variety of perceptual, linguistic, and cognitive skills to extract meaning from visually presented material, most commonly, written text. In light of this, proficient reading takes years to develop and involves both understanding a language (comprehension) and understanding the symbolic representation of that language as written text (learning to read aloud).

A sequence of studies from the United States, notably Snow et al's., *Preventing reading difficulties in young children* (1998) and the National Research Council's *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success* (1999) culminated in an influential report published by the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read* (National Reading Panel, 2000). This comprehensive and seminal study, still relevant more than 20 years after its initial publication, found that a constellation of skills and knowledge is required to read, including 'the alphabetic principle, reading sight words, reading words by mapping speech sounds to parts of words, achieving fluency, and comprehension' (Snow et al., 1998, p. 6). Similarly, the *Teaching reading: Report and recommendations*, published in 2005, found that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension (Rowe & National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy [Australia], 2005).

The development of proficiency in reading comprehension is broadly similar across languages. In all languages, proficiency in reading comprehension initially develops in relation to texts that are read aloud to learners. Later, these skills are applied (and further developed) in relation to texts that are read independently. So too in all languages, reading comprehension begins with the initial realisation that text contains meaning, passes through the capacity to understand short written texts presenting familiar ideas, and moves on to the capacity to understand and critically reflect on a broad range of sometimes long and complex written texts with layers of subtle meaning that present unfamiliar ideas and draw upon a wide vocabulary.

In the early years in particular, it is acknowledged that the development of reading comprehension is underpinned by other skills. For example, prior to being able to read and write independently, the only way that students can demonstrate their comprehension is through their oral language skills. As Castles et al. said, 'the foundation of reading comprehension is provided by oral language' (2018, p. 38). It follows that support for oral language development that is focused on quality written texts provides the foundation for the development of reading comprehension. Similarly, the development of vocabulary and general knowledge are also integral to the development of early reading.

> There is now widespread agreement that learning vocabulary, developing oral language skills, and acquiring knowledge are tasks to be tackled in early childhood and primary settings, and that they are just as important as are the tasks of learning letters, sounds, decoding, and fluency (Snow, 2017, p. 8).

While skills such as oral language development are clearly important in supporting the development of early reading comprehension, the focus here is on essential skills and concepts unique to reading.

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1   English in the Australian National Curriculum is broad in its scope, covering language, literature and literacy. These areas are all critical, but this paper focuses on reading, specifically on identifying and describing the key skills that students need in order to start reading independently with comprehensive understanding – the comprehension of written text.

The essential skills and concepts of early reading

It is important to note that the essential skills and concepts outlined here are not new ideas: in fact they find strong expression both in existing curricula, as well as in the research literature (see for example, Snow, 2017; Castles et al., 2018; Freebody & Luke, 1990). The essential concepts are an attempt to identify the most fundamental ideas in early reading. While these essential concepts have strong support, they are sometimes difficult to identify in existing materials, particularly in the case of curricula and syllabus documents, which tend to outline a great deal of detailed content, without identifying which ideas are critical. In addition, much of the existing work does not adequately address the description of growth in the concepts identified. In an attempt to address this limitation, as well as the rationale for the essential concepts, a description of the beginning levels for one concept, text form and purpose, follows the introduction of the essential concepts.

Table 1 shows the five essential skills/concepts of early reading that have been identified through a review of existing bodies of work. Although their explanation is beyond the scope of this paper, the key aspects of each are included. An explanation of each skill/concept follows the diagram.

Table 1   The essential skills and concepts of early reading

1 **Representation and fluency**	2 **Text form and purpose**	3 **Critical perspectives**	4 **Interpreting meaning**		5 **Searching**
Segmenting, blending and manipulating sounds Phoneme–letter mapping Conventions of print Spelling Punctuation Fluency, text complexity and vocabulary	Text types and purposes Text structure and organisation Metalanguage for text forms and parts of speech	Ethical perspectives Evaluating text quality Logical analytic skills Reputational evaluations Recognition of implied bias	**Listening to and discussing texts** Text comprehension (see independent reading) Using the vocabulary, syntax and grammar of written texts	**Independent reading** General knowledge Making connections Identifying key ideas Comparing and contrasting Summarising and generalising Making inferences Identifying supporting evidence Recognising the intended effect of words Recognising lost meaning	Search criteria Search strategies Competing information

1. Representation and fluency

Students need to know how spoken words are represented in writing and how to quickly and accurately automatically recognise them (Snow, 2017; Castles et al., 2018). Integral to this is the understanding that writing 'says something', that it is the representation of the words they say and hear and therefore makes meaning. They need to know the print conventions used for directionality, punctuation, referencing and text formats. Most basic decoding skills of segmenting, blending and phoneme-letter mapping must be mastered in order to support fluency development and writing with error-free spelling (Castles et al., 2018). Fluency, which requires fast, accurate word recognition and appropriate word grouping, is essential to support independent reading comprehension. Fluency has a 'transformational impact' on reading: 'it is the point at which component skills are so automated and highly integrated that maximum cognitive energy is available to focus on meaning' (Konza, 2014, p. 161). Learners must become increasingly fluent readers who are able to automatically recognise a wider range of words as texts become increasingly complex.

2. Text form and purpose

Text form and purpose, is an important concept throughout literacy learning. Learners need to recognise the different forms and purposes of texts as this supports interpreting, searching or critiquing the text as well as the creation of different types of texts. Initially there is much to learn, as text forms and purposes are complex and varied. Once reasonably skilled readers and writers are familiar with a wide range of text types they will be able to navigate these texts, or emulate key features, developing increasing sophistication in their understanding as texts become more complex. Learners also need to develop increasingly nuanced metalanguage to describe and critique text forms including text structure, organisation and the way language is used as well as applying their understanding of text forms and purposes to their own text creations. Freebody and Luke's model (1990) encompasses a similar concept in its reference to 'text user', which is about understanding text types in the context of their purposes, or 'what the text is for, here and now' (p. 10).

3. Critical perspectives

Students need to become critical readers able to evaluate texts they read and justify their evaluations. For young readers, initial evaluations of texts they read are likely to be based on personal enjoyment or relate to elements of the text that present familiar experiences, or familiar values. As students mature and become more skilled and experienced readers, they learn how to adopt a range of critical perspectives, which eventually develop into a highly complex and demanding set of thinking and analytical skills that can be applied across a range of perspectives. These will extend into postgraduate tertiary education and highly specialist reading and writing tasks. Freebody and Luke's model encompasses a similar concept in its reference to 'text analyst', which they describe as an extension of critical thinking, 'an awareness of the fact that all texts are crafted objects, written by persons of particular dispositions or orientations to the information, regardless of how factual or neutral the products may attempt to be' (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p.13).

4. Interpreting meaning

Through listening to and discussing texts

When they are first learning to read, students can demonstrate more advanced skills in interpreting the meaning of texts when texts are read to them. This is partly because the short, simple texts used to master decoding are not designed with complexities in comprehension in mind. Therefore

interpreting meaning through listening to and discussing texts underpins the development of reading. In early literacy, comprehension skills are developed through listening to and discussing texts and these skills gradually transfer to texts students can read themselves as they achieve sufficient fluency.

When reading independently

Readers need to construct much of the meaning as they read texts. Writers make assumptions about the prior knowledge of their readers. They do not explain everything. Aspects of the meaning may be assumed or implied. Even when meaning is explicit, more complex texts often require comprehension skills that go beyond simply knowing the vocabulary and understanding the grammar and syntax to understand the meaning. Readers need a broad range of comprehension strategies including skills that support forming a broad understanding as well as skills that support close interrogation. Reading comprehension is the coordination of a number of integrated processes (Castles et al., 2018; Conley & Wise, 2011; Kendeou et al., 2016).

5. Searching

Searching is specific to reading. One purpose of reading within a text is to locate a specific piece of information. Konza refers to searching as part of the purposeful approach of good reading practices, as good readers can, for example 'skim over a newspaper article lightly' or 'scan a page quickly for a telephone number' (Konza, 2014, p. 163). Searches may be conducted within texts, or across texts, to locate a specific piece of information. Search criteria may need to be developed or refined to begin the search. Some searches may need to meet multiple criteria. Knowledge of how indexes, glossaries, and search engines work may be required. Additional research skills are generally necessary to select reputable links in an internet search. Scanning within a text can be supported by effective use of headings, subheadings and other structural elements. Similarly, competing information that does not match the search criteria must be rejected. A text, selected from many, also needs to be quickly reviewed to identify whether it meets the intended purpose with similar, but less appropriate or irrelevant texts rejected.

The importance of descriptions of growth

Students in most Australian classrooms differ widely in their levels of proficiency. A body of evidence converges on the conclusion that the most advanced 10 per cent of students in each year of school are about five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent of students (see for example Siemon et al., (2019)). This is not a new problem, and teachers are well aware of the need to differentiate in their instructional activities. However, under the existing grade-based approach to teaching, syllabus documents suggest that all students in a given grade be taught the same syllabus. Given the broad range of different levels of proficiency present in a classroom, if the syllabus were followed exactly, some students would be taught material that is beyond their current level, while others would be taught material they have already mastered. The key to ensuring that students make progress is the identification of where students are in their learning according to the essential skills and concepts, and to target teaching accordingly. In order to make this identification, however, it is necessary first to clarify and understand what it means to develop proficiency in a learning area. So, as well as identifying the essential skills and concepts within a domain, (as has been attempted for early reading in the previous section), it is necessary to also clarify what growth in these essential skills and concepts might look like. Table 2 gives descriptions of several levels of the essential concept of text form and purpose. These descriptions are evidence-based, developed from valid

and reliable assessment data that have identified a 'typical' trajectory of reading comprehension development. Therefore they can provide teachers with confidence in the data they are using to target areas of learning, and to identify how students' progress over time.

Table 2   Levels of text form and purpose

Level	Text form and purpose
Level 1	Use contextual clues such as location and images, to identify familiar book/materials (no word reading skills at this level).
Level 2	Recognise the purpose of a few highly familiar texts (e.g. labels, signs, well-known books read aloud for enjoyment).
Level 3	Listen to short, simple texts and orally identify obvious features (e.g. how likely the events in a story are) when clues are clear.
	Explain the purpose of very familiar visual conventions in illustrated texts (e.g. thought bubbles).
	Recognise the purpose of a few familiar texts read aloud when this is very obvious (e.g. to tell a story; sing a song; find a character in different images). Note this depends on exposure to these texts.
Level 4	Recognise the purpose and prominent elements of the form of a range of familiar texts read aloud (e.g. stories, information texts, recipes, lists, phone texts). Note this depends on exposure to these texts.

Conclusion

A common criticism of modern curricula is that they are overcrowded and focus on breadth of content rather than ensuring deep understanding of essential ideas. The identification of essential skills and concepts offers a way to add focus to existing curricula structures by encouraging thoughtful reflection of how different pieces of content might be taught in the context of one or more overarching fundamental concepts. To accompany the descriptions of growth in relation to the essential concepts, instructional materials are under development. These materials will be targeted at conceptual levels instead of school-year levels to demonstrate to teachers how explicit articulation of the early reading essential skills and concepts can help determine where their students are in their learning and target their teaching accordingly, an essential element in ensuring all students make excellent progress.

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