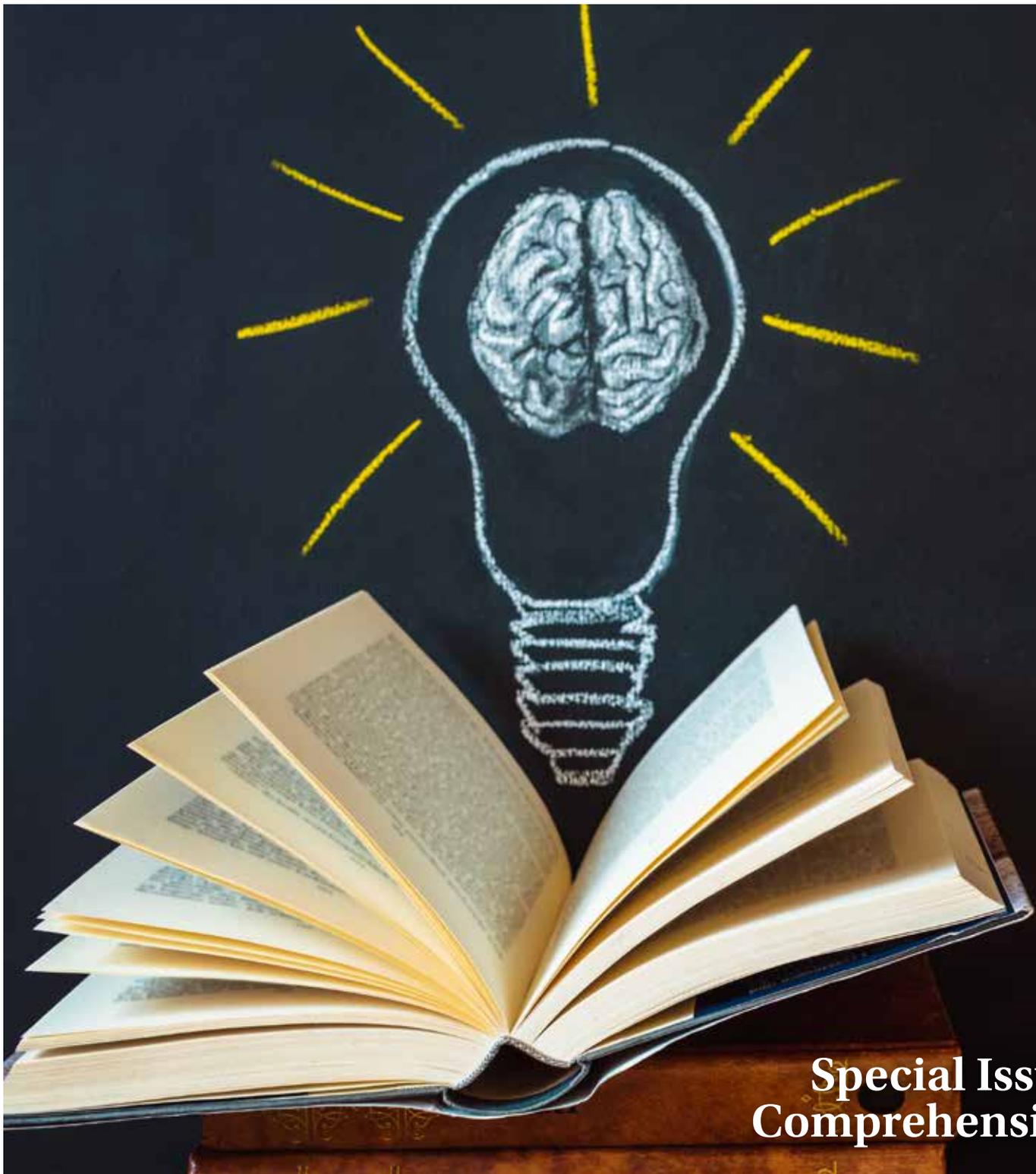


Bulletin



**Special Issue:
Comprehension**

LDA Council 2020-2021

(as of April 2021)

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LDA MISSION

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

THE BULLETIN

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From the President

Lorraine Hammond

As a teacher educator, one of my most rewarding roles is to provide professional development and coaching in school jurisdictions where a decision has been taken to implement evidence-based early literacy teaching. I have been working for three years to support 24 schools in the Kimberley Schools Project in northern Western Australia to adopt this kind of approach to early literacy, and I have written about the progress being made with the Kimberley Schools Project a few times in my reports to the LDA Bulletin.

I am delighted at this stage to have the opportunity to start working towards the same goal with Canberra Goulburn Catholic Education, who, led by Director Ross Fox, made the decision to implement evidence-based phonics teaching from 2021 as part of a system-wide push to improve students' literacy outcomes in 56 Catholic schools across Canberra and southern NSW. With the support of other providers in the Canberra Goulburn Catholic Education diocese, the program will be shifting instruction away from whole language/ balanced literacy-based approaches to the explicit teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension.

In terms of distance and social advantage, schools in Canberra and the Kimberley couldn't be further apart, but the decision to make changes in both jurisdictions was based on (a) data that showed that many five and six-year-olds were struggling with reading, and (b) evidence that showed that they are best supported by reading programs that teach systematic synthetic phonics. I look forward to reflecting on the similarities and differences between the outcomes in the two jurisdictions as I watch the progress of the Canberra program.

Dehaene (2009) reminds us that "... it is simply not true that there are hundreds of ways to learn to read. Every child is unique ... but when it comes to reading, all have roughly the same brain that imposes the same constraints and the same learning sequence" (p. 218). And as teachers, we all have roughly the same goal: to teach our students as efficiently and effectively as possible, in order to enable them to achieve the literacy skills they will need to function in a literate society.

It is both a privilege and a huge responsibility to have the opportunity to support this wide range of school jurisdictions, teachers and students to achieve their goals.

Reference

Dehaene, S. (2009). *Reading in the brain: The new science of how we read*. Viking.

LDA's President, Dr Lorraine Hammond AM, is an Associate Professor at the School of Education at Edith Cowan University.



In this issue of the Bulletin...

Ros Neilson, Editor, LDA Bulletin

This issue of the Bulletin starts with a rich sample of what LDA has been up to over the past few months: A summary of a hybrid national conference held in January 2021, and two interesting and entertaining summaries of presentations given by the recipients of the LDA 2020 Mona Tobias and Rosemary Carter awards, Bartek Rajkowski and Kristin Anthian. The closing section in this issue, the Consultants Report, reminds readers of the crucial service that the LDA consultant teachers provide.

The central theme of this issue is Comprehension – one of the basic dimensions of the Simple View of Reading. We all know intuitively what it feels like to understand (or not understand, or only partly understand) something that we read or hear, but the concept of ‘comprehension’ is difficult to define objectively, and it becomes even more elusive when we try to assess it. Comprehension presents teachers with huge challenges in the classroom. It is not only difficult to know when a student is not understanding and why they are not understanding, but also a challenge to know what to do to help. Supporting comprehension, however, is one of the most important things a teacher can do.

The special section on comprehension begins with an outline of a research project for which Dr Courtney Hattan won the 2019 International Literacy Association Award for Outstanding Dissertation in 2019. Courtney Hattan’s article on Relational Reasoning introduces an innovative approach to helping students to make sense of what they read, giving teachers explicit guidelines about questions to

ask during the reading of a text. The focus is not only on relating the new content to what students already know but also, significantly, on thinking about what was surprising, or different from, or the opposite of, what students already know. The approach involves subtle but very important changes from the traditional practice of ‘activating prior knowledge’, and it can open up stimulating possibilities for teachers and students.

Two articles follow that come to grips with the challenges of assessing comprehension. Firstly, Katrina Kelso discusses some of the findings from her Ph.D. research at Curtin University, which relates to the difficulty of identifying ‘poor comprehenders’ – children who have intact word recognition skills, but still have trouble understanding what they read. She explores the issue of the relationship between listening comprehension and reading comprehension, and she points out how seriously complicated it is to know what different tests are actually assessing. This leads to a practical suggestion for a screening protocol that may simplify the task of identifying poor comprehenders in the classroom.

Secondly, we are fortunate to have in this issue of the Bulletin (as we have in previous issues, with contributions from the MultiLit assessment team) an insight provided by a test designer into the decisions and research that took place *behind the scenes* of the publication of a standardised assessment tool. Nickola Wolf Nelson was a core part of the Test of Integrated Language and Literacy (TILLS™) team, and, in this article, with due disclosure of commercial interests, she teases out some of the theoretical and practical complexity of assessing comprehension within a test battery that allows test users to explore how students perform on the complex array of skills involved in the Simple View of Reading. Teachers will find the discussion useful not only as an overview of the test, but also as a reminder of all the factors that should be considered as we come to understand individual students’

strengths and weaknesses in language and literacy.

Two book reviews follow - reviews of publications that are critical to teachers’ understanding of

what comprehension problems are and how they might be addressed. Lyn Stone reviews *The Knowledge Gap* by Natalie Wexler, and Ros Neilson reviews not only the book by Margaret McKeown and Isabel Beck, *Question the Author* (2nd Edition), but also a fascinating podcast recently produced by Ollie Lovell with Margaret McKeown herself.

Best wishes to all readers,

Ros

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