Welcome to SPOCK: The Society for the Prevention of Children's Knowledge aka know-how for the in-crowd

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All students have the right to access a knowledge-rich curriculum.

Recently, I attended two Sydney events that have given me pause for (further) thought on the mixed state of play in Australian education. These were the Australian School Improvement Summit on Wednesday October 29 2025, and the researchED Conference at St Catherine's School on Saturday November 1 2025. For those of you unfamiliar with researchED, it is a platform that hosts low-budget events, always on Saturdays, so teachers and researchers can come together, share ideas and discuss existing and evolving evidence concerning education across year levels and sectors.

At both of these events, there was discussion about the importance of a *knowledge-rich curriculum*, for all students, but most particularly those whose backgrounds create a lack of financial, social, and human capital that can only be offset by strong educational experiences curated by classroom teachers.

Natalie Wexler is a US education writer and commentator, author of two highly regarded texts, *The Knowledge Gap* and *Beyond the Science of Reading*, and co-author, with Dr Judith Hochman, of *The Writing Revolution*. Wexler was a keynote speaker at both of the above events, acknowledging first that the focus on explicit and systematic phonics instruction in recent years has been entirely appropriate, because of the serious and harmful policy and practice deficiencies highlighted in Emily Hanford's American Public Media *Sold a Story* podcast.

Wexler's central thesis (like many before her) is that effective decoding skills are the necessary *but not sufficient toolkit for students' reading success*. She highlights the complex factors that can stand in the way of children's comprehension of text. These include knowledge of increasingly *complex vocabulary*, mastery of more elaborate sentence structure, inferencing ability, and the application of prior *(background) knowledge* when reading. Of course, different factors may be more or less in play to create difficulties for different children reading the same text.

Children who cannot efficiently and effortlessly lift unfamiliar text off the page, also cannot efficiently and effortlessly understand said text, particularly as its complexity rapidly increases after the first three years of school. The distinction between the constrained skill of decoding and the unconstrained skill of comprehending text should never have been a matter of debate, but some education academics continue to contest the importance of early explicit decoding instruction and oppose moves at policy level for this to be mandated, e.g. see here. Such commentators are silent on the fact that a growing number of schools, after adopting explicit teaching approaches, see a significant uplift in reading success in their students, often in spite of socioeconomic factors that make such success even more challenging, e.g. at Churchill Primary School in rural Victoria, Marsden Road Primary School in western Sydney, and Blue Haven Primary School on the NSW central coast – to name a few.

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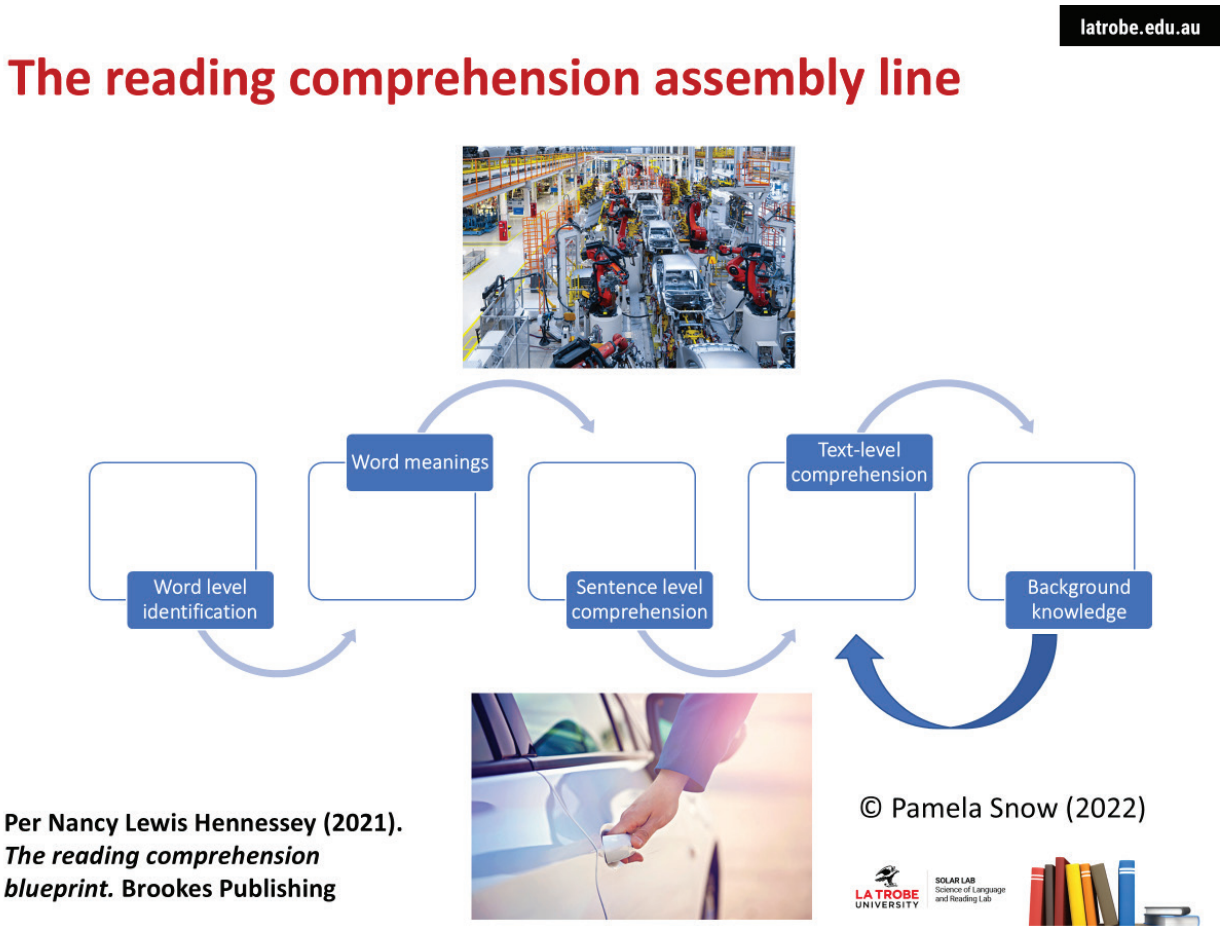

Figure 1. The reading comprehension assembly line (P. Snow).

Wexler makes a compelling and evidence-based case for classroom practice to continue to be *purposeful and explicit beyond the early mastery of decoding*, so that children's comprehension of texts (and by extension, their enjoyment and learning) continues to grow and meet the unconstrained challenges that can stand in the way of academic success. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which I compiled to reflect Nancy Lewis Hennessey's analogy in her 2021 Reading Comprehension Blueprint text that reading comprehension is akin to a factory assembly line, so is dependent on all processes and components being fully engaged via classroom teaching.

And just to be clear, neither Hennessey nor I are saying schools should be like factories. This is an analogy for how reading comprehension occurs.

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Let's look at these separately.

Opposition to the teaching of knowledge

It would probably surprise (and dismay) most parents and other taxpayers to know that there are education academics around the world who get up in the morning to rail against the teaching of knowledge to children at school. Some refer to the privileging of knowledge-teaching as the 'learnification' of schools. I am not making this up.

The general argument goes something like this (my high-level synthesis):

Knowledge-rich curricula are overly prescriptive, culturally narrow and politically conservative, meaning that certain 'knowledges' and learners are privileged/prioritised while others are neglected. It is not possible to agree on what knowledge should be included and what should be excluded, so curricula should be *inclusive*, *dialogic* and *socially transformative*, where 'knowledge' is not simply delivered but contested, contextualised, and co-created. There is a premium placed on so-called '21st century skills' such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity and these are priorities for classroom time, via activities that favour 'engagement' over evidence of actual learning. We can't agree on what knowledge to privilege so we should by-pass it altogether.

Some academics are actually sounding an alarm about the 'intrusion' of terms like 'evidence-based' and 'knowledge-rich' into education debates and policies, e.g. see here and here. Others argue for a greater emphasis on play (see here) and on building relationships and wellbeing at school, e.g. see here. Professor Pasi Sahlberg of the

University of Melbourne has even coined the acronym 'GERM' (Global Education Reform Movement) to deride the efforts of policy-makers, school leaders and individual teachers who work hard to leverage the social justice potential of education through evidence-based instruction and school accountability. Background knowledge might be handy here, as some germs are actually essential for good health. If there's somewhere I can sign to be a card-carrying GERM ambassador, I'm in.

Accountability is disparaged by some as a 'neoliberal' artefact. Funnily enough, I see no objections by these same commentators to accountability in health, engineering and aviation – where they may personally experience the consequences of 'choose your own adventure' practices. I'm musing over an opposite term to neoliberal – *paleoprogressive* perhaps?

For some education academics, the crisis is not that 30% of children are not proficient readers, or that the burden of this disparity is disproportionately borne by students in equity and diversity groups. No. The crisis is that governments and education sectors are visibly galvanised in increasingly coordinated efforts to do something about this – by putting in place the kinds of policies and practices likely to lead to intergenerational change.

Much of the opposition to explicit teaching of knowledge comes from education academics (rather than teachers themselves) and is veiled in the language *of academic freedom, teacher autonomy and a vague need to 're-imagine' schools and schooling*. Unfortunately, this is often a fig-leaf for "we don't *like* the evidence on the impact of explicit teaching on student academic and wellbeing outcomes". In the quest for improved educational outcomes for all students, academic freedom has a mere cameo role at the margins, and must yield to evidence, in the way this is managed in respected disciplines such as medicine, psychology, engineering, nursing, and aviation. These are all professions that have *accountability contracts with the communities they serve*, and practitioners are required to answer (often quite publicly) for poor decisions and adverse outcomes.

As I have noted previously, much of the early heavy lifting in the so-called GERM has come from classroom teachers. Policy makers in Australia (and elsewhere) are increasingly on the bus but many education academics are yet to even acknowledge there's a journey to undertake that they need to be part of. *Until things change upstream in the halls of academia*, there will be enormous practice bottlenecks and inefficiencies (and thus continued student inequities) downstream.

Opposition to the teaching of Tier 2 vocabulary to children from minority groups

In this 2024 paper, British educational linguist Dr Ian Cushing takes aim at the consideration of vocabulary in terms of 'tiers', as described by Isabel Beck and her colleagues in the US (e.g. in the well-regarded and widely-used text *Bringing Words to Life*). Cushing applies a postmodernist critical lens to argue *against* the teaching of higher-order (Tier 2) vocabulary to children from Black minority backgrounds, on the basis that to do so is to impose "colonial histories of raciolinguistic ideologies" (p. 972) and class-based power dynamics on the language of such children. He claims (p. 976) that:

> *"It is a very specific type of child that Beck and her colleagues have in mind when arguing for the targeted instruction of tier two vocabulary: Black children from low-income communities. Reproducing the same raciolinguistic ideologies as articulated in the writings of white European colonisers and anti-Black deficit thinkers as I described above, Beck et al claim that such children are unlikely to experience 'language rich' environments at home or with peers, unlikely to use language in 'reflective, playful, or novel ways', and unlikely to encounter 'extensive and sophisticated vocabulary"* (Beck et al. 1987, p. 156).

There's a major problem with this claim, however. It is not an accurate reflection of the Beck et al. source from which Cushing is quoting. I have read the chapter in question, and they make no reference to race, Black or otherwise, anywhere. It is unfortunate that this point escaped the *Language and Education* reviewers, who appear to have accepted on face value, the proposition that such an overtly racist position would be adopted by respected reading scientists.

It is notable too that Cushing seems happy to overlook the educational needs of minority children and the possibility that to succeed in an English-speaking education system, mastery of Tier 2 vocabulary might be as useful to them as it would be to other children (right across the socio-economic spectrum), whose comprehension of increasingly complex texts will be compromised without receptive and expressive vocabularies that go beyond everyday Tier 1 common words learned in the context of home and community interactions, regardless of text exposure. Vocabulary contributes to mental models of knowledge held in long-term memory. As Kintsch observed in 1998 (p. 127) "Comprehension begins with the identification of individual words and their meanings; without this, no higher-level integration is possible." Kintsch was in no way suggesting that reading comprehension ends with word knowledge, a point taken up by E.D. Hirsch in 2003, in his paper with a built-in self-explanatory title: Reading comprehension requires knowledge of words and the world.

Cushing offers no suggestions as to robust, culturally responsive, dare I say it, evidence-based instructional support for the children he is seeking to 'protect' from being explicitly taught Tier 2 vocabulary. Presumably they should simply not be allowed to read texts that contain these words? Someone should alert the librarians in UK schools so this can be policed. Contrast this with the late Dr David Corson's observation that "A diverse and rich vocabulary is a better tool for dealing with a complex universe" (1995, p. 2).

Interestingly, Cushing pays little attention to Tier 3 words (typically described as lower-frequency and more subject-specific than Tier 2 words) and in fact claims with respect to the work of Beck and colleagues that these are "….generally dismissed as not important for teaching" (p. 979). What Beck et al. actually wrote is that "…Tier Three consists of words that tend to be limited

So, if we're not careful, the next reading war is not going to be about how we teach decoding (the jury has returned a verdict on that one), but rather whether we teach complex vocabulary and background knowledge to all students, so all students can engage deeply, and dare I say it, critically, with increasingly complex texts.

to specific domains (e.g. enzyme) or so rare that an avid reader would likely not encounter them in a lifetime (e.g. abecedarian)" (p. 20). If we 'protect' students from the deficit-based thinking of Tier 2 vocabulary teaching, how, I wonder, should they leap-frog from Tier 1 to Tier 3 words, so they can engage with specific curriculum areas? Or should students from equity and diversity groups be spared exposure to vocabulary-dense subjects such as biology, geography and mathematics, on the basis that they contain 'big words' that they would not use in their home contexts?

I wonder whether Dr Cushing asks his own students from minority backgrounds (who have presumably acquired sufficient Tier 2 vocabulary to succeed at school given they have made it to university) to engage with a different academic reading while those of white Anglo ethnicities read this paper?

Although I could have easily predicted the answer, I asked ChatGPT to analyse a 1000-word sample of Dr Cushing's paper, to determine the proportion of content words (nouns, verbs and adjectives) that are Tier 2 or Tier 3. The result? Forty-five percent were Tier 2 and 35% were Tier 3. So, 80% higher-order vocabulary all-up, in a breathtaking example of pedagogy for the privileged.

In Tier 1 parlance, we might call this know-how for the in-crowd.

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The *Society for the Prevention of Children's Knowledge* is open for business.

Don't trip over your privilege on the way in.

Further reading on the vocabulary debate

- If you're interested in this debate, do read US reading practitioner Harriett Janetos' Substack article and make sure you work through the comments that follow: Is Teaching Academic Vocabulary Racist?
- Readers are also referred to this response to Cushing's paper, by Dr Kathleen Brown of the University of Utah Reading Clinic: Letter to editors: commentary on tiered vocabulary and raciolinguistic discourses of deficit: from academic scholarship to education policy.
- Cushing's response to Brown is published here: A response to Brown.

This article originally appeared on the author's blog, The Snow Report.

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