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Research Article

Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: We report findings from a survey of elementary teachers regarding reading instruction. The purpose was to examine teachers' beliefs about how children in the first 7 years of schooling develop reading comprehension skills and to characterize the self-reported practices and strategies they use to support children to comprehend connected text.

Method: A web-based survey was used to collect data from 284 Australian elementary teachers about their beliefs and practices regarding reading comprehension instruction. Selected Likert-scale items were aggregated to determine the degree to which participants held "child-centered" or "content-centered" views of reading instruction.

Results: Australian elementary school teachers hold a wide range of beliefs about reading instruction, some of which are in direct opposition to each other. Our findings indicate low consensus about what elements of instructional practice are useful in classrooms or how time should be apportioned to different tasks. Commercial programs had significant penetration in schools, and many participants reported using multiple commercial programs, with varying degrees of pedagogical harmony. Participants indicated that their most common source of knowledge about reading instruction was their own personal research, with few nominating university teacher education as a primary source of knowledge or expertise.

Conclusions: Little agreement exists within the Australian elementary teacher community regarding the ways that reading skills can and should be taught. There is significant room for teacher practice to have improved theoretical underpinnings and to develop a consistent repertoire of classroom practices aligned with these.

Reading instruction is a highly contested topic in education, in terms of both its theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical approaches (Castles et al., 2018; Chall, 1967; Hoffman et al., 2020; Kim, 2008; Pearson, 2004; Rowe, 2005; Shanahan, 2020). The "reading wars," prevalent in other English-speaking countries, have also impacted Australian academic, policy, media, and classroom practice arenas over the past 50 years (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Rowe, 2005). Despite recommendations about effective reading practices made by national reviews undertaken in three English-speaking countries since 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rose, 2006; Rowe, 2005), reading instruction in Australian classrooms is still highly contested, and this debate impacts both the teaching of decoding and the teaching of comprehension. Notwithstanding the divisiveness of the debate, as reflected by the three national inquiries, the weight of evidence on reading instruction favors explicit teaching, using a scope and sequence. This runs counter to the prevailing balanced literacy dominance and instead reflects the science of reading, as reflected by the Simple View of Reading (SVR; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990).

According to the SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990), reading comprehension is described

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as the product of word decoding (identification) and linguistic comprehension. Word decoding can be considered a *constrained* skill—the required knowledge of the phoneme–grapheme correspondences is finite. Castles et al. describe this correspondence knowledge as "...a relatively small body of knowledge of how graphemes relate to phonemes provides children with the ability to decode most words in their language. Provided that children have adequate vocabulary, this sound-based representation can then be used to access the meanings of those words" (Castles et al., 2018). Students can reach a significant level of mastery in a constrained skill like decoding, which then opens opportunities to build skills in the unconstrained comprehension domain (C. E. Snow & Matthews, 2018).

As noted above, comprehension is an unconstrained skill, meaning that it comprises multiple levels of linguistic understanding such as vocabulary, knowledge of language structures, genre, print concepts, and verbal reasoning and large domains of background knowledge (Allen & McNamara, 2017; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Scarborough et al., 2009) that have no practical limit. These unconstrained elements must be acquired gradually through exposure, explicit teaching, and experience (C. E. Snow & Matthews, 2018). Once children are competent decoders, the main barrier to reading comprehension is their facility with unconstrained skills, which can be strengthened via explicit teaching (Hennessy, 2021).

Every day, Australian elementary teachers and allied health professionals such as speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are tasked with helping students develop reading comprehension, yet little is known about the beliefs teachers hold and the instructional decisions they make in order to support students in this critical aspect of reading success. This lack of insight reflects the fact that debate concerning the teaching of decoding has dominated early reading instruction discourse and has resulted in less consideration of the pedagogical beliefs and related practices of teachers working with students who are skilled decoders. Studies in both Australia (Louden & Rohl, 2006; Rowe & National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Australia), 2005) and overseas (Aro & Björn, 2016; Holdheide & Reschly, 2008) have demonstrated that skilled and knowledgeable teachers are critical to the work of developing strong readers. However, it is suggested that elementary teachers do not always have the requisite knowledge and skills to teach students, particularly those at risk, to read (Lyon, 2003; Lyon & Weiser, 2009; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Moats, 2009; Podhajski et al., 2009). The considerable weight of research evidence that has accumulated over time regarding the ways in which children learn to read, and the instructional strategies that can be used to support them, has not been translated in practice in all elementary school classrooms (Castles et al., 2018; Seidenberg, 2017). This "research-to-practice gap," which has been described across a range of domains of teacher practice (Seidenberg, 2017), means that the beliefs and instructional decisions of elementary teachers in Australia are variably aligned with what is known scientifically about how children learn to read (de Lemos, 2002; McLean et al., 2021; Stark et al., 2016). This research-to-practice gap risks a lack of theoretical and practical alignment for interdisciplinary practice between educators and allied health professionals.

Given the importance of early reading instruction in preventing reading difficulties and promoting academic achievement (Lyon, 2003; National Research Council, 1998; Strickland, 2002), the beliefs and practices of teachers regarding their teaching of reading are of significant policy and practice interest. Understanding what teachers believe and do in the classroom is critical in helping researchers, teacher educators, allied health professionals, policy makers, and school leaders consider which instructional practices are beneficial and should be prioritized and which need to be replaced. This information is essential in identifying and redressing "research-to-practice gaps" in schools. It is also crucial to inform the development of a shared understanding of what effective instructional practice looks like between teachers and SLPs.

The teaching of reading comprehension is inherently a complex task and is further complicated by a series of additional factors. These include a school's statutory responsibility to teach the curriculum as outlined by its state or territory, the increasing penetration of commercial materials into the reading classroom, and differences in the way that teachers conceptualize their role in helping children learn to understand text. Key dimensions of these complexities are summarized below.

Although Australia has a national curriculum (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2018) that provides a framework for schools in terms of what to teach, few parameters are set regarding how instructional time is allocated and for what purpose, or which instructional approaches or strategies should be used. Given the wide-ranging advice offered regarding the composition of a literacy block, it is reasonable to hypothesize that there would be variation in the make-up and use of any time set aside for reading instruction.

An additional factor that impacts on the analysis of what Australian teachers do is the existence of three distinct education sectors: the *government* sector, funded by

state governments,[1] and the *Catholic Education*[2] and *independent*[3] sectors, each funded by a combination of federal government and student fees. These sectors vary in their policies, application of oversight, and governance, all of which can affect classroom practice in ways that are difficult to identify and measure.

As a federal democracy, Australia comprises eight states and territories, each with its own education department that sets a curriculum, which, in some cases, differs markedly from the Australian Curriculum. There are significant differences in the degree to which the states and territories prescribe how literacy should be taught. For example, the Victorian Curriculum provides a broad set of outcomes and advice that gives teachers license to teach in ways that they feel are most appropriate (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2017). The New South Wales Curriculum, by contrast, explicitly prescribes what "good" literacy practice looks like and which instructional methods will be more successful and should therefore be used (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2017, 2021).

Student-Centered and Content-Centered Approaches

An important area of debate in the elementary teaching community is the relationship of the teacher with subject-level content (Buchs et al., 2017; Morgan, 2022; Rege Colet, 2017). The current evidence base for reading comprehension instruction has accumulated over the past 7 decades and is summarized by Hennessy (2021). Evidence-based reading comprehension instruction can be conceptualized as a progression from word-level identification and meanings to sentence- and text-level comprehension. Instruction should be focused on developing each of these aspects of comprehension through explicit instruction, with the teacher playing a primary role in the classroom (Hennessy, 2021). Despite this knowledge base, differences remain in how teachers conceptualize their role in the classroom.

Unlike teachers in high schools, who often teach in particular discipline areas across multiple classes and year levels, elementary teachers are typically generalists who are expected to teach a range of subjects to a single class of students. Over their careers, they may also be expected to teach different year levels. While high school teachers often define their teaching in terms of the content they teach ("I am a history teacher"), elementary teachers are more likely to define themselves by the age of the children they teach ("I am a Grade 4 teacher"; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Buchanan, 2015). Given the principal focus of many elementary teachers is the children in their care, there can be tensions between instruction that deliberately and systematically builds knowledge and understanding and instruction that is focused on following the preferences of individual children (Buchs et al., 2017; Morgan, 2022; Rege Colet, 2017).

Teacher instruction can be broadly considered in two domains: student centered and content centered (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Student-centered approaches place a particular emphasis on tailoring instruction to individual children, advocating for choice and interest at each step of the planning and learning process, to maximize student engagement. Lessons are developed by individual teachers, meaning that there may not be a common set of knowledge or skills being taught at any particular time. Instead, children will be reading, writing, and learning about different concepts in the same classroom (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Pinnell & Fountas, 2007; Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2010; Watson & Wildy, 2014). In contrast, content-centered pedagogy places value on the development of particular skills and knowledge as a class, with these content areas determined by the teacher and/or curriculum rather than by the preferences of the students (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Rata, 2019; Reutzel et al., 2014). In this approach, the starting point of planning is the content to be mastered, followed by ways in which the teacher will support all students to learn this material. To some extent, these approaches represent a continuum of practice rather than a binary distinction, but the result of these divergent views and practices is that considerable debate persists about the role of content-based instruction in the elementary classroom.

One of the major differences between student- and content-centered approaches in the elementary literacy classroom is the role of the teacher. A content-centered approach is more likely to favor an explicit teaching paradigm, where the teacher takes responsibility for modeling good reading practices and then guiding students through the development of knowledge and skills. Archer and Hughes (2011) described explicit teaching as being systematic in design, relentless in its focus on practice and mastery of ideas, engaging in its collecting of observations and feedback, and successful for learners. Rosenshine (2012) also described explicit instruction as being a highly

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[1]Government schools in Australia are funded by the state and territory governments. These schools cater to 65.6% of Australian students.

[2]Catholic schools are partially funded by the federal government, with additional funds provided by students attending the school and the Catholic Church. These schools cater to 19.5% of Australian students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

[3]Independent schools in Australia are private schools that are partially funded by the federal government, with additional funds provided by students attending the school. These schools cater to 15.0% of Australian students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

interactive, teacher-led process that involves complex tasks broken into constituent parts that are explicitly taught to students. Explicit teaching is well supported by both observational and experimental studies (Hughes et al., 2017).

Student-led approaches, on the other hand, create a different role for the teacher, who takes a less "hands on" approach to students' learning. Typically, these approaches, such as inquiry learning and project-based learning (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985; Kuhn, 2007), rely more heavily on students developing their understanding and knowledge, with less guidance from the teacher (Kirschner et al., 2006; Kuhn, 2007). Although proponents of less explicit approaches argue they lead to deeper thinking or better approximate what experts in the domain would do as part of their working lives (Kuhn, 2007; Heathcote & Herbert, 1985), more explicit teaching leads to stronger learning, particularly for novices in a domain (Chi, 1981; Kirschner et al., 2006; Taconis et al., 2001). This holds true for developing readers, too (Willingham, 2009).

Teaching Comprehension Skills or Strategies

Another point of contention is the relative importance of the teaching of comprehension *skills* compared to comprehension *strategies* (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020; Petscher et al., 2020; Shanahan, 2018a, 2020). *Comprehension skills* include those abilities that are required to answer questions on typical reading comprehension papers. These abilities include finding the main idea, inferencing, finding literal information, and drawing conclusions. Most of these comprehension skills are the outcomes of comprehension rather than the inputs (Smith et al., 2021). Comprehension skills are practiced using "leveled" readers—a series of books that are designed by publishers that claim to be of varying levels of difficulty. Students are matched to a leveled reader based on assessment information, with the text ideally at a level in which the child can read most words independently. There are some considerable concerns regarding the degree to which texts are appropriately sequenced and whether their use contributes to improvements in reading instruction (Morgan et al., 2000; Shanahan, 1983; Brown et al., 2017). *Comprehension strategies*, on the other hand, describe actions that a reader is taught in order to comprehend a text. These actions may include summarizing, rereading, self-questioning, and visualizing. There is a substantial literature on the effectiveness of the use of comprehension strategies to improve comprehension (Afflerbach et al., 2020; Bereiter & Bird, 1985; McKeown et al., 2009; McNamara, 2007; Pressley & El-Dinary, 1997; Such, 2021).

Teachers' decisions concerning whether the focus should be on comprehension *skills* or *strategies* (and indeed the extent to which they differentiate between these in their instructional practice) have profound effects on the ways that classrooms operate and the dominant instructional methods employed. The amount of time allocated to skills and to strategies may be linked to beliefs around whether instruction should be content or student centered. Most elementary classrooms utilize a reading block of some description: a discrete period of time that is notionally assigned to the teaching of reading. Classrooms characterized by comprehension *skill* instruction tend to involve small groups of students conferencing about a particular skill, either with or without the teacher (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Pinnell & Fountas, 2007). The focus here is on what individual students need to know and do in relation to the development of generalized reading skills using texts whose topics and difficulty is different for every student (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Pinnell & Fountas, 2007). In classrooms where comprehension *strategies* are given priority, a relatively small amount of instructional time is spent teaching each of the strategies, and the remainder of the class time is spent discussing complex texts, using the strategies when students are finding comprehension difficult (Such, 2021). The teaching of comprehension strategies is regarded as more content centered than the teaching of comprehension skills (Such, 2021). One technique associated with the use of a comprehension strategies approach is close reading. This is a key component in the approach advocated in the United States Common Core Curriculum (National Governors Association Centre for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and so is widely used in the United States but is referred to less often in Australia. Close reading involves students being taught to utilize comprehension strategies to analyze complex texts with the assistance and support of a teacher. Although there are some indications of what elementary classroom practice may look like through observational studies (e.g., Louden et al., 2005), there has not been an investigation into the beliefs and self-reported practices relating to comprehension skills and strategies in Australia of which we are aware.

Use of Commercial Materials

Like other English-speaking nations, Australia provides a significant market for commercial reading programs supporting both decoding and reading comprehension instruction (Campbell et al., 2012, 2014; de Lemos, 2005). There is some suggestion that this market is on the rise, given that commercial programs were rarely used in the early part of this century (Louden et al., 2005).

Concerns have been variously expressed by professional associations (Emmitt et al., 2006; Honan, 2015) and academics (Campbell et al., 2012, 2014; Duncan Owens, 2010; Hogan, 2016) about the prevalence in classrooms of commercial programs. In particular, concerns have been expressed about whether they can be used to effectively teach students to read, most notably those programs involving phonics provision. In addition, the use of commercial programs is sometimes looked upon as an unnecessary imposition on the professional autonomy of teachers (Honan, 2015). In the United States, commercial programs are the most frequently used tools for teaching reading (Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Canney & Neuenfeldt, 1993; Kretlow & Helf, 2013; Stein et al., 2001). In some cases, teachers use the commercial materials with fidelity. In other cases, teachers select, adapt, or ignore selected components, based on their personal beliefs, perceptions of students' needs, or their teaching style (Baumann & Heubach, 1996) and/or other unknown factors such as their background knowledge and completion of training in the use of the program. This variation regarding the role of commercial materials in teachers' practices from one lesson to the next is a significant concern. Commercial programs are not sufficient on their own, as "programs do not teach children, teachers do" (Moats, 2013). However, well-designed evidence-based programs can help to provide clear examples of good practice and can be useful when teachers have the theoretical knowledge and necessary training to enable them to implement programs with fidelity. Although useful for international comparisons, information gleaned from overseas jurisdictions cannot give a sense of what is occurring in Australia, and so a study in the Australian context was identified as a priority.

The purpose of this study was to examine Australian teachers' beliefs about how children in the first 7 years of schooling[4] develop reading comprehension skills and to characterize the self-reported practices and approaches they use to support young children to comprehend connected text. Specifically, the research questions concerned teachers of elementary students[5] and were as follows.

1. What beliefs do teachers hold about the teaching of reading comprehension?

2. What instructional practices do teachers use to teach reading comprehension and how do they apportion class time?

3. To what extent do teachers use commercial reading comprehension programs in schools?

4. How did teachers gain their knowledge about reading instruction?

Method

Participant Eligibility and Recruitment

Participants were eligible if they were currently teaching in Australia (or on leave for less than 1 year) and their students were in their first to seventh year of school. Recruitment occurred via convenience and snowball sampling (Sarantakos, 2012). Convenience sampling occurred through an invitation to participate via teacher association newsletters and the social media accounts of formal and informal teacher associations on Facebook and Twitter. Snowball recruitment (Sarantakos, 2012) was also used whereby participants were encouraged in the body of the social media post to share the survey details with colleagues via their own networks.

Participants

Participants were 284 elementary teachers in metropolitan, regional, rural, and remote Australia.[6] Their teaching experience ranged from 0 to more than 20 years ($M = 13.57$ years; $SD = 11.22$). Those teaching students in their first 2 years of school comprised 42.9% of the sample; 36.6% taught in the third to fifth year of school, and 20.5% taught in the sixth and seventh year of school. The distribution of participants across states, sectors, and locations is broadly representative of the Australian teaching profession, although teachers in the government sector were slightly overrepresented (a response proportion of 72.2% compared to the expected 65.6%; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). One notable feature of the sample was the underrepresentation of New South Wales and Queensland teachers, who comprise 28.3% and 22.0% of the nation's teaching workforce, respectively. Table 1 displays the key characteristics of participants.

Procedure

Participants completed an anonymous survey that was hosted on Qualtrics, a secure online platform. Approval to conduct this study was granted by the La Trobe

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[4]Primary (elementary) school in Australia lasts for 7 years, and during this time, the predominant model is that a single teacher is responsible for the majority of a student's class time.

[5]Primary (elementary) school in Australia generally consists of students between the ages of 4 and 12 years. One exception until recently was South Australia, where 13-year-old children were considered part of primary school until 2022.

[6]Metropolitan centers are defined by their high population densities, whereas regional, rural, and remote areas are designated by their relative remoteness. Using the method developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, relative remoteness in Australia is determined by the road distances from an area to the five nearest urban centers.

Table 1. Key characteristics of participants (*N* = 284).

Participant characteristic		Participants, *n* (%)
Years of teaching	0–2 years	14 (4.93%)
	3–5 years	28 (9.86%)
	6–10 years	51 (17.96%)
	11–15 years	41 (14.44%)
	16–20 years	48 (16.90%)
	> 20 years	102 (35.90%)
Educational sector		
	Government	205 (72.18%)
	Independent	45 (15.85%)
	Catholic	34 (11.97%)
State/territory in Australia		
	Victoria	94 (33.10%)
	New South Wales	64 (22.54%)
	Western Australia	55 (19.37%)
	Queensland	39 (13.73%)
	South Australia	22 (7.74%)
	Tasmania	5 (1.67%)
	Australian Capital Territory	3 (1.06%)
	Northern Territory	2 (0.70%)
School location		
	Metropolitan/urban	182 (64.08%)
	Regional/rural	88 (30.99%)
	Remote	5 (1.76%)
	Unknown	9 (3.17%)

University human research ethics committee. The survey took a mean of 15 min (*SD* = 14.33) to complete, and only fully completed survey responses were included in the analysis.

Survey Instrument

A survey tool was developed by the authors to address the aims of this study (see the Appendix). The majority of the survey was based on the *Propositions about Reading Instruction Inventory* (Rupley & Logan, 1985), with the remaining items developed by the researchers. The *Propositions about Reading Instruction Inventory* was developed to examine teachers' reported beliefs about reading as part of a project to determine the relationship between beliefs about reading and subsequent instructional decision making. The instrument uses a Likert scale to determine agreement with statements and has a reported Cronbach's α reliability estimate of .74 (Rupley & Logan, 1985).

The draft survey was distributed between the authors and several elementary teachers in order to seek feedback on clarity and coherence as well as the suitability of the items and the need for additions. Adaptations were made to the instrument based on this feedback, and then the survey was trialed with a group of four elementary school teachers. These teachers also provided feedback on the coherence and clarity of the items, as well as any items that did not seem to align with the aims of the study.

The final survey instrument comprised three sections. Section 1 asked about teachers' beliefs about teaching reading,[7] section 2 examined the specific instructional strategies teachers used in their classroom, and section 3 sought demographic information, with eight items related to professional background, school context, and methods by which participants developed their professional knowledge. In the first section, 35 questions examined teachers' beliefs about early reading and related instruction: which aspects of reading are important and the ways in which they might be developed in early elementary children (see the Appendix). This section of the survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale for participants to rate the degree to which they agreed with propositions about reading development and instruction (*strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*). In keeping with the instructions of the original *Propositions about Reading Instruction Inventory* (Rupley & Logan, 1985), participants were asked to select the *Undecided* option if they felt that they could not answer an item within 30 s. If participants selected *Undecided,* it could mean that they neither agreed nor disagreed or had difficulty making a selection from the possible options. Section 2 comprised nine questions aligned to project aims 2 and 3 and addressed the instructional strategies that the participants use in their classroom as well as the materials (both commercial and teacher constructed) used to support instruction. Terms used to describe an instructional strategy, such as "close reading" or vocabulary instruction, were not defined in the survey itself in order to reduce survey length and increase participation. Two items asked participants to rank the importance of particular strategies, for example, whole-class instruction and silent reading, and the remaining items involved participants identifying the amount of time they spent on particular comprehension techniques as well as which commercial programs they used in their instruction. Participants were also invited to make comments on various aspects of their experiences with reading instruction and the role of commercial materials.

Data Analysis

The survey instrument comprised a range of item types and so required a number of different analyses. All quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26). The data were analyzed descriptively, identifying proportions of

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[7]We note that decoding, as per the SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), is a *contributor* to reading comprehension, and as such must be considered when early reading instruction is being examined; however, decoding per se was not the main focus of the survey.

responses that sat at the extremes of the continuum for each question.

The responses from nine of the questions in Section A were combined to form a scale estimating the degree to which a participant was "child centered" or "content centered." These nine questions were those sourced from the *Propositions about Reading Instruction Inventory* and were used in the original survey to determine the degree of alignment with these approaches to "child-centered" or "content-centered" approaches (Rupley & Logan, 1985). This was done in order to broadly characterize the sample on this important dimension of teacher practice.

As part of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to make comments relating to their use of commercial materials and to add closing comments; 182 participants availed themselves of this option, and a thematic analysis of these data will be reported in a separate publication. In addition, for some Section A questions, data were collapsed according to anchor-points of the scale—*strongly agree* and *agree* were aggregated as agreement with a statement and *disagree* and *strongly disagree* were aggregated as disagreement.

Results

Beliefs Teachers Hold About Reading Comprehension Instruction

Almost half of the participants (42%) nominated their own personal research as their key source of knowledge, while only 3.7% identified a significant role of preservice education. Few teachers (8.3%) who had been teaching for fewer than 5 years nominated preservice education as a major source of knowledge about reading. Details are provided in Table 2.

Pedagogical Alignment

The distribution on the dimension of student-centeredness versus content-centeredness was bimodal, with 31.4% of participants identifying with student-centered instruction and 33.4% identifying with content-centered instruction. The remaining one third of participants had views that ranged across the survey items used to construct this scale.

Instructional Practices Used to Teach Reading Comprehension

Responses to questions from Section A are reported in terms of general views on teaching reading, use of reading groups, role and selection of texts, and views on the value of instructional strategies. Two thirds of teachers (66.6%) recognized a need for specific and explicit reading instruction. Related to this, a third (34.4%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: *Reading comprehension is not difficult for children to learn if they are provided with lively and stimulating material to read.* When asked about the utility of teaching comprehension skills (such as inferencing and finding the main idea), 87.9% agreed or strongly endorsed these approaches.
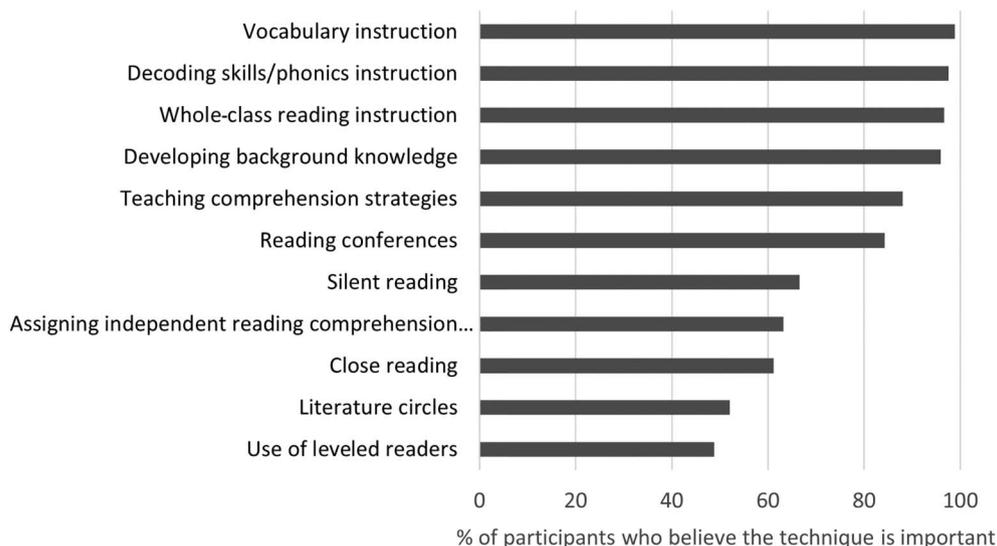
Participants were asked to classify common instructional strategies as either "important" or "not important" in effective reading instruction. Figure 1 summarizes these binary results and shows consistent views of the importance of vocabulary and phonics instruction, with far more divided views relating to literature circles and the use of leveled readers.

Participants also described the length of time they assigned to the teaching of various strategies in their literacy block. The largest allocations of time were assigned to whole-class reading instruction, reading conferences (most commonly 31–60 min per week) and vocabulary instruction (most commonly 31–60 min per week). The majority of participants indicated that they spent time each week on three of the four strategies identified as most important: whole-class reading instruction (97.4%), vocabulary (97.1%), and teaching background knowledge (93.4%). In contrast to the other most important strategies, 58.4% of participants indicated that they did not include any decoding skills/phonics instruction in their literacy blocks,

Table 2. Sources of teachers' knowledge about reading instruction.

Primary source of knowledge about reading instruction	Percentage of respondents						
Years of experience	0–2	3–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	> 20	Total
My own research	2.5	5	8.6	7.8	8.6	9.1	42.0
Professional development	1.3	1.3	4.5	2.9	3.7	9.5	23.1
My personal experiences with students in the classroom	0	0.8	5	2.9	2.5	3.7	14.8
My school-provided curriculum or program	1.3	2.5	0.8	0.4	1.3	2.5	8.6
Literacy coaches in my sector	0	0.8	0.8	1.6	0.8	1.3	5.3
My preservice education	0.8	0	1.6	0.4	0.4	0.4	3.7
Social media	0	0.4	1.3	0.4	0	0	2.5

Figure 1. Participants' views on the utility of various instructional strategies to teach reading comprehension.

including 54.2% of Foundation[8] teachers and 52% of Year 1 teachers.

Reading Groups and Whole-Class Teaching

Participants held a range of views about how to best support students' reading comprehension in the classroom. Over half (56.3%) strongly agreed or agreed that reading comprehension is best taught through whole-class instruction rather than via smaller groups. Just under half agreed with statements suggesting that the use of reading groups is necessary and most effective for the development of reading comprehension. Of those 142 participants who used reading groups, more than three quarters (76.6%) supported adjusting groupings based on particular student needs (such as grouping students who are perceived as having a weakness in finding the main idea), while 30.5% indicated that these groups were based on student progression through leveled readers.[9]

Role and Selection of the Texts

Participants were asked about various aspects of text selection for the purposes of reading instruction. Few participants agreed with the notion that reading comprehension skills are best developed using narrative texts. Responses regarding the role of leveled readers in reading

instruction produced a bimodal distribution across all related questions, including that reading comprehension is best taught by providing "just right" books. There was considerable disagreement among the sample regarding how books for reading comprehension instruction should be selected (see Figure 2).

The only statement on which there was strong consensus was the proposition that all students should use the same text during classroom reading instruction, with almost three quarters (74.7%) of participants rejecting the proposition.
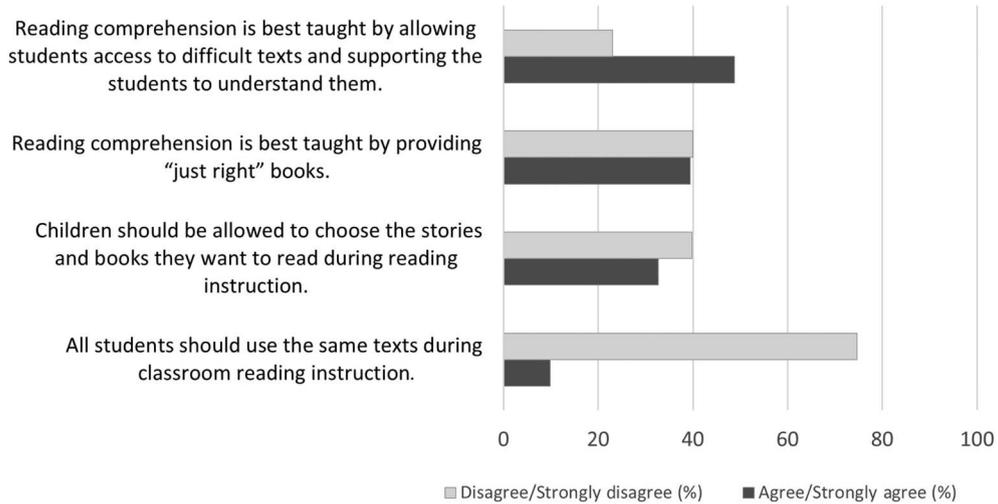
What Instruction Is Valuable for Children's Reading?

Participants generally supported the importance of reading comprehension skill instruction (finding the main idea, making predictions), with 87.9% agreeing with the assertion that teachers should directly teach comprehension skills. Over half (54.3%) believed that this instruction should specifically focus on comprehension skills, even in the early years when students are learning the code but particularly once decoding has been mastered. Just over one third (37.3%) indicated that there was too much emphasis on comprehension skills in reading instruction. Participants also indicated that decoding should be emphasized as a precursor to comprehension, with 77.3% agreeing. Most teachers (95.1%) indicated that instruction in vocabulary and background knowledge are important considerations. How vocabulary is best taught was more contested, with one fifth (20.9%) of participants noting that, during reading, most new vocabulary can be understood by considering the context and syntax of surrounding

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[8]Children in their first year of formal schooling.

[9]Leveled readers are a system where books are categorized according to how difficult they are to read. There are a number of different leveling systems that employ varied methods to categorize difficulty. Books can be on markedly different difficulty levels depending on the scheme by which they are judged (Lemov et al., 2016).

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Figure 2. Level of agreement with statements regarding the selection of texts for instruction. Note that *Neither agree nor disagree* responses have been omitted from this figure.

Reading comprehension is best taught by allowing students access to difficult texts and supporting the students to understand them.

Reading comprehension is best taught by providing "just right" books.

Children should be allowed to choose the stories and books they want to read during reading instruction.

All students should use the same texts during classroom reading instruction.

☐ Disagree/Strongly disagree (%) ■ Agree/Strongly agree (%)

text, with the remainder of the participants indicating that explicit vocabulary instruction is required.
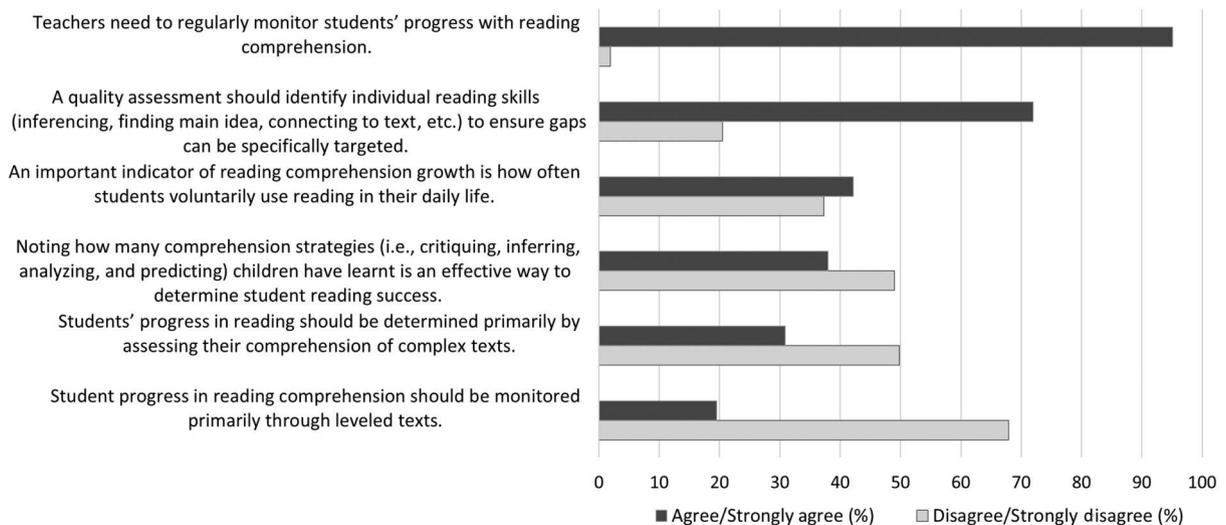
Measuring Reading Progress

Participants highlighted the importance of regularly monitoring students' reading comprehension (95.1% *agree/strongly agree*), yet there were differences in opinion on how this should be conducted. One in five (19.5%) believed that rate of students' progress through leveled reader schemes is the primary method for determining student progress, while a larger proportion identified with the idea that a quality assessment should identify individual reading skills (e.g., inferencing, finding the main idea, connecting to text) to ensure gaps can be specifically targeted (72% *agree/strongly agree*). Figure 3 summarizes the degree to which teachers either agreed or disagreed with statements about measuring reading progress.

How Literacy Time Is Structured in Schools

Most (90.5%) participants used a dedicated literacy block, and 45.9% of those blocks were considered effective; however, 24.4% of participants had the personal opinion that their literacy blocks were not effective. Time spent in a reading block each day varied—most schools

Figure 3. Level of agreement with statements relating to measuring student progress.

Teachers need to regularly monitor students' progress with reading comprehension.

A quality assessment should identify individual reading skills (inferencing, finding main idea, connecting to text, etc.) to ensure gaps can be specifically targeted.

An important indicator of reading comprehension growth is how often students voluntarily use reading in their daily life.

Noting how many comprehension strategies (i.e., critiquing, inferring, analyzing, and predicting) children have learnt is an effective way to determine student reading success.

Students' progress in reading should be determined primarily by assessing their comprehension of complex texts.

Student progress in reading comprehension should be monitored primarily through leveled texts.

■ Agree/Strongly agree (%) ☐ Disagree/Strongly disagree (%)

(56.3%) had a literacy block allocation of between 31 and 60 min per day, with allocations ranging from less than half an hour to over 90 min per day.

Use of Commercially Available Schemes and Programs in Schools

Over three quarters (75.3%) of teachers indicated that their schools used one or more commercially available programs for the teaching of reading. These programs could be separated into two general categories: phonics focused and comprehension focused (those that assume decoding skills are relatively secure). For example, Little Learners Love Literacy, MultiLit, Reading Eggs, Sound Waves, Sounds Write, and Teaching Handwriting and Spelling Skills can be categorized as phonics-focused programs designed to help teach children the alphabetic principle and how speech and print map to each other. Commercially available comprehension programs included Corrective Reading (Engelmann et al., 1999) and Levelled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). Interestingly, just over a third of respondents reported that their schools used a program for one purpose (phonics or comprehension) but did not use programs for both. Table 3 summarizes the reported use of programs for comprehension and phonics.

Over half of the respondents (153 teachers) reported that their schools employed one or more commercial phonics-focused programs. Of those who reported using a commercial phonics program, 47.7% said their school had more than one phonics program in use (see Table 4). In fact, a small number of schools (1.8%) employed as many as four different phonics programs across their classrooms. The use of multiple programs was also reported for comprehension-focused programs: 60.9% of teachers reported that their schools used commercial comprehension-based programs, and of those, 47.6% said their school used more than one program.

Participants had mixed views regarding the use of commercial reading programs. Over half (55.6%) indicated that commercial programs were useful, while 19.9% were unsure. Of the participants who reported using commercial programs, 61% believed that they were useful and 15.3% reported them as having little use. A number of participants believed that commercial programs could be

Table 4. Proportion of schools using one or more commercial programs.

Number of programs employed	Proportion of schools (phonics-based)[a]	Proportion of schools (comprehension-based)[b]
1	52.3%	52.4%
2	36.3%	27.8%
3	9.5%	15.9%
4	1.8%	3.9%

[a]Proportion of schools that identified using phonics-focus programs. [b]Proportion of schools that identified using comprehension-focus programs.

used to teach reading yet did not employ a program in their own practice. In fact, 35% of those who did not use a commercial program indicated that they thought that commercial programs had some use in the classroom.

Discussion

Coherence of Beliefs and Practices

A key aim of this study was to describe the practices for teaching reading employed by elementary teachers in Australia. A wide range of beliefs and instructional methods were reported, including those that have diametrically opposing pedagogical bases, characterized as student centered and content centered. Notably, there was limited agreement on the most basic view of the approach to reading instruction, with teachers divided about the fundamentals of pedagogy. When significant numbers of teachers disagree on such a fundamental point about whether or not reading needs to be explicitly taught (Sweller, 2021), it is not surprising that a lack of alignment in related strategies and instruction in the classroom ensues. Our results suggest that there is no commonly agreed view of what it means to teach reading comprehension in Australian elementary classrooms or what teaching reading comprehension should look like from a practice perspective. This is concerning, as there is a significant evidence base related to reading comprehension instruction in middle-to-late elementary years that states that skills that contribute to comprehension need to be explicitly taught to students and that, particularly for less advanced readers, teachers cannot rely

Table 3. Participants' reported use of phonics-based and comprehension-based programs.

Reported use	Does your school use a comprehension program?		
		Yes	No
Does your school use a phonics program?	Yes	39.1%	14.7%
	No	21.5%	24.7%

on incidental exposure and implicit coverage of skills as methods of teaching reading (Castles et al., 2018; Hennessy, 2021; Silverman et al., 2020). For example, text selection is crucial, as studies demonstrate the place for challenging texts that support, and are supported by, the development of background knowledge via a knowledge-rich curriculum (Cabell & Hwang, 2020; Cervetti & Wright, 2020; Cervetti et al., 2016; Hwang et al., 2022).

The variability of views reflected in these results stands in contrast to observations made by Louden et al. (2005), who conducted a large-scale qualitative descriptive study of classroom practices ($N = 33$), the results of which continue to inform policy, practice, and education discourse in Australia. They noted that there was little difference in the practices employed by teachers in the observed classrooms; teachers judged as more effective, used a wider range of instructional methods across their lessons, and used these strategies more often than less effective teachers. Less effective teachers relied on fewer literacy activities and used them less often. However, in general terms, there was no clear difference in the types of strategies being employed by more effective teachers compared to less effective teachers. There are a number of potential reasons for the differences observed between the findings of Louden et al.'s study and the findings of this study. It is possible that the selected sample of classrooms visited by Louden et al. may not have been fully representative of the range of practices existing in Australian elementary classrooms. Alternatively, the nature of classroom instruction in Australia may have changed in the 2 decades between Louden et al.'s study and this study. Teachers' understanding of what it means to teach reading may also have changed over the intervening period, with resultant changes in reported instructional strategies.

The variation in beliefs about effective classroom practice has implications for the way that classroom teachers work together in teams and also the way that teachers can work with allied health professionals such as SLPs in helping students learn to read. When there is significant interdisciplinary variation in beliefs and practice, it makes it difficult for a school, as an organization, to present a coherent and consistent set of low-variance instructional practices over time. It also presents difficulties when working with SLPs, as the evidence-aligned strategies employed by SLPs may be at odds with the strategies favored by the student's teacher.

One concerning finding from our survey was that the majority of participants did not see preservice training as the foundation for their knowledge of the teaching of reading. Early career teachers are expected to be "classroom ready" to take on the significant responsibility of teaching children to read. However, our findings suggest that teachers have had to heavily supplement the advice and learning they gained from their preservice training to effectively teach reading in their classrooms. This is far from an ideal situation, and consideration must be given to the relevance and utility of current initial teacher education programs. There has been recognition of this problem, and the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership has recently embarked on a review of Australian initial teacher education programs (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019).

Given that over half of the participants indicated that their practice is based on their own investigations and experiences, and not from formal educative or coaching processes, it is not surprising that such a range of beliefs and pedagogies ensues. There seems to be great variation in the way that teachers access knowledge about reading instruction and, therefore, the risk of various and varied instructional practices being employed is high. One intervention sometimes employed to enable greater consistency in practice, at both school and system level, is the engagement of a literacy coach. Most states and territories in Australia have department-based literacy coaches that work across several schools (e.g., Thelning et al., 2010), and literacy coaches are also regularly used for instructional improvement in the Catholic and independent sectors. The literacy coach model has been shown to be effective (e.g., Basma & Savage, 2018; Matsumura et al., 2010; Powell et al., 2010) in a variety of circumstances, and so it was striking that so few participants nominated a literacy coach as their primary source of knowledge regarding reading comprehension instruction. Given the significant investment represented by a sector-based literacy coach, this finding calls into question the impact they have on teaching and learning.

Virtually all participants felt that the deliberate teaching of reading comprehension was important and that, accordingly, time was set aside for teaching specific reading strategies in the school day. However, there were differences in teachers' perceptions of how reading comprehension was best taught. These are most apparent in methods of text selection for reading and what the focus of reading instruction should be. Examination of associations between items in the beliefs section of the survey indicated that responses tended to be clustered around two general sets of beliefs: a "student-centered" and a "content-centered" approach (Rupley & Logan, 1985). Student-centered beliefs were associated with the use of leveled texts for both instruction and assessment and were more likely to reflect a belief that reading could be developed using lively and engaging texts. Participants who were content focused were more likely to favor whole-class instruction, to advocate for teachers selecting more complex texts and the teaching of associated strategies.

Broadly, these views are associated with so-called balanced literacy and science of reading approaches, respectively (Castles et al., 2018; Freebody, 2007).

This divergence of beliefs between student- and content-centered approaches is borne out in the methods by which teachers reported selecting texts for reading instruction. Text selection is a key issue in reading instruction worldwide (Shanahan et al., 2010; Sturtevant et al., 2006), and our findings suggest that Australian elementary schools are no different. In some classrooms, student choice and the use of so-called "authentic texts"[10] are prioritized by teachers. These teachers work with a range of different texts in the classroom and use small-group instruction as a strategy for navigating this complexity. The primary goal of this approach seems to be the provision of interesting and "just right" books as a precursor for reading development, linked to their belief that lively and rich books chosen by students in their area of interest enable students to make better progress and stimulate a love of reading (Davis, 2010; Iaquinta, 2006; Pressley & Allington, 2014). These may be texts that are leveled for complexity, genre, and/or subject matter. Reading progress is then assessed via an ability to answer comprehension questions related to a text scored at a particular level. This is a concerning position, given that the use of leveled readers, such as those produced as part of the Fountas and Pinnell and Leveled Literacy Intervention programs (both widely used in Australia), have little independent empirical support (see discussions by Shanahan, 2014, and Hanford, 2022). Juxtaposed to this is the view from some participants that books selected for reading instruction should be chosen by the teacher for specific purposes (e.g., complexity, relatedness to topic study). This difference in the way that the role of text in the classroom is conceptualized is noteworthy. The focus of instruction in classrooms where there has been an intentional choice of text in order to demonstrate and support a particular point of teaching is very different to a classroom where the students have full choice in text selection. When students in a classroom are each reading a different text, with different genres and levels of complexity, it makes it difficult for teachers to systematically plan for instruction in a single lesson and over time.

It is worth noting that although the categories of student- and content-centered approaches were identified in our results, a sizable percentage of participants had eclectic beliefs, some of which seem to be self-contradictory. For example, there was a small subset of teachers

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[10]A so-called authentic text is one that is not constructed for the purpose of helping children (or adults) learn to read. There is no arbitrary way of classifying a text as "authentic" or, by implication, "non-authentic," however.

who advocated explicit instruction of vocabulary and background knowledge and yet indicated that the main focus of instruction should be the teaching of comprehension skills like finding the main idea or practicing inferencing through multiple-choice questions. While some teaching and practice of such skills has value (Such, 2021), allocating significant classroom time in this way redirects the focus of instructional time away from the explicit teaching of a knowledge base. This is significant because of the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension (Smith et al., 2021). Our findings suggest, therefore, that some teachers are not operating within a theoretically coherent reading instruction framework that provides a lens through which they, and the schools they work for, can evaluate the effectiveness of their reading approach.

How Literacy Time Is Structured in Schools

Having a sequestered time set aside for reading instruction is a recognized routine in Australian schools (Thomas & Thomas, 2022) and internationally (Kurtz et al., 2020; Victorian Education and Training, 2018). However, besides the existence of the block itself, there was little agreement among the survey sample about the ideal duration of the literacy block or the instructional practices that it should contain. This is not surprising, as there is a significant literature describing the variation in approaches to reading in most English-speaking countries. Education Week surveys show that the dominant paradigm in the United States is a so-called student-centered approach (Kurtz et al., 2020), while England has a variety of approaches for the teaching of reading (Buddeberg et al., 2016; Gibb, 2015; Rose, 2006), including those that could be classified as either student or teacher centered. This range of views points to a lack of shared understanding about how reading is taught and the ensuing spread of instructional strategies.

One surprising element of our findings was the difference between the importance attached to decoding skills/phonics by participants and the actual amount of time they reported devoting to decoding instruction. Given how highly this aspect of teaching was rated, it is notable that almost 55% of participants indicated that they spent no time on these skills during the week. Of particular note was that in Foundation and Year 1, normally the place where decoding instruction is most prevalent, only 45.8% of teachers reported spending any time on phonics at all during the week, and an even smaller subgroup (17%) reported spending more than 10 min per day. This seems to contradict claims made by some investigators into the state of reading instruction in Australia that phonics instruction is a well-embedded aspect of elementary instruction (Ewing, 2018a, 2018b; Louden et al., 2005;

Riddle, 2015). It also runs counter to the recommendations of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Rowe, 2005), National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), and the Rose Report (Rose, 2006). These three reports, commissioned by their respective national governments, advocate the use of systematic phonics instruction as part of an effective early reading program. This recommendation is particularly prominent in Australia's National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, which recommends that "teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency" (Rowe, 2005, p. 14).

Silent reading was a strategy that had little support (ranked by our participants among the five least valuable uses of instructional time), yet participants indicated they frequently employ this approach. This view aligns with a lack of empirical support for silent reading in improving reading outcomes given the potential opportunity cost associated with it (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Reutzel et al., 2008; Shanahan, 2018b). Despite this, silent reading occupied a significant proportion of class time, with almost 20% of teachers allocating more than an hour a week (over 40 hr per year) to children engaging in independent silent reading. It is possible that silent reading has an attraction for teachers, as it allows the teacher to believe that students are practicing their reading skills while also providing some downtime in the classroom. Also of interest is how few participants identified close reading as an important strategy for reading instruction. This particular strategy is heavily referenced in the United States Common Core curriculum (National Governors Association Centre for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010); however, reports on its efficacy are mixed (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Petscher et al., 2020; Welsch et al., 2019).

Role of Commercially Available Schemes and Programs in Schools

Commercial reading programs are widely used in the schools featured in this survey, with over three quarters of respondents reporting that their schools use a program of some description as part of their reading block. This is similar to the usage rate of programs in the United States (Barton & Wilder, 1964; Kretlow & Helf, 2013) and also to the reported rate of usage in this study. One possible explanation for the widespread use of commercial programs is that they help fill knowledge gaps of the teacher (Campbell et al., 2014). As noted earlier, investigations into teacher knowledge in the areas of decoding and early reading instruction, both in Australia (Meeks & Kemp, 2017) and overseas (Lyon, 2003; Lyon & Weiser,

2009; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Moats, 2009; Podhajski et al., 2009), show that teachers typically lack the requisite skills to construct and deliver a well-sequenced and effective early reading program. The acceptance of commercial materials in the Australian context may fill the void left by a lack of teacher knowledge (Stark et al., 2016). This view is supported by a recent evaluation of the content taught to preservice teachers as part of their initial teacher education (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019). These researchers found that in the majority of cases, the curricula as outlined in publicly available documents did not cover the breadth of understanding required to teach literacy in line with the recommendations of the three national inquiries, had little time devoted to these concepts, and were often designed and/or delivered by academics who were not content experts. Despite the reservations about commercial phonics programs by Australian education unions and professional associations (Caro, 2020; Emmitt et al., 2006; Ewing, 2018a; Honan, 2015), the idea of using programs was generally well received by participants in this study. Notably, education academics and teacher union officials who oppose the use of commercial phonics programs do not seem to object to the use of commercial leveled reading systems.

A further concerning finding was the frequency with which participants reported that their schools employed multiple commercial programs that fulfilled similar, though not always complementary, functions. Although the programs' pedagogical bases and goals may be broadly similar, each program differs from the others in a variety of ways. In some cases, these differences could potentially be discordant, hindering children's progress in reading. The use of multiple programs to fulfill similar purposes in the same school seems an inefficient use of both professional development time and money. This overlapping of approaches and potential creation of redundancy hints at a resourcing or decision-making strategy that may not be coherent within and across schools. An eclectic approach—where teachers are encouraged to use a broad range of strategies to teach reading, irrespective of their congruence as a whole (P. Snow, 2021), is a hallmark of the balanced literacy approach and seems to be endemic among the participants in this study. Some participants indicated that decisions about instructional practice are left almost entirely to the individual teacher. Given that some schools were using multiple programs to achieve similar goals, it is possible that, in certain settings, individual classrooms, or year level teams in the same schools, may choose to use different commercial programs. In contrast, a number of participants reported that they were directed to use certain programs, or not to use programs, by senior personnel in the school in which they were employed. Given that commercial purchases often involve significant sums of money, and that these funds

are allocated via the school, there must be some locus of decision making and resource allocation within schools. Almost a third of participants who worked in schools that did not adopt commercial programs indicated that they believed that such programs had some utility in the classroom. Taken together, this suggests that there is a significant proportion of schools that have mandated programs in use, about which teachers have mixed views.

Limitations and Future Research

Distribution and completion rates of the survey were hampered by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This is likely to have reduced participation due to competing demands on teacher time. It is also possible that teachers who completed the survey may have had stronger views on reading comprehension than the typical teacher and hence feel more motivated to participate. The format of some of our items precluded more fine-grained analysis. For example, the prevalence of participants indicating that their school employed multiple programs for both phonics and reading comprehension programs precluded our ability to identify whether the comments on use of commercial programs referred to the phonics program, the reading program, or both. This item should be refined by future researchers. Classroom observation studies of current practice would allow coding of observed practices against teacher self-reports. In addition, the sources of teacher learning regarding reading instruction warrant further examination. In particular, an understanding of the locus of decision making about the selection and use of commercial programs and/or other approaches may help explain patterns identified in this study. A further limitation of the study, and a potential avenue for future research, is the degree to which responses might vary based on demographic factors. Although a range of demographic information was collected as part of the survey, this information was not used to further disaggregate the data based on geographic location or years of teaching due to constraints during the ethics approval process.

School-Based Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for schools, school systems, and initial teacher education and education sectors. First, the stark division of teacher approaches into categories broadly labeled as student and content centered suggests high variability in the way that reading comprehension instruction is conceptualized and implemented by teachers in their classrooms. This division is exacerbated by professional bodies and government agencies (including education departments) providing inconsistent and conflicting views on pedagogical and practical issues around reading. It is hoped that the introduction of a national body, such as the Australian Education Research Organization, can build on the outcomes of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Rowe, 2005) recommendations and help schools and teachers develop a consistent and clear set of guidelines to help them make informed decisions about their practices. Teachers deserve to have access to a consistent and coherent knowledge base about reading that does not require collation across data sources and support from state and federal government agencies that is not characterized by conflicting or absent advice.

Second, guidance needs to be provided to schools about ways in which they can best structure their instructional time to improve reading comprehension. The opportunity exists for governmental bodies and agencies to develop suggested structures that schools can implement within their regular timetables. Finally, schools need to carefully consider the methods by which they choose commercial materials. Given that many programs are used, often with similar remits but very different approaches and alignment with empirical evidence, careful consideration needs to be given to whether a program should be employed, for what purpose, and for whom. This decision making should not be located at the level of the individual teacher; having such a level of autonomy inevitably produces a centrifugal effect where resources are diverted in different directions despite attempting to pursue a similar goal.

Conclusions

Teaching children to read is one of the fundamental responsibilities of elementary teachers. As such, a significant research base has accrued over the course of 6 decades relating to reading acquisition and the effectiveness of different teaching strategies. In this study, we sought to gain an understanding of Australian elementary teacher beliefs and practices related to reading comprehension. Our results indicate a considerable range of both beliefs and practices regarding how students learn to read, many of which were contradictory and/or at odds with contemporary empirical evidence. Our findings highlight gaps between the instructional strategies that are considered valuable by some elementary teachers and their demonstrated efficacy; in fact, there are practices in use that have been repeatedly shown in empirical research to be ineffective or less effective than other practices that have been ignored, for example, spending inordinate amounts of time on teaching comprehension skills. Our findings indicate the need for a more consistent approach to

teaching reading that is rooted in contemporary evidence, starting with initial teacher education. Further research should be conducted to better understand gaps between the espoused beliefs of teachers and the instructional strategies they report employing.

Data Availability Statement

The data sets generated during and/or analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Primary teachers' perspectives about teaching reading comprehension

Thank you for taking the time to complete this anonymous survey. Its purpose is to investigate your perspectives regarding reading comprehension and identify the methods you use to teach your students to understand what they read. For the purposes of this survey, please assume that students referred to in questions are reading at an age-appropriate level and rate, and are able to decode individual words.

Please respond in line with your current thoughts and practices around reading comprehension. Most questions ask you to choose one option from a selection. However, for some questions you may select all options that apply. For some questions, you are also invited to provide a written response.

Part I: Reading comprehension

1. For each of the following items, please indicate your level of agreement with the statement (Strongly Agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Strongly Disagree; Undecided). If you cannot decide upon a response to a particular item after 30 seconds please select Undecided and go on to the next item.

<u>Monitoring Reading Progress</u>

*   Teachers need to regularly monitor students' progress with reading comprehension.
    Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

*   Student progress in reading comprehension should be monitored primarily through levelled texts.
    Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

*   Students' progress in reading should be determined primarily by assessing their comprehension of complex texts.
    Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

*   An important indicator of reading comprehension growth is how often students voluntarily use reading in their daily life.
    Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

*   A quality assessment should identify individual reading skills (inferencing, finding main idea, connecting to text, etc.) to ensure gaps can be specifically targeted.
    Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

*   Noting how many comprehension strategies (i.e., critiquing, inferring, analysing and predicting) children have learnt is an effective way to determine student reading success.
    Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

<u>Teaching reading</u>

- Teachers should directly teach the basic skills of reading comprehension (inferencing, finding main idea, connecting to text, etc.).
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Reading comprehension is best developed by placing students in reading groups based on the comprehension strategies (inferencing, finding main idea, connecting to text, etc.) they are working on.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Teaching vocabulary and background knowledge should be a priority use of classroom time.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Reading comprehension can be taught mainly using whole-class (Tier 1) instruction.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Guided reading sessions using levelled texts should be a priority use of classroom time.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Students attempting texts that are difficult for them to read can prevent them from making progress.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- All students should use the same texts during classroom reading instruction.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- During reading, most new vocabulary can be understood by the student using the context and syntax of surrounding text.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- The most appropriate texts for teaching reading comprehension are narrative texts (story books).
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Purposeful, real-life projects and activities which call for the use of reading using levelled texts should be a priority use of classroom time.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Commercially-produced materials can be useful for teaching reading comprehension.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Comprehension instruction is not as important in reading as providing children with stimulating, interesting materials to read.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Teaching reading comprehension strategies (i.e., critiquing, inferencing, analysing and predicting) should be a priority use of classroom time.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Asking questions about a story being read by a child is an important technique for improving reading comprehension.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- The teacher's role in reading instruction is to assign students to appropriate texts and direct them as they complete comprehension questions and other tasks associated with the texts.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Children should be allowed to choose the stories and books they want to read during reading instruction.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Reading comprehension is not difficult for most children to learn if they are provided with lively and stimulating material to read.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Vocabulary and background knowledge instruction are critical components in reading comprehension instruction.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Reading comprehension is best taught by allowing students access to difficult texts and supporting the students to understand them.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- It is difficult to understand a text if you do not have background knowledge on the topic of the text.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

- Reading comprehension is best taught by providing "just right" books.
  Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Neutral*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*   *Undecided*

Purpose of primary school reading instruction

- Primary school reading instruction should emphasise decoding skills as a precursor to comprehension.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

- Primary school reading instruction should focus heavily on comprehension, even at the beginning stages of reading.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

- Primary school reading instruction should emphasise the higher-level comprehension skills (inferencing, finding main idea, connecting to text, etc.) required of children when reading good children's literature.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

- Too much emphasis is being placed on comprehension strategies (inferencing, finding main idea, connecting to text, etc.) in primary school reading instruction today.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

Grouping students for instructional purposes

- An important criterion for grouping students is the levelled reader each child is able to read.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

- Reading groups should be formed as the need for them arises and should be disbanded when the need has been met.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

- Reading groups should be based on the students' interests.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

- Reading groups are necessary for teaching reading comprehension.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   Undecided

Part II: Reading comprehension strategies

1. **Do you have a reading block set aside for each day?**

Yes	No	Not sure
☐	☐	☐

1a.   **In your opinion, how effective is the current arrangement of reading time at your school?**

2. **Approximately how much time do you spend teaching reading each day?**
    0–30 min

    31–60 min

    61–90 min

    More than 90 min

3. **Rank each of the following instructional approaches in terms of their importance in developing comprehension skills from 1 to 11, with 1 being most important.**
    Decoding skills

    Use of levelled readers

    Literature Circles

    Close Reading

    Teaching students about background knowledge

    Vocabulary instruction

    Teaching comprehension strategies

    Regular silent reading time

    Reading conferences (small group guided reading)

    Whole class reading instruction, including modelling and think-alouds

    Students independently reading texts followed by comprehension questions

4. **Please estimate how much time you would spend on each of the instructional strategies in a typical week.**
    I think I will have the following ranges: None; 1–30 min; 31–60 min; 61–90 min; more than 90 min.
    Decoding skills

    Use of levelled readers

    Literature Circles

    Close Reading

    Teaching students background knowledge

    Vocabulary instruction

    Teaching comprehension strategies

    Silent reading time

    Reading conferences (small group guided reading)

    Whole class reading instruction, including modelling and think-alouds

    Students independently reading texts followed by comprehension questions

5. **In your view, can commercial reading programs be used to improve children's reading comprehension?**

Yes	No	Not sure
☐	☐	☐

5a. **Comments:**

6. **Does your school use a commercial reading program?**

Yes	No	Not sure
☐	☐	☐

7. **If so, which program/s does your school use (check all that apply)?**

CAFÉ Reading program

CARS/STARS

Corrective Reading

CORI

Doorway to Practical Literacy

Fountas and Pinnell

HMH Journeys

HMH into Reading

InitiaLit

Levelled Literacy Intervention

Little Learners Love Literacy

ReadWriteThink

Reading to Learn

Reading Eggs

Reading Workshop

Sound Waves

Sounds Write

THRASS

Units of Study for Teaching Reading series

Other (please specify)

Part III: About You

1. **Are you currently employed as a primary (F/Prep to Year 6) teacher in an Australian school?**

Yes	No
☐	☐

If answered NO, then they will be prompted to answer the following question:

1a. **What has been your role (current and/or past) in helping children to read?**

2. **Are you currently a:**
   ○ Mainstream / generalist teacher

   ○ Specialist teacher (please specify): _____

3. **Is the school you currently work in:**
   ○ Government

   ○ Catholic

   ○ Independent

   ○ Other (please specific)

4. **Which Australian state or territory do you currently work in?**
   ○ Australian Capital Territory

   ○ New South Wales

   ○ Northern Territory

   ○ Queensland

   ○ South Australia

   ○ Victoria

   ○ Tasmania

   ○ Western Australia

5. **Is the location of your school:**
   ○ Metropolitan / Urban

   ○ Regional / Rural

   ○ If unsure, please state your suburb or postcode: _____

   ○ Prefer not to say

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For question 6, please only complete those areas relevant to your own educational history. Skip subheadings that do not apply to you.

6.   Please specify your teaching qualification in education / primary teaching: Undergraduate:
- ○   Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary)
- ○   Bachelor of Education (Early Years)
- ○   Bachelor of Education (Primary)
- ○   Bachelor of Education (Primary and Secondary P-10)
- ○   Bachelor of Early Childhood and Primary Education
- ○   Other (not listed): _____

Other:
- ○   Diploma of Education
- ○   Graduate Diploma of Education
- ○   Other (not listed): _____

Postgraduate:
- ○   Master of Teaching (Early Years)
- ○   Master of Teaching (Primary and Early Childhood)
- ○   Master of Teaching (Primary)
- ○   Master of Teaching (Primary and Secondary)
- ○   Master of Teaching (Special Education)
- ○   Other (not listed): _____

Double Degree:
Please Specify: _____

7.   Do you have any other tertiary qualification/s?
- ○   No
- ○   Yes (please specify): _____

8.   How many years ago did you gain your initial teaching qualification?
- ○   0–2 years
- ○   3–5 years
- ○   6–10 years
- ○   11–15 years
- ○   16–20 years
- ○   More than 20 years

9.   Which grade / year level are you teaching *this* year?
- ○   Prep / Foundation / Reception
- ○   Year 1
- ○   Year 2
- ○   Year 3
- ○   Year 4
- ○   Year 5
- ○   Year 6
- ○   Older year level

10. **For how many years (in total) have you been teaching primary school children?**
   ○   1–2 years

   ○   3–5 years

   ○   6–10 years

   ○   11–15 years

   ○   16–20 years

   ○   More than 20 years

11. **Where did you learn most of what you know about reading instruction?**
   My pre-service education

   Literacy coaches in my sector

   My personal experiences with students in the classroom

   My school-provided curriculum or program

   My own research

   Professional development/coaches in my sector

   Social media

   Other (please specify)

12. **Do you have any further comments you would like to add?**
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____