



**A SUBMISSION BY THE
AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION
TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
SCIENCE AND TRAINING
NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE
TEACHING OF LITERACY**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Education Union represents 160,000 teachers and ancillary staff in public pre-schools, schools and TAFE institutions across Australia.

While the AEU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Committee of Inquiry, and does so in good faith, we wish to express our concern at the origins of this Inquiry and our regret that an issue of such significance has been caught up in the political dispute between the current Coalition Federal Government and the ALP state and territory governments. The impression conveyed by both the Minister and the media at the time the Inquiry was announced was of a system in crisis, despite the fact that Australia performs extremely well in comparison with literacy achievements in other countries. This effectively demeaned the excellent work being done by teachers under often difficult conditions in classrooms everywhere.

1. The AEU supports a broad definition of literacy which acknowledges both the cognitive/psychological and socio/cultural aspects of literacy, recognising that cognitive literacy is a means to an end rather than an end in itself.
2. Teaching is a complex process which incorporates bodies of knowledge about learning styles, brain research, gender, children at risk and how these factors combine and interact in the classroom. In a powerful learning environment, successful teachers make use of a range of teaching strategies according to the circumstances in play at the time.
3. The power is in the selection of the appropriate variables, not in the application of a single strategy.
4. The AEU supports teachers being provided with knowledge of a range of teaching strategies, and the skills to implement them, in order to make informed judgements as to the most appropriate strategies for a particular student at a given time.
5. The AEU supports the implementation of best practice in professional learning in order to ensure that theoretical information is transferred into classroom practice where that is necessary.
6. The AEU explicitly rejects a mandated approach to teaching, as this ignores the individual circumstances of the child; limits the benefit that a combination of approaches brings and undermines the professional judgement of teachers.
7. The terms of reference do not address *literacy learning* by children and the factors which influence their learning, particularly their learning environments.

2. INTRODUCTION

The history of this Inquiry, as far as can be gleaned from reading media reports, is that it arose from a letter signed by 26 academics, concerned about the “whole language” approach to the teaching of reading. These academics wrote to the Federal Minister in May 2004 saying, in effect, that because of the focus on a “whole language” approach at the expense of a phonetic approach, education systems and teachers were failing Australian children. To support this claim they quote up to 30% of students as having ongoing difficulties with reading literacy, as well as claiming that phonics-based instruction benefits students experiencing reading problems.

The Federal Minister, in announcing the Inquiry, added to the statistical information by stating that 30% of students at Year 5 cannot pass literacy benchmarks as well as highlighting the experience of a particular parent who had not realised that her child was unable to read until the end of Year 5.

In the context of this Inquiry, it is necessary to unpick the 30% figure used by the Minister. The most recently published figures regarding literacy benchmarks (MCEETYA, 2001) indicate that only approximately 10% of students do not reach the benchmarks.

The AEU is always supportive of improving teaching practice and will participate in good faith in any inquiry into the teaching of literacy.

However, in noting the genesis of this Inquiry, we wish to place on record our concerns that such an Inquiry should be established apparently on the strength of a single letter and with little evidence linking reading outcomes to “whole language”, phonic or any other approaches.

We are also concerned that, because of the manner in which the Inquiry has been established, the debate appears to be cast in terms of either “whole language” or “phonics” when in fact the reality is much more complex.

The AEU is cognisant of the fact that a significant minority of students experience difficulties in achieving literacy benchmarks, and is committed to improving that situation. We are concerned, however, that this statistic has been portrayed as being due to the use of a whole language approach rather than a phonic approach. Longitudinal studies of student achievement show very little change in the percentage of students with literacy problems over several decades, a fact which renders the “whole language” vs “phonic” debate somewhat irrelevant, given that various approaches to the teaching of reading have been used over that time.

It is not an issue that the vast majority of Australian students are well served in relation to the acquisition of literacy skills. The recent results from the OECD's Programme of International Achievement 2003 (PISA) showed that Australian students again ranked second only to Finland in reading literacy. It is important to bear this in mind in any recommendations from this Inquiry and not compromise the excellent practice which is already occurring in schools around Australia.

The teaching of literacy is a complex process about which much more is known today than previously. However, problems still remain in ensuring that all students are able to read and educators do not claim to have all the answers. Children may have literacy problems for a number of reasons to do with their health, problems with school attendance, social circumstances, intellectual capacity, non-English speaking backgrounds or any combination of these. There are groups within Australia who manifest many of these characteristics.

An analysis of those children failing to reach benchmarks will show a strong correlation with children who display one or more of these characteristics; research shows that the strongest predictor of educational achievement is socio-economic background.

It is important that this is acknowledged and not merely dismissed as an attempt on the part of teachers to deny responsibility. Indeed, recognition and acknowledgement of these factors enables teachers to more appropriately plan reading programs or seek suitable intervention; it also facilitates the appropriate allocation of resources by school systems.

The allocation of appropriate resourcing remains a critical factor in any consideration of literacy outcomes. The most recent report from the OECD, *Learning for Tomorrow's World – First Results from PISA 2003*, observes that, in certain countries, Australia included, there is a significant correlation between the socio-economic background of students and the quantity and quality of educational resources provided. The OECD notes that in these countries, "policy makers need to address the fact that school resources appear to reinforce, rather than moderate socio-economic differences".

This resourcing must include consideration of class size, teacher professional learning programs (pre-service and in-service) and appropriate classroom technology, including computer access.

3. A NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Traditionally, most people in the community have an understanding of literacy in its most basic, functional sense – as being the capacity to read and write. However, over the past two decades, within the education sector at least, definitions of literacy have broadened to encompass a social purpose; indeed, contemporary views of literacy see it as social practice which is situated in social situations and social contexts. (See, for example, the view expressed by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration in “*Literacy in Teacher Education: Standards for Preservice Programs*”, May 2001.)

The definition adopted by DEETYA also takes a broader view in its reference to “effective” literacy which includes “the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing”.

This is not to discount the importance of cognitive literacy skills, but to place them in a wider context – the acquisition of skills is not an end in itself; rather, it contributes towards an individual’s capacity to engage in the practice of literacy.

Unfortunately, much of the media discussion of literacy tends to focus on low-level cognitive aspects of literacy with little or no reference to social purposes and higher level skills.

A further, more recent development worldwide has been the manner in which knowledge is now conceptualised as an economic tool; we now talk of “creating” new knowledge; knowledge as flexible, changing and growing; knowledge as a “form of work and production itself as more educated people work in the fields of ideas, communication, selling, marketing, counselling, consultancy, tourism, event organising and so forth” (Hargreaves, 2003, p16).

To flourish in such an environment, competitive companies build systems and cultures of “continuous innovation” (Reich, 2001 p37) where workers are encouraged and expected to work as learning teams, contributing to learning organisations. These expectations are reflected in daily newspaper advertisements seeking applicants with the capacity to communicate effectively, work in teams, contribute to the achievement of team and organisational goals, etc.

With these demands increasing, schools are being challenged to develop the necessary thinking and social skills, which in turn requires reflection on the kinds of knowledge which students are being, and should be, provided with. This reflection is not taking place in isolation - the work of educators is now the subject of intense debate by people who have little understanding of the process of education but great interest in the product; people for whom the purpose of education is to enable nations and companies to profit within a knowledge society. Such a purpose, in itself, is not necessarily a bad thing, within compassionate constraints, but it creates tensions between those for whom education, particularly public education, fulfils a nation-building role in which the tenets of democracy are promoted and developed and those who see education only as an individual, economic benefit.

What is interesting in this debate, especially given the rate and variety of the social and economic change currently occurring, is the paradox between the rhetoric of the importance of education in developing innovation and creativity in young people and the reality of increased prescription, control and measurement at every stage of formal education.

Politicians of all persuasions, in many countries, are keenly feeling pressure from a range of interest groups, particularly as comparative international tests of student performance are now regularly conducted and their results published and analysed, sometimes by those with little comprehension of their significance. This can add to a sense of confusion and anxiety about the “state of our education system” which is exacerbated by different tests producing different results. In such an environment it is critical that decision making is informed by sound educational research and information, rather than anecdotal, uninformed comment within the media.

In seeking to improve educational outcomes, the challenge for legislators and educators is not to be sidetracked by a focus on excessive regulation, thereby confusing standards with standardisation. Regulatory and legislative responses to literacy problems create the impression that there are clear and simple solutions. They also reinforce a view that what is important is only what can be measured. Neither is the case.

4. THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Teaching is a complex process, as is learning. There is no “best way” to teach. We can, however, identify characteristics demonstrated by successful teachers – the pedagogical skills and knowledge they display, the relationships with their students, etc.

Successful teachers *make use of* a range of bodies of knowledge, from which they select what is relevant to their classroom situations. They incorporate research about multiple intelligences, learning styles, brain research, gender and children at risk into their teaching by using that research to assist in designing learning programs.

For example, Howard Gardner’s (1983, 1993) work on multiple intelligences shows us that students bring different strengths to learning situations. They may be linguistically, musically, or spatially intelligent; they may have logical-mathematical or bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence. When teachers can identify these intelligences and plan their teaching accordingly, they increase the chances of students achieving successful outcomes.

Similarly, the latest developments in brain research tell us much about how the brain works - that its goal is survival; that emotion and thinking are powerfully connected; that the brain needs to make connections – it seeks patterns; that intelligence is enhanced by social situations, etc. All of this is relevant in selecting appropriate learning experiences for children.

Successful teachers are also aware of, *and respond to*, research about children's learning styles. Educators are well aware of the differences between the way girls and boys can approach learning. We know, for example, that literacy programs for boys or girls, in addition to providing for functional literacy skills, must also examine how constructions of gender affect literacy participation and performance.

We need to know more about:

- the cultural texts that boys and young men and girls and young women use outside the classroom, including electronic and visual texts;
- boys' and girls' textual competence in literacy sites outside the school and how boys and girls use language;
- the differences among boys in the way they view their masculinity; and
- the relationship of these to the ways in which literacy is taught in schools.

Boys and girls are more likely to want to participate if they can see that literacy programs are relevant and useful to their understanding of themselves and their lives.

Successful programs focus on constructions of both masculinities and femininities; we need to avoid the "competing victim" syndrome (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997).

In addition, there are many children in our schools who are considered "at risk". This can be for a range of reasons. Some 20% of students, for example, suffer from physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, the effects of drug/alcohol abuse, witness violence, live in poverty and may experience negative consequences related to divorce.

Teachers need to be aware of which of these situations children may be experiencing and of how to create a safe environment for them within the classroom.

Children with disabilities as well as those who are not literate in their mother tongue also pose challenges for teachers.

In a powerful learning environment, a number of variables combine and interact. In addition to the above-mentioned considerations, this includes the use of particular teaching strategies, such as "whole language", phonetic, functional (genre based), and critical approaches to reading. It is impossible to say that one approach or another is more or less suitable for a particular child in a particular environment at a particular time. Aspects of all must be understood and applied as appropriate.

The power is in the selection of the appropriate variables not in the application of single innovations (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001 p 47).

It follows from this that the AEU is supportive of teachers being provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to make informed judgements as to the most appropriate teaching strategy for a particular student or group of students.

Such provision must be made at both pre-service and in-service levels, as it is not realistic to assume that all the necessary skills can be provided during the formal teacher education phase of a prospective teacher's education. It is, however, important that this provision is both well resourced and well directed.

It is critical that any professional learning programs are actually effective, are "best practice" in themselves, and that they are available not only to primary school teachers, but to secondary school teachers as well. Some students will need ongoing individual support throughout their schooling.

5. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE INQUIRY

The precise focus of this Inquiry remains unclear. In announcing it, the Minister for Education referred to a review of the teaching of literacy. His comments, however, appeared to focus on reading, rather than literacy, indicated by his comment that he was "leaning towards phonics at this stage".

The objectives of the Inquiry display a similar lack of clarity. They vary from a focus on literacy teaching approaches (Objective 1) to one on reading teaching (Objective 2), and one on monitoring early reading learning (Objective 4).

While, clearly, reading is related to literacy, it should not be confused with it; similarly, teaching and learning, though related, are not the same thing.

This lack of clarity is reinforced by the fact that the objectives appear to be cast in the assumption of an either/or debate as though learning to read can in fact be reduced to "whole language" or "phonics", when in fact both learning to read and the acquisition of broader literacy skills are far more complex.

Further the terms of reference do not reflect influences other than teaching on children's ability to learn to be literate. The AEU would like to see the Committee of Inquiry examine showcase good practice programs for literacy *learning* in the context of this Review. This would provide useful information for teachers and assist the likelihood of follow up.

In addition, the AEU notes the emphasis on the early years of schooling and, while we understand this focus, it is imperative that the other phases of schooling also be addressed. Teachers, particularly at secondary level, but also in the upper primary years often express the need to be provided with greater knowledge and skill development in literacy teaching, both pre-service and in-service.

5.1 Review and analyse recent national and international research about literacy teaching approaches, particularly approaches that are shown to be effective in assisting students with reading difficulties.

The AEU does not intend to comment on specific pieces of research (although we note that the general consensus appears to support a balance of approaches), but rather to encourage the Committee of Inquiry to consider a range of reviews of the research literature available.

However, in determining which research literature to review, we would caution the Committee against accepting a narrow, cognitive-psychological approach to defining literacy at the expense of a broader socio-cultural definition. It should not be a case of either/or but rather that the approaches complement each other.

We reiterate our earlier comment – that cognitive skills are a means to end and must be situated within the broader context of the social and cultural purposes of literacy.

In relation to specific reading approaches which are effective in assisting students with reading difficulties, the AEU believes it is essential that teachers are familiar with these. There is no doubt that a thorough understanding of phonetic approaches is essential for teachers, as is an understanding of “whole word” and “whole language”, the Four Resources Model, the cultural, operational and critical framework, and other approaches, such as mentioned earlier.

However, as noted in *“In Teachers’ Hands: Effective Literacy Teaching Practices in the Early Years of Schooling”* (DEST, Forthcoming) it is the combination of these understandings with appropriate instructional techniques which is critical, rather than the adoption of one particular approach over another.

5.2 Identify the extent to which prospective teachers are provided with reading teaching approaches and skills that are effective in the classroom, and have opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to implement effective classroom reading programs. Training in both phonics and whole language approaches to reading will be examined.

The AEU is not in a position to comment accurately about the degree to which prospective teachers are provided with reading teaching approaches and skills which are effective in the classroom, particularly in relation to opportunities to practice and develop these skills. In considering this question, however, there needs to be some agreed view as to what it *is* reasonable to expect from a new graduate. It is certainly the case that other professionals are not considered proficient upon graduation and many undergo structured induction processes to assist their transition into full-time practice.

We suggest that the Committee inform itself in relation to this particular term of reference by surveying groups of new teachers as well as through communication with university education faculties.

The AEU has new teacher networks in most states and territories and would be able to facilitate the distribution of such a survey.

We note, also, that education faculties in universities often suffer from inadequate levels of funding in relation to other faculties and that this is particularly evident in the area of the teaching practicum. We also see the need to strengthen partnerships between practicum supervising teachers and universities to enhance the practicum component.

5.3 Identify the ways in which research evidence on literacy teaching and policies in Australian schools can best inform classroom teaching practice and support teacher professional learning.

The most effective way for research evidence on literacy teaching to inform classroom practice is through the implementation of best practice professional learning programs.

There is significant research available as to what constitutes best practice in professional learning if, in fact, the aim is to transfer what is learned into classroom teaching practice.

Most professional development tends to focus on information sharing rather than providing opportunities to change practice in a supportive environment. This information ranges from updates on policy to recent developments in education theory or practice. Rarely does it provide practical follow up, which is time consuming and expensive.

It is this follow up, however, which provides the greatest likelihood of changed behaviour within the classroom if that is what is needed.

Indeed, research on effective staff development training practices shows that where professional learning programs provide opportunities for modelling, peer observation and coaching in addition to the initial input (awareness raising), the likelihood of transfer from theory to practice increases to 90% (in comparison with 10% from a normal presentation situation where input alone is provided).

The combination of this approach with a well designed program, based on sound research, would be of considerable benefit to classroom teachers needing support. For example, the “Myread” program, available on-line (<http://www.myread.org/>) and on CD Rom, provides a range of research-based teaching strategies for teaching reading. Incorporating this into a properly resourced, best-practice professional learning model would greatly increase the likelihood of skill transference into the classroom.

Thus, if a main outcome of this Inquiry were a recommendation that teachers be informed of its findings, this, on its own, would probably have little effect in changing classroom practice where this was necessary. Research evidence needs to be integrated into appropriate pre-service and in-service learning through a best-practice approach. The Committee of Inquiry needs to be aware of the appalling average funding levels available to schools for teachers' professional learning.

The AEU explicitly rejects a mandatory approach whereby teachers are directed to employ particular teaching methods at the expense of others; such an approach ignores the individual circumstances of the child(ren) concerned; limits the benefits that a combination of approaches brings to children; and undermines the professional judgement of teachers.

5.4 Examine the effectiveness of assessment methods being used to monitor the progress of students' early reading learning.

Most student assessment occurs within the classroom and is conducted by the classroom teacher in a variety of ways to assess a range of different things, both academic and social. This assessment is ongoing and provides the most valuable and reliable information upon which teachers make professional judgements about student progress.

Children are taught letter sounds and names; they are taught blending and decoding; word families; spelling; they do word recognition exercises; they practise oral reading; guided reading; and silent reading; they use context cues and prediction.

Teachers assess children on all of these strategies both informally through games, stories, structured group activities; and formally by way of lesson work, structured reading activities, reading behaviour checklists, miscue analysis, running records and classroom tests.

Authentic student assessment informs teachers, not only about the strengths and weaknesses of a particular student, but also about the value of a particular teaching program or strategy.

An effective assessment program should enable teachers to diagnose, with reasonable certainty, particular problem areas for students. Ideally, it should also provide students with useful information about their own learning. The failure of basic skills tests to do either of these things is one reason that they are regarded with caution within the profession and that educators refrain from making judgements based only on basic skills test results.

Most states and territories conduct state-wide testing programs the results of which are used for a variety of purposes which may include the allocation of staff or additional funding or inclusion in a particular program of instruction.

However, basic skills tests do not enable teachers to assess reasons for errors. For example it is impossible to know whether an error has resulted from an inability to read the question, to understand a particular, critical word within the question, a failure to comprehend the instruction, an inability to write the answer, a wrong guess, or simply not knowing the answer despite being able to do all of the preceding things.

In addition, basic skills tests usually test only a small number of the cognitive aspects of literacy; they do not consider the application of those skills. In doing so, they reinforce the one-dimensional view of literacy which is often seen in the press. They also are limited to a pencil and paper mode. They do not test students' literacy abilities in the use of Information & Communications Technologies (ICTs). In fact, if this were done the results profile for boys, in particular, would probably be quite significantly different.

Despite these limitations of basic skills testing, it remains popular with bureaucrats, politicians and journalists because it tests everyone and because of the simplicity of reporting results to the public.

Other assessment methods are available but are more time consuming and, therefore, expensive. They are, however, much more effective if the desired outcome is diagnosis and remediation. Peer and self assessment strategies for example can begin to be taught from a very early stage and have the advantage of enabling children to understand the characteristics of an assessment process – being able to identify the goal and what has to be done to achieve the goal.

In Queensland, the Year 2 Diagnostic Net monitors early literacy and numeracy development through a four-step process:

- Observation and mapping in reading, writing and number;
- A validation process undertaken by the teacher with each child individually – during Year 2;
- Moderation and reporting – school and district based moderation processes;
- Intervention – the school receives additional resources for those students experiencing difficulties.

5.5 Produce a report of the Inquiry's findings in the second half of 2005 and offer best practice in effective approaches to literacy teaching and learning, both at classroom level and in the training of teachers.

This Term of Reference gives the first mention of literacy *learning* - all other terms of reference are focussed on literacy *teaching*. It will be difficult to include in the report factors related to learning literacy that are outside the *teaching* of literacy when the Inquiry hasn't called for this in submissions. For example, a factor related to the learning of literacy that is outside teaching considerations would be the importance of a literate home environment, particularly for young children before they are of school age. Other factors influencing a child's ability to be literate have

been briefly canvassed in Section 2 above.

While the AEU welcomes the suggestion of offering “best practice in effective approaches to literacy teaching and learning”, we caution against viewing this in too simplistic a manner.

If it is indeed found to be necessary for some classroom practice to change, the provision of a selection of best practice approaches will not in itself do this. It is simply the first step.

It must be followed by providing teachers with opportunities to familiarise themselves with these approaches and, most importantly, *be provided with best practice approaches in professional learning, in order to increase the likelihood of changed classroom teacher practice.*

Without a commitment to best practice professional learning, and to its resourcing, any necessary change is unlikely to occur.

Similarly, the AEU believes that prospective teachers should thoroughly understand a variety of approaches to the teaching of reading and literacy, as well as being equipped with at least a basic instructional repertoire which should be increased with experience. Again, however, the production of a Report will not, of itself, change current practice. To do that - if it is found to be necessary – education faculties in universities will need resources, support and expertise.

CONCLUSION

Australian teachers achieve considerable success in the teaching of literacy. There is a great deal of excellent and innovative practice occurring in Australian schools. This excellence needs to be acknowledged and any recommendations from this Inquiry should not compromise what is already occurring.

For the teaching profession, the effectiveness of this review will be the extent to which it can provide credible directions which resonate with teachers and teacher educators; directions which indicate that this Committee is cognisant of the issues which teachers face in their daily teaching.

For the public at large, the Committee will have achieved much if it can assist in promoting greater awareness of the complexity of literacy acquisition and how parents can contribute to their children’s development.

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