

## **Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education**

It is not possible to say with any confidence that the Academic Standards of our education system are good, bad or indifferent because no-one knows. The Australian education system abandoned the tried and true methods of objectively testing and monitoring progress more than twenty years ago. It is accepted that a high number (30% or more) of Australians have difficulty reading and writing; the reason they have difficulty reading and writing is that they were not properly taught; and the reason they were not properly taught is that their school teachers use ineffective teaching strategies based on the failed philosophy of Whole Language/constructivism. Being able to read and write properly is the imperative on which all school learning depends, whether a child dreams of becoming a rocket scientist, train driver or poet, and my comments relate to the following Term of Reference.

- the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage.

My son got to the end of Grade Five without being able to read and write properly and without any of his teachers noticing that he couldn't read and write, even though I told them I thought there was a problem every year from Prep onwards.

When my son finally received effective reading instruction from a private tutor who was a retired teacher, it took just twelve hours of instruction in letter/sound correspondences followed by three months of practice for his spelling to improve three Grade levels (based on objective testing). This was more progress than in the previous four years of full-time schooling.

I was so shocked to discover that not one of his school teachers knew how to teach sound/letter correspondences, knew how to monitor progress with objective testing, or even knew that the sound/letter correspondences were important in learning to read and write that I wrote letters to Education Ministers and senior education bureaucrats. Most fobbed me off with meaningless, vague assurances but Dr. Brendan Nelson appointed me as parent representative to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL).

During my participation in the NITL process, I discovered that not only is the true level of literacy in Australia frighteningly low, but that it continues to fall, and that the truth about literacy levels is kept secret from the general public. After more than 100 years of compulsory education, we now have for the first time, a generation of young people who complete school less educated than the generation before.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics study (Aspects of Literacy, Assessed Skill Level, Australia, 1996 (Cat. no. 4228.0) showed that,

“...50 percent of the Australian community have considerable difficulty reading, 35 percent can read but not possibly turn it into value or knowledge, leaving only 17 percent fully literate...”

During my participation in the NITL, I was shocked to learn that none of the University Schools and Faculties of Education which offer teaching degrees adequately prepares teachers to teach reading and writing.

None of the State and Territory Curricula requires the teaching of the specific sub-set of skills that are the imperatives for learning to read and write, nor is there any requirement for objective testing to monitor progress.

At present, a student can complete 12 years of formal schooling without learning to read and write properly, can gain a place at a School or Faculty of Education and complete a Bachelor of Education degree without having adequate personal literacy skills, and can gain the appropriate qualification to teach without knowing how to teach reading and writing. That individual is then able to gain employment in a school without any requirement to demonstrate adequate personal literacy skills, or the ability to teach reading and writing effectively.

Our children sit the annual National Benchmark Tests in Grades 3, 5, 7 & 9 and information is published by the State and Territory Departments of Education that almost all students “meet the Benchmark”. However, the information that is not provided to the general public is that the Benchmark is an arbitrary illusion that can be manipulated in order to deliver whatever result is required for whatever purpose, therefore, to announce that most students “meet the Benchmark” is a meaningless statement that provides false assurances to the general public.

Similarly, when information celebrating the success of Australian students compared with students in other countries according to the PISA tests is released, the general public is not informed that the PISA tests do not mark students down for errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, or that many of the highest performing countries do not participate in the PISA tests.

The first and most important recommendation of Teaching Reading, the report of the NITL is that teaching strategies should be based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research. While the Teaching Reading recommendations were accepted by COAG in 2006, none of the University Schools and Faculties of Education have changed or indicated they are considering changing their course content to reflect this recommendation.

The State and Territory Departments of Education have developed and presented to COAG papers which purport to improve the teaching of literacy based on the NITL recommendations, yet none of these papers actually addresses the key issue of using teaching strategies that have been proven to be effective by evidence-based research. The consultation papers presented to COAG not only advocate untested and un-trialed programs, but are also largely based on the discredited Whole Language/constructivist philosophy which places undue emphasis on gaining meaning from text and insufficient emphasis on the direct, explicit and systematic instruction that has been proven by evidence-based research to be the most effective.

It would appear that the Federal, State and Territory education bureaucracies have failed to follow Ministerial directives and have delivered programmes and materials in which more money is spent on exactly the same teaching strategies which have previously failed to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes and will continue to contribute to Australia’s unacceptably high levels of illiteracy.

Education, like religion, is susceptible to cults, and while the education establishment swings between various warring cult-like philosophies, our children are cannon fodder and the collateral damage is their educational progress.

Literacy and therefore academic standards in Australia will only rise when education is based on the findings from rigorous evidence-based research rather than personal beliefs, fads or philosophy. Much of the necessary research has been completed and effective teaching and learning programmes are available and can be immediately implemented. While COAG accepted that education should be evidence-based when they accepted the NITL Recommendations, State and Territory Education Ministers appear unable to ensure their departments instigate and deliver the necessary changes to fulfill this requirement.

The Departments of Education do not appear to have the appropriate understanding that proving a programme is effective by rigorous evidence-based research is different to stating that in the personal opinions of selected individuals, a programme contains the elements that evidence-based research has proven effective, no matter how eminent or well respected those individuals may be.

The Departments of Education deem participation to be the equivalent learning, and therefore measure success by how long a student stays at school instead of how much they learn while at school.

If the various Departments of Education are unable or unwilling to deliver an education for our children that is evidence-based, then they should be compelled to fully inform the general public so that parents in particular can make alternative arrangements that are in their children's best interests. To this end, I respectfully request that the Committee of the Academic Standards Inquiry make the following recommendations;

- The State and Territory Departments of Education publish the level at which the National Benchmark is set.
- Schools inform parents whether their teaching and learning programs are evidence-based; teachers inform parents whether or not their teaching pedagogy is evidence-based; and this information is available in plain English without the use of misleading and confusing terminology.

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