

Submission to the Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education

On the Effective Teaching of Initial Reading, and its Role in Preparing Students for Further Education, Training and Employment.

Kevin Wheldall, Molly de Lemos and Max Coltheart

Summary of Submission

This submission addresses the first of the Inquiry's three terms of reference, and presents the argument that adequate reading skills are essential for further education, training and employment. It argues that methods of teaching students to read in most Australian schools are not based on the scientific evidence relating to how children learn to read and the strategies that are most effective for teaching reading in the early years of school. As a consequence of this, ineffective teaching methods based on outdated methods and assumptions are leading to a situation where schools are failing to provide students with the strong foundational skills in reading that are necessary to progress successfully to further education and training.

Our basic argument is that if children are not taught to read adequately in the first few years of schooling (early primary) they cannot progress successfully to later levels of schooling, and that if students lack basic reading skills, they cannot acquire the core knowledge and skills that are needed to participate in further education and training, since this knowledge is transmitted largely through the written language.

The three authors of this submission have been concerned for some time about the failure of educators and education systems to implement effective programs for the teaching of reading based on current theory and evidence-based research. These concerns were expressed in an open letter to the then Minister of Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, in 2004. This letter was instrumental in bringing about the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, which produced its report *Teaching Reading*, in December 2005. This report made a number of recommendations. However, there is as yet little evidence to indicate any serious attempt to implement any of these recommendations, and in fact disturbing evidence that some of the initiatives that have been undertaken subsequent to this report, are directly contrary to the recommendations of the report.

We argue that unless effective measures are taken to ensure that the teaching of reading in the early years of school is based on the scientific evidence as to how children learn to read and what methods are most effective in teaching them to read, the broader aim of preparing students adequately for further education, training and employment will not be achieved.

Background to the Submission

This submission to the Inquiry essentially constitutes a reiteration of our arguments that precipitated the National Inquiry into The Teaching of Literacy (NITL). We believe that any consideration of academic standards in school education must be predicated on an assumption that high levels of literacy are essential since, as the former Minister for Education stated, 'literacy underpins everything else'. This was reiterated in the Nelson Report when it was released. Our concern in the current context is that little has thus far been achieved in terms of implementing the recommendations of NITL and that what has been done does little to inspire confidence.

The report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, entitled *Teaching Reading*, was released just before Christmas, 2005. The three authors of this current submission were instrumental in bringing about the inquiry. We had become increasingly concerned about the proportion of young Australian students who were struggling to learn to read. Our concern extended to the ways in which young children are typically taught to read in Australian schools that seemed to us to be ignoring a powerful body of research evidence that had accumulated over the previous twenty years. Finally, early in 2004, in some desperation, we decided to see what we could do to press for an inquiry into the way in which reading is taught in Australian schools. A draft letter to Dr Nelson was circulated to active academics in the field of scientific reading research asking if they would be prepared to put their names to the letter. Twenty six researchers endorsed the letter and it was sent to Dr Nelson as the then education minister in March 2004. The full text of this letter is attached since it still fully articulates our concerns.

The letter pointed out that there had been enormous advances over the past twenty years in the scientific understanding of how children learn to read, why some find this so difficult, and how such difficulties in learning to read can be effectively treated. What was of concern to the signatories of this letter is that this scientific knowledge was not being put into practice in Australian classrooms, nor are teacher education students exposed to it in the course of their training. The letter, therefore, urged the Minister to institute a National Inquiry into the teaching of reading, an inquiry which would:

- a) carry out a literature review of current scientific knowledge concerning the teaching of reading;
- b) seek to discover how much of this current scientific knowledge about the teaching of reading is actually provided to future teachers as they are currently being trained; and
- c) seek to discover how much of this current scientific knowledge about the teaching of reading is currently being put into practice in Australian classrooms.

A month later, having heard nothing from Dr Nelson's office, we press released the letter and it was picked up and printed in the Higher Education section of the Australian newspaper, causing quite a stir. (We were subsequently to learn that Dr Nelson had not, in fact, seen the letter until its publication in the Australian.)

To cut a long story short, Professors Coltheart and Wheldall subsequently met with Dr Nelson and we were able to reiterate our deep concern about the teaching of reading in Australian schools. The Minister agreed to institute such an Inquiry based on the three terms of reference. The Inquiry Committee began its work in November 2004 and reported in December 2006.

The Nelson Report into the Teaching of Reading

The Committee's report consisted of three separate documents, which can all be obtained from <http://www.dest.gov.au/nitl/report.htm>. The three documents, with a brief account of each, are as follows:

Teaching Reading: A Literature Review

On the basis of this literature review, the Inquiry reached the conclusion that the evidence indicates that the Whole Language approach to the teaching of reading, currently the most widely used approach to the teaching of reading in Australian schools, is not in the best interests of students, especially those students who are having difficulty learning to read.

It concluded that the evidence is very clear as to what is essential for an effective programme for the teaching of reading. A considerable body of research has shown that, if it is to be effective, such a programme must emphasise, throughout its first two or three years, extensive systematic *explicit* instruction in *synthetic* phonics. Taking these key terms in turn:

First, what is *synthetic* phonics? A child being taught that "cat" can be analysed into three sounds "kuh" "a" and "tuh" that correspond to the three letters of the word is being taught *analytic* phonics; a child being taught that the letters *c a* and *t* correspond to the sounds "kuh" "a" and "tuh" and that these can be put together (synthesized) to make the syllable "cat" is being taught *synthetic* phonics. Either type of phonics instruction helps children learn to read but research shows that the synthetic approach helps children more.

Second, what is meant by *explicit* instruction? This contrasts with *implicit* instruction, sometimes referred to as "discovery learning". Here you present children with a number of examples and let them figure out the rules for themselves. Few children will be able to figure out the rules of phonics by themselves in this way: most need to be told explicitly what these rules are and then trained in their use.

The conclusions of this literature review are completely consistent with those reached in two other recent national surveys of the teaching of reading, the Rose Review commissioned by the UK government, which reported at the end of 2005, and the National Reading Panel in the USA, which reported in 2000.

Teaching Reading: Report and Recommendations

The Inquiry's survey of 4 year Bachelor of Education courses around Australia found that:

- (a) in almost all such courses less than 10% of course time was devoted to preparing student teachers to teach reading; in about half of these courses this percentage was less than 5%.
- (b) many students undertaking such courses have poor literacy skills themselves and lack the essential knowledge of such concepts as phonemic awareness, phonics and the alphabetic principle, just the kind of concepts that they will need to teach children if their teaching of reading is to be effective.
- (c) on the whole, beginning primary teachers are not confident about teaching some specific aspects of literacy, namely viewing, spelling and grammar, as well as phonics.
- (d) barely a third of senior staff in schools thought that beginning teachers are adequately prepared to teach children to read.
- (e) new teachers are graduating without sufficient specific strategies to improve literacy standards.

So the results of this survey showed, just as the signatories to the letter to the Minister had feared, that, as far as the teaching of reading is concerned, the situation in teacher education courses is indeed grave; which, of course, means that the classroom situation will also be grave.

The Committee made 20 recommendations which they hoped would improve the situation. These recommendations included:

- Teachers should be equipped with teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing learning to read in all children (i.e. including children who are having difficulty in learning to read);
- Teachers should provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency;
- The teaching of reading throughout schooling should be informed by comprehensive, diagnostic and developmentally appropriate assessments of every child, mapped on common scales;
- The conditions for teacher registration of graduates from all primary and secondary teacher education programs should include a demonstrated command of personal literacy skills necessary for effective teaching of reading.

Teaching Reading: A Guide to the Report and Recommendations for Parents and Carers.

This is a brief (8-page) and accurate document written in plain language summarizing the report and its recommendations for parents and carers of children being taught to read. We warmly recommend it to a far wider audience.

Implementation of the Nelson Report

Since the 'Nelson Report' was released there has been little done of appreciable significance to implement its findings. More seriously, what has been done has been paying little more than lip service to the Report's recommendations. Nowhere is this more manifest than in the implementation of the second phase Reading Assistance Voucher (RAV) scheme. After a fairly disastrous pilot in which few of the eligible low-progress readers sought assistance under the scheme, DEST invited tenders for the production of a Reading Assistance Kit (RAK) for use by tutors in assisting students under the \$700 RAV scheme. Tenderers were strictly instructed that their tenders must fully comply with the recommendation of the (NITL) Report (outlined above). At least two tenders submitted of which we are aware sought seriously to demonstrate their full compliance with the recommendations.

The tender was subsequently awarded to the Curriculum Corporation, a quango owned by all federal and state education ministers "to assist education systems in improving student learning outcomes". Putting aside any concerns over the awarding of a public tender to a controlled government entity, it is of considerable concern that the Curriculum Corporation subsequently produced a set of materials for the RAV scheme, the RAK, that immediately met with considerable public criticism, specifically for not being sufficiently in line with the recommendations of the Nelson Report.

Perhaps the most damning criticism came from the Chair of NITL, Dr Ken Rowe (of the Australian Council for Educational Research), who was clearly appalled by the RAK. According to the Australian of April 5 2007, he said that "the tutorial resources failed to teach basic skills required to read, such as the relationship between sounds and letters." Moreover he is quoted as commenting: "Their lack of alignment with the recommendations (of the inquiry's report) is extraordinary, ... They're putting the cart before the horse. And the horse is making sure you're explicitly and directly teaching basic skills."

Again in the same article in the Australian, leading literacy expert Dr Kerry Hempenstall is quoted as saying that the RAK materials were "so distant from current research findings, they're something of an embarrassment ... It (the kit) seems to just be a rehash of the same old stuff that's got us in this situation in the first place. ... It could be interpreted as a whole-language model. It doesn't have the sort of direct, explicit teaching of the critical aspects of beginning reading."

We regard the decision to give the tender to Curriculum Corporation, a body that clearly did not have the expertise to deliver materials in accord with the tender specifications, and of their subsequent predictable failure to produce materials in line with the recommendations of NITL as evidence of either the unwillingness or the complete inability of federal and state governments to allow educational policy to be determined by the best available scientific evidence on how best to teach children to read.

We argue that given the enormous repercussions that failure to learn to read has on subsequent educational progress, it is essential that proper attention be paid to ways in which effective teaching of reading can be implemented in the early years of school. It is also necessary to establish effective programs to support students who fail to achieve adequate reading skills by mid-primary level and beyond. Such programs need to be based on the evidence-based research that identifies effective teaching strategies for both initial reading and for students who are experiencing difficulties in learning to read.

We therefore submit that the broader aim of preparing students adequately for further education, training and employment will not be achieved unless these problems are adequately addressed by the relevant education authorities.

Correspondence:

Professor Kevin Wheldall, Macquarie University Special Education Centre, Sydney, 2109.

Tel. (02) 9850 9621

Email: kevin.wheldall@mq.edu.au