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Literacy, Inquiries, Research, Policies, Specific Learning Difficulties: Realities

In March 2002, the NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues published Foundations for Learning, presenting findings from their Inquiry into the Early Intervention into Learning Difficulties. This publication acknowledged Specific Learning Difficulties when clarifying the Inquiry target group as being:

- those children whose learning difficulties may be caused by extrinsic factors,
- those children who learn differently because of intrinsic Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia (which are not caused by a manifest physical or intellectual disability - but are a learning disability),
- those children who learn differently because of a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors.¹

While most children master the skills of literacy quite easily, many experience great difficulty in learning to read and write. Such children are those who may be identified by state testing programs such as in NSW, being in Band 1 NSW Year 3 Basic Skills Test and Band 1 and 2 of the Year 5 Basic Skills Test and again in the low and elementary bands of the Year Seven Language and Literacy Assessment. An unfortunate reality is that in most instances these children must demonstrate this failure before satisfying guidelines to access additional learning support. Despite political and policy rhetoric about early intervention and equity, this deficit model continues to focus on remediation and is a major barrier to the early identification of children at risk for Specific Learning Difficulties.

Another barrier to early identification is the opinion that some children are late maturers. However, three decades of research has substantiated that this wait-and-see attitude does not always work. Many children need direct intervention with explicit instruction and structured practice to prevent failure. The Australian Institute of Family Studies publication Pathways from infancy to adolescence: Australian Temperament Project 1983-2000 states that it is not the case, as is sometimes claimed, that children 'grow out' of their learning problems, and that there is a strong association between failing to learn to read at a normal rate and having behaviour problems – especially for boys. (p40)²

Children who fail to learn to read at a normal rate usually grow into adults with the same difficulties. This reality was considered on the March 5th 2007 ABC Four Corners show The Road to Return, when Matthew Carney reported that 60% of the nation's gaol inmates are illiterate. During discussion prompted by that show a now retired prison officer of 16 years confirmed from his experience that a large percentage of inmates had little or no basic literacy skills, while another caller noted the high cost of keeping a prisoner each year and suggested the way forward should start with early childhood support for families.³

Support for the provision of early support for children is clearly stated in the findings of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading (2005).⁴ The Executive Summary of the Inquiry report states: "The Inquiry Committee came to a view that the assessment of all children by their teachers at school entry and regularly during the early years of schooling is of critical importance to the teaching of reading, and in particular, to identify children who are at risk of not making adequate progress. The early identification of children experiencing reading difficulties means that interventions to provide support for these children can be put in place early." (p13)

A NSW reality is that while the current government is promising to develop an assessment to assess the reading, writing and counting abilities of all children entering kindergarten, this service will not be

“rolled out” until 2010. Further, while there will be early learning plans for students, these plans will have to wait as they will be based upon information obtained from the new assessment. (Morris Iemma media release March 2007 – Schools to receive more funding in 2007) This promised expectation means that at least for several more years, the generally accepted figure of 7-10% of children who experience learning difficulties translating to up to 6000 NSW kindergarten children per year (based upon the media release’s figure of 60,000 NSW kindergarten children each year), will continue to be at risk of failure to achieve literacy skills to the best of their potential. A study within the Australian Temperament Project found that almost half of the children who were already behind in reading in Year 2 still had reading difficulties at age 13-14, while almost two-thirds had spelling and/or maths difficulties.

In their Policy Paper Learning to Read in Australia ⁵, M. Coltheart and M. Prior say “Given that much is already known about learning to read and spell, about the difficulties some children have in this domain, and about how these difficulties can be treated ... it is surprising that three national surveys of children’s reading levels and of classroom practices in the teaching of reading” have been required. In the USA, Congress established the National reading Panel in 1997 ⁶, in the UK in 2004 Parliament established a House of Commons Select Committee on the Teaching of Reading ⁷, and the 2005 Australian Nelson Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading.

A common finding of each these three national inquiries is that the inclusion of extensive explicit and structured early instruction in all aspects of phonics in the teaching of reading and spelling is necessary. The Nelson Inquiry found that “where there is unsystematic or no phonics instruction, children’s literacy progress is significantly impeded, inhibiting their initial and subsequent growth in reading accuracy, fluency, writing, spelling and comprehension” and that “the whole-language approach to the teaching of reading on its own is not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties”. (Executive Summary, p12) Some generally accepted realities about Reading Recovery (RR) and reading disability, based on reams of research, are:

- RR is founded in the whole-language approach to teaching reading
- RR is extremely expensive owing to required individual RR teacher training and the required 30 hours of one-to-one student teacher ratio at half an hour per day
- many other models are classwide, cost much less, affect more students, produce higher performance, and, most importantly, change school and classroom practices so that the need for costly after-the-fact interventions are minimized
- RR is an exclusive program owing to guidelines of children chosen for and maintained in the program – children who are not progressing are usually dropped from the program
- RR benefits are short lived – e.g. Centre, et al. (2000) found in their evaluation of Reading Recovery that twelve months after RR, 35% of the tutored group had benefited while 35% had not, and 30% of the untutored group (controls) had reached average levels anyway ⁸
- long term benefits of RR have been over stated as evaluative studies promoting the program have only been based upon those students who successfully completed the program
- explicit instruction in phonemic awareness beginning in kindergarten followed by explicit systematic instruction in phonics combined with extensive practice reading are important factors in the effective treatment of reading disabilities.

Current political realities are that despite evidence regarding the cost ineffectiveness of RR, and RR’s ineffective long term benefit in alleviating reading disabilities, State and National politicians continue to call for more Reading Recovery. In the above mentioned M. Iemma media release in NSW (March 2007), he promised to “recruit” an extra 200 Reading Recovery teachers. He may not realise that before they can teach RR, the government will need to ensure they are trained RR teachers and provide training if they are not. The media release also states that these RR teachers are to ensure that “no struggling student misses out on the one-to-one tuition they need” – 200 extra RR teachers across NSW can not accomplish this task.

At the National level, Senator Lyn Allison, in a March 2007 media release, speaks of a lack of funding for “work with small groups” for Reading Recovery. Again, although well intentioned, this statement shows a misunderstanding of the Reading Recovery Program. However, as convenor of the 2002 Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities, which specifically stated as including learning disabilities, Sen Allison is actually a great crusader on behalf of those with SLD.

A current Commonwealth reality is their \$20.6 million Reading Assistance Voucher Programme (RAV). Curriculum Corporation, an independently operated, not-for-profit organisation owned by all Australian Education Ministers, is the RAV National Programme Manager, and developed the teaching materials for this programme called the Reading Assistance Kit – available from April 2007. The teaching materials are said to be strongly focused on evidence-based approaches to the teaching of reading as recommended by the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading. Information about Curriculum Corporation is available at: www.curriculum.edu.au RAV information is available at: www.readingtuitionh.edu.au

The RAV is in response to Commonwealth concern for children who have not achieved appropriate age/stage reading levels in year 3 as identified by their failure to achieve national year 3 literacy benchmarks in 2006. This one-off programme will pay \$700 to parents and caregivers, exclusively between April – September 2007, for their eligible children to receive individual reading tuition.

The Commonwealth RAV is based upon the Commonwealth’s pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative (2005). The Executive Summary of the independent evaluation of that Initiative states that of the 19,000 children potentially eligible to receive \$700 worth of private individual reading tuition, 6,200 children started that program with 5,443 (28.6%) completing the program.⁹ That left 13,557 of those potentially eligible children, who had already proved their risk of further failure, to fend for themselves within the system, perhaps receiving additional learning support as necessary after their year 5 national benchmark testing.

The pilot evaluation also states that 69% of the tutors reported all or most of their students improved in the categories of reading aloud and reading for understanding and 87% reported increased level of confidence. However, the Tutor Feedback also indicated that many of the students will need further follow-up or reinforcement of their learning gains.⁹ Both these National programs continue to demonstrate the government’s deficit model policy approach to helping students with SLD where the children must first fail, before becoming eligible to access additional learning support.

Colthart and Prior say that “... despite beliefs to the contrary in the education system, improved teaching of reading in the early years will help to reduce the numbers of children with difficulties over the longer term, (that) we have enough expertise now, from the science of remedial intervention, to make a difference to the existing problems, and to save many children from the undesirable consequences of poor literacy”. (pg 8) However, as these authors also point out, it is noted in the Nelson Report “that it is currently possible for Australia’s future teachers to complete a Bachelor of Education with less than two percent of total credits devoted to instruction in the teaching of reading” (pg 10)

With the seeming reality of inevitable Australian National benchmarking, curriculum and testing looming from 2008, the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training must provide information in relation to the assessment and reporting of school literacy and numeracy achievement in relation to students with disabilities and learning difficulties. It is critical that we petition the Commonwealth Government to detail their intentions in implementing the recommendations of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading.

The ultimate reality is that “Critical, well-researched reviews of the teaching of reading are important; but if they are not followed by action to produce change for the better, they will of course have no

impact on what happens in the classroom. There is now opportunity following the Australian national review of the teaching of reading to take steps to significantly improve outcomes for Australian children learning to read and write.” (Coltheart and Prior, pg 8)

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References

1. Foundations for Learning: a new vision for New South Wales? Issues Paper 4. (March 2002). New South Wales: Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1.7 and 1.8, pg.2, and 7.1 pg. 56.
2. Prior, M., Sanson, A, Smart, D., & Oberklaid, F. (2001) Pathways from infancy to adolescence - Australian Temperament Project 1983-2000. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
3. Available at: www.abc.net.au/4corners and then click on achieves for 5 March 2007, The Road To Recovery
4. Available at: www.dest.gov.au/nitl
5. Coltheart, M. & Prior, M. (2007) Learning to Read in Australia. Policy Paper #6 The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Canberra. Available at: <http://www.assa.edu.au/>
6. Available at: <http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org>
7. Available at:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/meduski/121/12104.htm>
8. Centre, Y., Wheldall, K., Freeman, L., Outhred, L., & McNaught, M. (2000). An evaluation of Reading Recovery Reading Research Quarterly. 30(2), 240-263.
9. The 19 page independent evaluation of the pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative by Erebus International, is available on the DEST website at: www.dest.gov.au From the home page menu click on School Education and type Tutorial Voucher Initiative into the search window (top right), and then scroll down the Evaluation report.