



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

Early years reading instruction needs to be based on effective translation of evidence from cognitive science regarding the skills that beginning readers need in order to acquire early literacy skills, as a foundation for success across the curriculum in primary and secondary schooling. Young people "starting from behind" for a variety of reasons need to experience explicit, systematic early synthetic phonics instruction alongside instruction that promotes other aspects of early language development (but are not contested in the same way that effective early phonics instruction is).

Pre-service teachers need to be equipped with an explicit understanding of the structure of language, so that they can teach reading in accordance with the recommendations of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. Whole Language-derived approaches, such as Balanced Literacy need to yield to approaches that promote better likelihood of success for all children, most notably those whose early years are disadvantaged in ways that impact on early school success.

Response to Intervention should be considered as a framework in which to conceptualise early instruction and early intervention for struggling readers.

Main submission

Submission to Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this review. I do so on the back of two decades of research on the oral language and literacy skills of some of our most vulnerable and marginalised young people: those in youth justice, in out-of-home care, in child protection, and flexible/alternative education settings (see references here: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/she/staff/profile?uname=PCSnow>). In the course of identifying alarmingly high rates of language disorder and low literacy levels in these populations (see Anderson et al., 2016), I have had cause to look “upstream” to the early years of school, in an effort to gain a better understanding of ways in which the education system might better serve the needs of disadvantaged learners. This has led me to a body of research about the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Christle et al., 2005) – a notion that refers to the fact that some young people, because of a confluence of risks in early life, face a high probability of early educational departure (typically via suspensions and exclusions), without the requisite literacy and numeracy skills for engagement in the social and economic mainstream. Such young people are more likely than typically achieving peers to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and have fewer protective factors against the risks associated with suboptimal early instruction. Such young people account in large part for what has been described as the “long tail of under-achievement” in Australia (Masters, 2016).

In this submission, I will focus on the question: What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

The above research has resulted in my interrogation of the literature on early reading instruction and the ideological resistance in some education circles to the application of evidence derived from cognitive science concerning the importance of underlying psycholinguistic competencies for early readers. These competencies include, but are not limited to, vocabulary development, narrative skills, language comprehension, phonological and phonemic awareness, and knowledge of the alphabetic principle as a basis for early decoding skills (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

Unfortunately, ideas and approaches derived from so-called “Whole Language” (WL) teaching have dominated pre-service teacher education and classroom practice in Australia since the 1970s (Snow, 2016a). These ideas (such as encouraging beginning readers to guess/predict unknown words from context and/or pictures, rather than using their knowledge of sound-letter correspondences to decode through the word) have a strong-hold in many early years classrooms and are promoted by many Australian education academics (e.g. see Honan, 2015). This is occurring in spite of the fact that such approaches were not included in recommendations arising from the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL; Rowe, 2005). In fact, no Australian state or territory has formally adopted these recommendations, in spite of the fact that nothing has occurred in the ensuing 12 years to turn around the slide in children’s early reading achievement. In particular, there is a high level of

resistance to relinquishing analytic/incidental teaching of phonics, in favour of explicit teaching of systematic synthetic phonics. The distinction between these different types of phonics is important and is outlined by Wheldall et al. (2015).

Instead of adopting the NITL recommendations and bringing teacher pre-service education and early years practices into line with them, there has been a move to re-badge standard WL pedagogy as so-called “Balanced Literacy” (BL; see Snow, 2017). On the face of it, this sounds like an ideal compromise, after all, who would argue against “balance” in anything designed for and delivered to young children? BL encompasses the range of language skills that are critical to early reading acquisition and its proponents state that “phonics is in the mix”. This, however, is at the heart of the problem, as BL does not have a uniform definition, hence it is open to wide interpretation, at the university, school, principal, literacy leader, and teacher level. It is possible for two teachers in adjoining early years classrooms to say they are using BL, but to be employing vastly different pedagogical approaches. BL does not prescribe a scope or sequence for early reading instruction; rather, the word that appears frequently in the BL literature is “eclectic”. This eclecticism means that teaching is not based on a coherent theory of how reading is acquired, and creates a risk that those children who start school from behind with respect to their early language skills, will become what Reid Lyon (nd) has referred to as “instructional casualties”.

The current debate concerning the possible introduction of a Phonics Screening Check in Year 1 in Australia has re-ignited festering tensions between the two opposing “camps”: Whole Language and Balanced Literacy on the one side, and cognitive science on the other. Those who advocate for application of evidence derived from cognitive science do not, however, advocate a so-called “phonics only” approach. That is a straw-man argument designed to distract from the fact that the real argument concerns the nature and sequence of early phonics instruction. It is undoubtedly true that “some phonics” is used in most early years classrooms, however it is equally likely that in many cases this instruction lacks specificity and a coherent pedagogical sequence (and even more importantly, we have little direct data to tell us what kinds of instructional approaches are actually in use in Australian classrooms).

The idea that children are best served by being exposed to “authentic” children’s literature, rather than to simple, decodable texts that promote mastery of the alphabetic code, has also been widely promoted in teacher pre-service education. This argument is fallacious at a number of levels. It conflates the idea of adults reading to children, with the types of books that beginning readers should be given in order to learn to read. It overlooks the fact that many children have had suboptimal language and text exposure in the pre-school years (see Snow, 2016a), and it side-steps the fact that novices need opportunities to learn component skills

before they can approach a task such as reading with the skill of the expert. Children who have been exposed to predictable readers in the early months of school often appear to be reading and to be doing so fluently, where they are in fact simply memorising (reciting) a repeated phrase and using accompanying pictures to infer the word that changes from one page to the next.

It is sometimes argued by WL/BL advocates that synthetic phonics is not appropriate for the teaching of English, because of the inconsistent spelling rules that apply in the language. This myth has been dispelled by linguistic analyses of written English, however, which reveal that some 50% of English words have a transparent orthography, 36% only deviate by one sound (typically a vowel), a further 10% have spelling patterns whose pronunciation can be discerned with some knowledge of etymology, and only 4% are truly “non-decodable (Moats, 2010). So this is not a valid argument against explicit teaching via synthetic phonics from the outset, in order to ensure that all children are equipped with essential decoding skills. Such decoding skills remain important across the lifespan – when reading street names, identifying a particular retail outlet in a shopping complex, pronouncing medication names, and even reading popular fiction such as the Harry Potter series.

The Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990) posits that successful reading is the product of effective decoding skills and language comprehension. This means that children need to acquire skills in both domains. Inferencing from context, on its own, is not enough, any more than being able to decode, but not understand text equates to reading in its fullest sense. Hence it is often stated that decoding is necessary but not sufficient – in the same way, in fact that language comprehension is necessary but not sufficient. The sticking point in education circles, however, is that phonics has gained a contested, controversial space in early years education, where the other so-called “big ideas” (Konza, 2014) such as phonological/phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and oracy, are not contested. Effective phonics instruction – instruction that reflects the recommendations of the 2005 NITL needs to shed its contested profile and take its place alongside these other essential aspects of language that underpin the transition to literacy.

It must be noted, however, that there is a large body of Australian and international literature indicating that teachers have inadequate knowledge of the rules and structure of language in order to be able to teach beginning readers in ways that align with the recommendations of the NITL. In a recent Australian study by Stark et al. (2016) teachers were found to have very poor knowledge of basic concepts such as how to identify and count phonemes in words; even more concerningly however, they had a disproportionate degree of confidence in their own knowledge. Findings such as these have been borne out several times in the international literature (see Snow, 2016b).

Given that it takes four times as many resources to rectify a reading problem in Year 4 than it does in Year 1 (Hempenstall, 2013), it is important to consider early years teaching within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. RTI comprises three tiers, typically depicted in a triangle. Tier 1, at the bottom, reflects universal classroom delivery. Tier 2 makes services available for a time-limited period to a small group of learners (10-15%) with similar needs, while Tier 3 is designed to meet the needs of a smaller group again (around 5%) who may need highly specialised services, often on a 1:1 basis. Teachers and other professionals use data to monitor progress at all tiers and it is assumed that the bulk of children's time will be spent at Tier 1. This means, however, that the quality of what is delivered at Tier 1 is paramount. Where Tier 1 teaching is suboptimal, children "bleed" into the higher tiers, and may be "instructional casualties" as outlined earlier.

It is also critical that education academics and policy makers recognise that the notion of evidence-based practice, as derived from clinical and public health, is predicated on the ability to critically appraise research publications and to ascertain the level and quality of evidence afforded by a particular publication. It is not sufficient to locate one or two papers in sometimes low-ranking journals and present these as evidence in favour of an a priori ideological position. Education has suffered in recent decades not so much from a lack of evidence, but from a lack of translation of existing evidence into teacher pre-service education and early years practice.

Australia, like other industrialised economies, is seeing unskilled jobs disappear. School leavers with low language, literacy, and numeracy skills will be less and less able to be part of the economic mainstream, placing heavy burdens on taxpayers for public housing, employment support, mental health and substance abuse services, and the criminal justice system (Snow, 2016a). Effective early reading instruction will obviously not avert all of these adverse life outcomes, but it should afford all young people the opportunity to connect to and achieve in education, and to benefit from its intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

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