

Teaching Reading:



Findings from the National Inquiry



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Being able to read is an important foundation, not only for school-based learning, but also for productive and fulfilling participation in society. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy was recently commissioned by the Commonwealth government to review current practices in the literacy acquisition of Australian children.

Ken Rowe outlines the findings of the Inquiry.

While international data indicate that Australia's level of achievement in literacy is high relative to other countries, a significant minority of children in Australian schools continue to face difficulties in acquiring acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy examined the way reading is taught in schools, as well as the effectiveness of teacher education courses in preparing our teachers for reading instruction.

Three key principles underlie the report and recommendations from the Committee for the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. First, young Australians are the most valuable resource for our nation's social and economic prosperity. Second, the key to such prosperity at both the individual and national level is the provision of quality schooling. Third, because teachers are the most valuable resource available to schools, it is vital that teachers be equipped with evidence-based teaching practices that are demonstrably effective in meeting the developmental and learning needs of all children.

Nowhere are these three principles more important than in the teaching of reading, since being able to read is foundational, not only for school-based learning, but also for children's psychosocial wellbeing, further education and training, occupational success, as well as for productive and fulfilling participation in social and economic activity. Moreover, the rapidly changing nature of computer-based technologies and global communication systems demand competence in increasingly complex multiliteracies, of which reading competence (together with writing) is essential.

Learning to read and write

While children enter school with varying degrees of competence in speaking their language(s), typically they have little knowledge about how to read and write. Because reading involves two basic and complementary processes: learning how to decipher print and understanding what the print means, the purpose of early reading instruction is to help children master the challenges of linking written and spoken language. These include acquiring knowledge about the alphabetic system that link written words to their pronunciations, learning to decode new words, building a vocabulary that can be read on sight from memory, and becoming facile at constructing, integrating, interpreting and remembering meanings represented in text in whatever form such representations are presented.

So what are the major messages from the evidence-based research that indicate which approaches are most effective in teaching children to read?

For beginning reading during the early years of schooling (and later if needed), findings from a large volume of local and international evidence-based research

consistently indicate that direct, systematic instruction in phonics makes significantly greater contributions to children's initial and subsequent progress in reading, writing, spelling and comprehension, than do alternative approaches involving unsystematic or no phonics instruction. When foundational phonics skills are taught early, the need for costly and often belated intervention programs is minimised.

These findings highlight a concern by the Inquiry Committee that the predominant whole-language approach to the teaching of reading in Australian schools is problematic. Essentially, the whole-language approach reflects a constructivist philosophy of learning (rather than a philosophy of teaching) in which children are viewed as inherently active, self-regulating learners who construct knowledge for themselves, with little or no explicit instruction. However, there is a strong body of evidence that exclusive use of a whole-language approach is not in the best interests of children learning to read, and especially for those experiencing reading difficulties. Nonetheless, whereas the systematic, explicit teaching of phonics is a necessary condition for the effective teaching of reading, it is not a sufficient condition.

That is, the evidence indicates that all children are provided with the best opportunities for success in learning to read when teachers integrate the following skills via explicit instruction in:

- phonemic awareness: the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in oral language;
- phonics: the relationships between letters and sounds;
- fluency: the ability to read quickly and naturally, recognise words automatically, and group words quickly;

- vocabulary knowledge: new words and what they mean; and
- text comprehension: understanding what is being read and developing higher-order thinking skills.

Because these are essential skills for the development of competence in reading, writing and spelling, they must be taught early, systematically, explicitly and well. Parents and caregivers have a positive role to play by regularly reading aloud with their children, especially during the formative pre-school years.

Linking practice to evidence

The Committee learned much from the 453 submissions provided to the Inquiry and visits to schools across the country where some excellent examples of effective practice in the teaching of reading and writing were observed, together with evidence of children's success. In general, however, it was clear that teachers seemed unaware of the reasons for using particular strategies rather than others. Teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment for reporting to parents need to be more firmly linked to findings from evidence-based research indicating effective practices, including those that are demonstrably effective for the particular learning needs of individual children.

While the evidence indicates that some teaching strategies are more effective than others, no one approach of itself can address the complex nature of reading difficulties. An integrated approach requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of a range of effective strategies, as well as knowing when and why to apply them.

Similarly, the Committee found that many teachers do not use (and are not aware of) objective, standardised diagnostic tests that



assess the essential alphabetic, decoding skills required for reading proficiency. Consistent with the findings documented in the report titled: *Assessment of literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling – An overview* (DEST, 2001),¹ assessments of reading in the early years need to be linked to formal assessments of reading undertaken during the subsequent years of schooling. These are important issues that the Committee recommends be addressed during pre-service teacher education, and especially through in-service professional learning.

What makes a successful teacher?

Children begin school with a wide variation in their abilities, their attitudes, their behaviour and their backgrounds. Often, too much emphasis is given to these factors. Once at school, the evidence shows that it is quality teaching that is vital to teaching children to read. For beginning teachers to be well prepared to teach children to read, the Committee recommends that:

- as a condition of registration, all primary and secondary teaching graduates must demonstrate that they possess the personal literacy skills and knowledge necessary for teaching literacy, especially reading;
- teachers update their skills by engaging in regular evidence-based professional learning; and
- teacher education institutions make preparing student teachers to teach reading their key priority. Coursework should be based on research and include instruction on how to teach phonics in a systematic and explicit way, along with instruction on how to teach oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.

What makes a successful school?

The Committee found that six key elements operate consistently in the successful schools visited. These are:

- a belief that all children can learn to read and write regardless of background and location;
- an early and systematic emphasis on the explicit teaching of phonics;
- a subsequent focus on direct teaching;
- a well-resourced print-rich environment, including fiction and non-fiction books, charts and computer programs;
- strong leadership and management practices, involving whole-school approaches to the teaching of reading and writing; and
- an expectation that teachers will engage in evidence-based professional learning and learn from each other.

Equipping young people to engage productively in the knowledge economy and in society more broadly is fundamental to both individual and national prosperity. This objective depends primarily on: the ability to read and write effectively; and the provision of quality teaching and learning by teachers who have acquired, during their pre-service teacher education, and in-service professional learning, evidence-based teaching practices that are shown to be effective in meeting the developmental and learning needs of all children. Our children and their teachers require no less.

Further information

The Inquiry's full report and recommendations, literature review, submissions and site visits are available on the Department of Education, Science and Training website at www.dest.gov.au/schools/literacyinquiry

This article is based on a shorter piece first published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 9 December 2005. ■

¹ DEST (2001). *Assessment of literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling: An overview*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.