

Productivity Commission Education Evidence Base  
Submission from Yvonne Meyer

I was a member of the Committee of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL, 2005), and I'm writing to support the submission made by Dr. Kerry Hempenstall.

In particular, I support the introduction of a compulsory Year One test of phonic (sound/letter correspondences) knowledge, with the results made public. This simple, cost effective measure will do more to improve education outcomes for students than any other proposal.

*The NITL found that, "The evidence is clear... that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read ... that systematic phonics instruction is critical if children are to be taught to read well, whether or not they experience reading difficulties ... 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 ... too often emphasis is given to the nature of the child's environment or background rather than on how a teacher should teach."*

The NITL found that, despite assurances to the contrary, very few of our teachers and schools included explicit instruction in systematic/synthetic phonics as the foundation of their beginning reading and spelling instructional programs. As a result, many of our students struggle to *learn to read* and therefore cannot *read to learn* at school and leave school with basic literacy and numeracy skills too weak to fully engage in adult life. Many of these students are labeled as having Learning and/or Behavioral Difficulties, i.e. a within child deficit, when they are, in fact, instructional casualties, i.e. struggle to learn because of ineffective instruction.

This was the situation in 2005 and nothing much has changed. The NITL Recommendations were accepted by COAG, and despite the appropriate directions given by State and Federal Ministers of Education to their Departments, were ignored then, and continue to be ignored now.

An illustration of our dysfunctional education system is currently happening in New South Wales where the Minister of Education has instructed all schools to teach systematic/synthetic phonics and has provided all schools with a brochure on how to teach systematic/synthetic phonics, while the New South Wales Department of Education is running teacher professional development in ineffective 'multicueing' (guessing and memorising) strategies to teach beginning reading and spelling.

Since the evidence is overwhelming that instruction in systematic/synthetic phonics is essential for all students to learn to read and spell fluently, and that so few of our teachers and schools teach systematic/synthetic phonics effectively, a test of students' phonic knowledge in Year One with the results made public is the only way to improve student educational outcomes.

Other submissions claim that NAPLAN already provides adequate information of students' progress in literacy. However, the NAPLAN test does not test a student's knowledge of phonics, i.e. the student's ability to read and spell unfamiliar words. A student with a small bank of sight-memorized words can guess enough correct answers on the NAPLAN test to meet the very low Benchmark.

Teaching to the NAPLAN test is common practice with teachers teaching students to be better at guessing. Teaching to a test of sound/letter correspondences would require teachers to teach sound/letter correspondences effectively. Not only would a good test of phonics in Year One ensure that phonics is taught effectively, it would also identify those children who have genuine learning difficulties and allow additional support to be targeted to those children who need it most.

References

Teaching Reading

[Ken Rowe, ACER  
National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy \(Australia\)](#)

[http://research.acer.edu.au/tll\\_misc/5/](http://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/5/)

**UK Phonics screening check: technical reports**

UK Gov. Standards and Testing Agency

9 May 2016

Reports providing analysis of the phonics screening check following administration in 2011, 2012 and 2013.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/phonics-screening-check-technical-reports>