

## **Education Evidence Base, response to the draft report.**

The draft report contains many excellent recommendations, particularly the importance of 'gold-standard' evidence-based research, that value-added data should be collected, that evidence should inform practice, that cost-effectiveness must be a priority, and that there should be a national measure of student achievement in Year 1.

However, I believe a small section of the report could be perceived to support an anti-phonics and anti-evidence bias.

I have pasted the section that concerns me below with the corrections (in bold) that I believe are required for this section to be without bias, and to more accurately reflect the evidence, and I have added the explanation of why I believe these changes are necessary.

### **“Box 3.3      Phonics assessment (page 84)**

Phonics received attention from a number of participants (for example, AASE, sub. 30; de Lemos et al., sub. 6; Hempenstall, sub. 1; Meyer, sub. 34). Phonics is a method of learning to read that involves understanding the sounds that individual letters and combinations of letters make (Walker et al. 2015). The importance of phonics to the teaching of reading was acknowledged in the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST 2005). Although the inquiry found that teachers should be able to draw on multiple techniques suited to the needs of individual children, systematic phonics instruction was deemed to be critical to children learning to read (DEST 2005, p. 11).

**Important** evidence of the benefits of a national phonics assessment is available from the United Kingdom. A Year 1 phonics screening check was introduced in 2012 to help identify children who may need extra support to improve their decoding skills (their ability to recognise sounds that letters and combinations of letters make, and blend the sounds to form words). An evaluation of the check suggested that it has led to improvements in the teaching of phonics and in student performance in phonics. **“However, no conclusive statement can be made because of the methodological limitations of the study; namely, the absence of a control group and the context of a number of existing phonics initiatives in national policy.” (Walker et al. 2015).**

**Despite some teachers' ambivalence towards the use of pseudowords in the assessment of beginning reading, (Walker et al 2014, 2015) there is a sizable body of evidence that indicates the importance of pseudowords in monitoring students' progress. Error analysis of a well-constructed test of pseudowords is of great value as it indicates which specific sound/letter combinations that confuse individual students.**

My comments:

The information we have from the Walker (2014, 2015) evaluation of the UK Phonics Check has given us very important information that should not be de-emphasized by being described with the perfunctory "Some".

Walker (2014, 2015) informs us that teachers changed their behavior and started teaching phonics and that this change in teacher behavior resulted in more children learning the imperative of beginning reading – sound/letter correspondences.

- *Phonics* attainment, as measured by the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard on the check, improved over three years and there is some evidence that this may have been an impact of the introduction of the check.
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- There is evidence that the introduction of the PSC has led to schools making changes to their phonics teaching and classroom practice in each and every year of the evaluation. (Walker, 2015)

The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL, 2005) found that few Australian teachers knew how to teach phonics effectively, and that ineffective instruction in sound/letters correspondences meant that a significant percentage of children would fail to learn to read in their first years of formal schooling. Failing to learn to read consigns these children to the educational scrapheap as they fall further and further behind their peers in following years.

Despite COAG accepting the NITL Recommendations in 2006 targeted at improving the teaching and learning of beginning reading, nothing has changed in the classroom, and student achievement has continued to stagnate/decline.

Australian teachers do not fully comprehend the Simple View of Reading (Gough, Tunmer, 1986), that decoding X comprehension equals reading.

Decoding alone is not reading, but a student can't comprehend if they can't decode.

No improvements can be made in student academic achievement until this core issue is addressed; that teachers don't teach sound/letter correspondences effectively in students' first two years of formal schooling, so students don't learn to read and are therefore unable to read to learn in subsequent years.

The UK Phonics Check proves that a test of students' knowledge of sound/letter correspondences in Year 1 changes teachers' behaviour and, therefore, the best way to improve students' learning.

The wording used in the Productivity Commission's draft report, that the Walker (2014, 2015) evaluation did not find conclusive evidence of improvements in reading and writing, infers that this is because the Phonics Check has not led to improvements, whereas the actual wording from the Walker evaluation makes it clear that no improvements were found due to the limitations of the evaluation itself.

This distinction is important and must be clearly stated.

Walker (2014, 2015) recorded comments from some teachers that the Phonics Check didn't tell them anything they didn't already know, but these comments fly in the face of the finding that teachers and schools changed their behaviour each and every year of the Phonics Check. If teachers knew which students were struggling and why, they would not have needed to change their behaviour.

The Walker (2014, 2015) evaluation found that, "... in 2014, 56 per cent of literacy coordinators reported that 'phonics is taught discretely alongside other cueing strategies' or that 'phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies'." This is important (see the Simple View of Reading, Gough, Tunmer, 1986 mentioned previously) as it informs us that just over half of UK literacy coordinators did not understand that instruction in systematic/synthetic phonics and 'other cueing strategies' are competing not complementary strategies, and that confounding these strategies gives rise to students who are 'instructional casualties', i.e. students who struggle to make adequate academic progress due to the confusing instruction they receive in the classroom.

The Walker (2014, 2015) evaluation quote that teachers considered 'nonsense' (pseudowords) words to be problematic informs us that these teachers lack the knowledge to be effective instructors of beginning reading.

Debbie Hepplewhite discussed UK teachers' ambivalence towards pseudowords in the Phonics Check on the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction (IFERI) forum.

Hepplewhite states, *"... the proliferation of phonics resources provided by manufacturers and publishers - and by others making 'free' resources of nonsense words content ... consists of nonsense words with 'illegal' or 'inappropriate' spelling patterns. That is, the structure/content of the nonsense words includes spelling patterns not seen in real English words (or very rarely seen).*

*Sheer logic suggests that this is not really a good idea - a contradiction in terms. ... the (pseudowords) words should arguably be based on legal/appropriate spelling patterns and not illegal spelling patterns."*

[http://www.iferi.org/iferi\\_forum/viewtopic.php?t=589#p949](http://www.iferi.org/iferi_forum/viewtopic.php?t=589#p949)

In other words, teachers don't know the difference between legal and illegal spelling patterns, so they are using teaching materials that they shouldn't be using, which causes unnecessary confusion for students.

A large body of evidence informs us of the value of pseudowords in monitoring the progress of beginning readers.

*"The speed of naming pronounceable nonwords (pseudowords) is one of the tasks that most clearly differentiates good from poor readers" and "It thus is not surprising that pseudoword naming is discovered to be a "potent predictor of reading ability at all levels." Stanovich (2000)*

*"Compared with other reading subskills, such as vocabulary and verbal memory, pseudoword decoding is the best single predictor of word identification for poor and normal readers." (Ravthor, N., 2004).*

*“The most reliable indicator of reading disabilities is nonsense word reading.” (Ravthon, N., 2004; Stanovich, 2000).*

Below is a selection of evidence-based research that supports the use of pseudowords in monitoring students’ progress. There is no evidence-based research that informs us pseudowords should not be used to monitor progress.

## **References**

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*Good, R. H. & Kaminski, R. A. (2002) Dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills: Nonsense word fluency. Eugene, OR: Institute for the Development of Educational Fluency.*

*Stanovich, K. E. (2000). Progress in understanding reading. New York, NY: Guilford.*  
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*Bauer, D. & Stanovich, K. E. (1980). Lexical access and the spelling-to-sound regularity effect. Memory and Cognition, 8, 424–432.*

*Cardenas, J. M. (2009). Phonics instruction using pseudowords for success in phonetic decoding (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1176&context=etd>*

*Groff, P. G. (2003). The usefulness of pseudowords. Strasburg, VA: The National Right to Read Foundation. Retrieved from [http://www.nrrf.org/essay\\_pseudowords.htm](http://www.nrrf.org/essay_pseudowords.htm)*

*Rack, J. P., Snowling, M. J., & Olson, R. K. (1992). The nonword reading deficit in developmental dyslexia: A review. Reading Research Quarterly, 17, 28–53.*

*Ravthon, N. (2004). Early reading assessment: a practitioner’s handbook. New York: The Guilford Press*

*Stanovich, K. E. (2000). Progress in understanding reading: Scientific foundations and new frontiers. New York: The Guilford Press.*

*Treiman, R., Goswami, U., & Bruck, M. (1990). Not all nonwords are alike: Implications for reading development and theory. Memory and Cognition, 18, 559–567.*

The following widely used psychometric and achievement assessments incorporate pseudowords in their battery of tests.

*Norm-referenced tests*

*Wechsler Individual Achievement Test,*

*Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement,*

*Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE), which is a fluency measure;*

*Informal assessments*

*Fox in a Box and CORE Phonics Survey*

*Criterion measures*

*AIMSweb Nonsense Word Fluency*

*DIBELS Nonsense Word Fluency.*

With all the above taken into account, the following change should also be made to the Productivity Commission's draft report.

**“Additional national collections are needed and steps are in train** (page 12)

Additional data need to be collected to support the monitoring of progress against Australia's education objectives, including:

- national measures of student **mastery of the foundational skill of beginning reading, i.e. sound/letter correspondences** in Year 1, which would facilitate value-added analysis and shed light on the impact of early achievement on later outcomes.”

We have vested commercial interests that will lobby for the most complicated, and therefore expensive to develop, test possible. Considering the vast amounts of tax-payers' money that is already wasted on unproductive education ventures, the Productivity Commission is in a position to circumvent more waste by specifically endorsing a simple test of sound/letter correspondences, i.e. reading pseudowords aloud.

The UK Phonics Check material can be sourced from the UK Department of Education at a cost to us that would be far less than developing our own NAPLAN-style test for Year 1.

Also, the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a series of one-minute tests that assess early literacy skills can be downloaded for free, or assessment packages can be purchased for US\$1.00 per student per year.

Australian norms have already been developed for DIBELS. The Cape York Academy schools in Aurukun, Coen and Hope Vale, as well as some other schools in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous areas are currently using DIBELS.

*The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade.*

<https://dibels.uoregon.edu>

Finally.

The concerns that Australian students are not progressing in their academic skills, and also the valid concern about, “Non-cognitive capabilities, ‘21st century skills’ and wellbeing...” (page 86) are both most effectively addressed by ensuring that all children learn to read, quickly and easily, in their first two years of formal education. It is the failure to learn to read, quickly and easily, that has the greatest negative impact on all aspects of student well being.

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