

I was a Committee member of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL 2005) which was called to examine concerns relating to the teaching and learning of reading expressed by the general public and by experts in the teaching of literacy.

I am writing to address the following statement in the Productivity Commission's Schools Workforce Draft Report

“Australia’s schools deliver generally good student outcomes at reasonable cost.”

The NITL found that most teachers, despite claims to the contrary from University Schools and Faculties of Education, are inadequately prepared to teach beginning reading and that most teachers were only exposed to the ‘constructivist’ philosophy of learning to read which has been found by evidence-based research to be less effective for all students, and especially less effective for disadvantaged students.

The NITL’s first recommendation was that all teaching and learning programmes be based on;

- findings from rigorous evidence-based research
- teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction

The NITL recommendations were accepted by COAG in 2006.

Despite being accepted by COAG, the NITL recommendations have been largely ignored by the University Education Schools responsible for preparing teachers, and by individual schools, teachers and school systems. In fact, while paying lip-service to the phonics component of teaching beginning reading, almost all teacher pre and post service education continues to advocate strongly for implicit, discovery, child-centred learning while actively admonishing teachers against systematic, direct and explicit teacher-directed instruction.

It is for this reason that I would like to point out to the Productivity Commission that the statement in the draft report that, “Australia’s schools deliver generally good student outcomes at reasonable cost” is incorrect.

A primary teacher’s single most important duty is to teach reading and writing. When a primary teacher enters the classroom without adequate preparation to teaching reading and writing, then the \$40,000 it cost to train that teacher is not a reasonable cost. Since the majority of primary teachers are only exposed to the ineffective constructivist philosophy and few primary teachers are exposed to the massive body of evidence-based research which inform us which strategies are most effective in teaching all students to read and write, then the cost of almost all our University Schools and Faculties of Education is not a reasonable expenditure of public money.

Since few teachers and Principals are fully capable of teaching reading and writing to all students, generally only succeeding with those students who are easiest to teach, most of our primary schools are failing their students. Therefore, the many millions of dollars it costs to maintain these schools are not a reasonable cost.

Many students fail to make adequate progress in reading from their first year of formal schooling due to the instruction they receive and 10% or more of students in most schools are then placed in the Reading Recovery remedial programme. Reading Recovery (the remedial arm of Whole

Language) has been found by Australian, New Zealand, UK and USA recognised reading researchers and official government education authorities to be a less effective and overly expensive form of remediation. Reading Recovery is especially less effective for the most disadvantaged students in our society.

Reading Recovery 20 Years down the Track: Looking Forward, Looking Back, authors Reynolds M, Wheldall K, International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, v54 n2 p199-223 Jun 2007

The Productivity Commission's draft report states that Australia performs well in International comparisons. The analysis of PISA results undertaken by ACER is far less rosy.

[Highlights from the full Australian Report: Challenges for Australian Education: Results from PISA 2009](#)

"Although the OECD average for reading literacy has not changed between 2000 and 2009, ten countries have significantly improved their performance over this time, while five countries, including Australia, have declined significantly.

Australia's reading literacy performance has declined, not only in terms of rankings among other participating countries but also in terms of average student performance. The mean scores for Australian students in PISA 2000 was 528 points, compared to 515 for PISA 2009. A decline in average scores was also noted between PISA 2000 and PISA 2006, when reading literacy was a minor domain."

Productivity Commission's Schools Workforce Draft Report states;

"But not all students are well served by the current arrangements — as exemplified by the large gap in the average educational achievement of Indigenous students."

In fact, it would be more accurate to state that our current methods of teaching literacy are failing all students, as the ACER paper points out;

Reading literacy

"Australia's reading literacy performance has declined not only in terms of rankings but also in terms of average student performance. Australia was the only high performing country to show a significant decline in reading literacy performance in PISA 2009. Of concern is that the decline is primarily among high-achieving students, and that the proportion of both males and females in the highest two proficiency levels declined significantly over the nine-year period, while the proportion of males in the lowest proficiency levels increased."

<http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/PISA-2009-In-Brief.pdf>

The Draft Report points out that there is much to be concerned about Australia's weak performance in Maths with only 4% of Australian students performing at Level 6, compared to 25% of China-Shanghai students performing at Level 6. I would like to bring to public attention that only 2% of Australian students are reaching Level 6 in Reading Literacy.

While Australian Educators explain this poor performance in terms of child-deficit, (if the child is not making good progress, there is something wrong with the child), the overwhelming evidence from multiple, over-lapping evidence-based research is that almost all children are capable of learning to read and write if they receive adequate instruction (if the child is not learning, something is wrong with the teaching).

The Productivity Commission's draft report rightly points out that students with higher socio-economic status perform significantly better than disadvantaged students, (even though relatively few Australian students are performing in the top bracket). The NITL stated that almost all teachers are inadequately prepared to teach reading and writing, regardless of whether, after being licensed, they end up teaching high, middle or low socio-economic students.

All parents want the best for their children. Well educated parents with adequate financial resources can monitor their children's education and provide additional, targeted teaching in areas which their child's classroom teacher has failed to address. Disadvantaged families do not have the education and financial resources to provide this necessary level of crisis management, intervention and remediation necessary for their children to compensate for what is lacking at school.

It is therefore logical to assume that the reason that middle class students make good progress in reading, despite receiving the same instruction as disadvantaged students, is that middle class parents provide additional teaching outside of school hours and that disadvantaged parents are unable to provide additional teaching and are forced to rely fully on their child's school to teach reading, writing and maths.

The reason we have free, compulsory schooling is to provide all students with access to education in order to alleviate social and economic disadvantage. If only those students whose families can provide additional teaching at home are taught to read and write, then our teachers and our schools, regardless of their best intentions, do more to entrench socio-economic disadvantage than to alleviate it.

Noel Pearson has implemented an evidence-based scripted teaching program, SRA/Direct Instruction, in the schools he controls in Cape York which are among the most disadvantaged in Australia. In the first year of implementation, he reports that 30% of his students are progressing at twice the speed of mainstream students and 50% of his students are progressing at the same speed of mainstream students.

Q&A: Radical Hope Book: A Talk by Noel Pearson

<http://www.cis.org.au/media-information/videos/player/117/38>)

Providing a Primary teacher in the K-2 years of schooling with the SRA/Direct Instruction scripted programme for Reading, Writing and Maths and the necessary training to use the programme would cost around \$2,000, compared to \$40,000 for their Bachelor of Primary Education degree which we know does not adequately prepared them to teach beginning reading, writing & maths.

Further savings of many millions of dollars would also be made in abandoning the entrenched but expensive and less effective Reading Recovery programme in Year 1, and there would be ongoing

savings in that the numbers of 'instructional casualties' who currently clog up the system would be significantly reduced.

In this light, I repeat my earlier statement that \$40,000 to train a primary teacher who, as a direct result of the training they receive, is incapable of teaching beginning reading, writing and maths adequately to all students is not a reasonable cost.

Another result of the inadequate preparation of teachers to teach beginning reading, writing and maths is that a significant percentage of students are inaccurately labelled as having Learning Difficulties (especially dyslexia) and behavioural problems (especially ADHD). There is a large body of evidence that informs us when schools change from ineffective and less effective teaching strategies to those strategies that evidence-based research informs us is highly effective, learning difficulties and behavioural problems are significantly reduced, if not disappear altogether. As the Dyslexia Working Party stated in their 2010 report to Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services, Hon. Bill Shorten,

The difference between "instructional casualties" and "people with dyslexia".

A great deal of recent research has focussed on what happens when a school that has been using methods for teaching reading based on ideology rather than research evidence of efficacy switches over to adopting evidence-based methods. Many studies have documented rapidly-achieved and large increases in the reading competence of poor readers in such schools; these children soon achieve reading abilities commensurate with their grades. It follows that the reason why such children were reading poorly prior to the adoption of the new teaching methods in their classrooms was not something to do with the children themselves, but was because of the kind of reading instruction they had been receiving (the California State Taskforce (1999) reported that "a significant number of children labelled learning disabled or dyslexic could have become successful readers had they received systematic and explicit instruction and intervention far earlier in their educational careers"; That is why the term "instructional casualties" has been used to describe these children.

The Productivity Commission's draft report states that,

"... effectiveness of different kinds of teacher pre-service training in improving student outcomes is equivocal."

In fact, there already exist evidence-based findings which are unequivocal.

"Project Follow Through (FT) remains today the world's largest educational experiment. It began in 1967 as part of President Johnson's ambitious War on Poverty and continued until the summer of 1995, having cost about a billion dollars. Over the first 10 years more than 22 sponsors worked with over 180 sites at a cost of over \$500 million in a massive effort to find ways to break the cycle of poverty through improved education. "

(The Story Behind Project Follow Through, Bonnie Grossen, Editor
<http://pages.uoregon.edu/adiep/ft/grossen.htm>)

The findings of Project Follow Through have been ignored by our University Schools & Faculties of Education, as have the findings of the USA National Reading Panel, the Australian NITL and the UK

Rose Review because the findings, that direct, explicit, intensive and systematic teacher-directed instruction is more effective than implicit, constructivist, child-centred discovery learning, does not agree with their personal belief system.

The Productivity Commission recommends that,

“...a high priority to build the evidence base on what approaches work best through trialling and evaluation of different modes of delivery, and better tracking of the impacts of training on the subsequent performance of teachers.”

Since all University Schools and Faculties of Education are committed to the same constructivist philosophy, all that the Productivity Commission is recommending is that there should be trials and evaluation of different forms of what we already know to be less effective.

My remarks have focused on the teaching of reading and writing since all school learning depends on first learning to read before being able to read to learn.

Since our Education Authorities have stated their concerns about Australian student's performance in Maths and Science, I would like to also point out that the same constructivist philosophy that underpins the teaching of beginning reading, also underpins the teaching of beginning maths & science.

When these subjects are taught according to the constructivist philosophy, many students, especially disadvantaged students, fail to work out for themselves the necessary basic algorithms and computations. Whereas direct, explicit, intensive and systematic teacher-directed instruction ensures that all students acquire all the necessary sub-set skills in order to succeed in subsequent years of schooling.

Until such time as our University Schools and Faculties of Education are required to base all teacher pre and post service education on the findings of rigorous, evidence-based research instead of personal belief and philosophy, Australia's education of its student population will continue to stagnate, the gulf between the have's and the have not's will continue to widen, and students from our Asian neighbours will continue to far exceed us in educational accomplishment.

Our University Schools and Faculties of Education have quality control mechanisms in place that are largely self-evaluating. The teacher professional associations, especially those which profess to represent primary teachers and teachers of literacy such as ALEA & PETA/e-lit are largely controlled by faculty members from the University Schools and Faculties of Education.

State and Territory Departments of Education seek expert advice from the University Schools and Faculties of Education and from the teacher professional associations, therefore only receiving advice from those committed to the same non-evidence-based constructivist philosophy. Generally excluded and/or marginalised by our Education Authorities when seeking expert advice are the education researchers and scientists who study and implement evidence-based research findings.

While stating that both qualitative and quantitative research is important, our University Schools & Faculties of Education and our Education Authorities rarely undertake quantitative, empirical

research, or pay attention to the findings of such research from highly respected Australian and International medical, psychological and education researchers.

I suggest that should the Productivity Commission recommend that;

- An independent body of recognised, evidence-based education researchers is appointed to evaluate all teacher pre and post service training for fidelity with the existing body of evidence-based research findings.
- All ongoing research funding be devoted to rigorous evidence-based research.

Universities have the academic freedom to teach whatever they like but the general public has an expectation that public money should not be squandered on programmes that are of little benefit to our children. Therefore, any University that fails to satisfy the evidence-based requirement for both teacher education and research should have its funding withheld.

Yvonne Meyer
