

An Open Letter to all Federal and State Ministers of Education

The Australian, 22/12/2012

In a recent article in the Australian (“Bell tolls for classroom reform”, 12/12/12), Geoff Masters, Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research is reported as being extremely disappointed (as any Australian would be) at seeing Australia ranked 27th in the PIRLS international survey of children’s reading abilities, and quotes him as urging that we should be looking at such questions as “How well are we teaching reading? How well are we preparing teachers to teach reading?”

These are not new questions.

In March 2004, *The Australian* published an open letter addressed to Dr Brendan Nelson, then Minister for Education, Science and Training, signed by 26 senior people in the fields of psychology, education, speech pathology, audiology, and linguistics, expressing concerns with literacy levels in Australian children and especially concerns with the way in which reading was typically being taught in Australian schools. The letter asked the Minister to commission a review of the approaches to reading instruction adopted in Australian schools.

The Minister did so, instituting towards the end of 2004 a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia and particularly asking the Committee conducting this inquiry to report on the current state of teacher education and the extent to which it prepares teachers adequately for reading instruction. This Committee submitted its report in December 2005. This Report and associated summaries of it has since been removed from the Federal Government’s web site, but the material can still be read at the website of the Australian Council for Educational Research – see <http://tinyurl.com/d6v2v9y>

The Report made 20 recommendations. Several of these focussed on improving the preparation of student teachers for being able to teach children how to read, since the Committee had found clear evidence that this was currently inadequate. The Report was favourably received by the Minister, and also by various national bodies concerned with children’s reading difficulties, such as Learning Difficulties Australia. But none of the Report’s 20 recommendations was ever acted upon. (In January 2006 Dr Nelson assumed a new portfolio, so there was a new Minister for Education from that date; she did respond to the Report, but not by acting on any of its recommendations.)

In June 2009 the Hon Bill Shorten, then Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services, set up a Dyslexia Working Party to write a report for him proposing a national agenda for action to assist people with dyslexia (difficulties in reading). This report was submitted to him on January 10 2010. It can be obtained from <http://www.dyslexiaaustralia.com.au/DYSWP.pdf>

The report made 19 recommendations for actions to deal with dyslexia in the Australian population. One of these was that in all teacher-training courses teachers should be made fully familiar with the research on how children learn to read, why some children find it so difficult, and how such difficulties can best be treated.

In September 2012 the Dyslexia Working Party received a Federal Government response to its report, over the signatures of the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth and the Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Carers. This response indicated that the Government proposed to take no action on any of the Working Party's 19 recommendations.

So Federal Governments have known about this problem for nearly a decade, and have received advice from two independent committees of investigation about how to deal with the problem. This advice has been ignored.

And so the results from PIRLS showing that so many Australian children are now very poor readers, though certainly disappointing, are not surprising to anyone who examines what happens in schools, and compares it to what research has clearly shown to be effective in promoting successful reading development. The 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) pointed to, and urged us to follow, the direction towards evidence-based practice taken recently in both Great Britain and the USA following national reports compiled by eminent experts in reading development. However, little productive change has eventuated at the policy level, much less at the classroom level. Indeed if the recommendations of the NITL were adopted, wholesale retraining of teachers would be necessary to provide them with the understanding of literacy not presented to them in their own teacher training.

We have significant problems in education from the beginning stages, in that we do not teach reading well. We do not use approaches known to be effective in initial reading instruction. As a nation, we do not routinely screen students entering school for underdeveloped pre-reading skills critical for facilitating learning to read, nor do we monitor student progress in learning to read in a manner that allows for successful early intervention with students failing to progress. We do not redress our early system failure during the middle primary years. In the secondary years, we have a significant group of disillusioned students who have lost contact with the curriculum because of these earlier issues. We tend to focus attention and resources upon compensatory educational options instead of emphasising the resolution of our earlier mistakes. The sequence of initial failure-shame-frustration-disengagement-dropout is predictable and ongoing. Currently, it is being addressed piecemeal, as if they were separate problems.

We need a vast shake-up at all levels of teacher training. By turning our gaze to educational practices supported by empirical research we can make optimum use of our resources to complete the task with effectiveness and efficiency.

We, as a group of concerned reading scientists, clinicians and educators, urge your immediate attention to what has become a national disgrace.

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