

Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education

The teaching of literacy: Reflecting a profession without a strong foundation.

I am former teacher and educational psychologist within the Victorian state school system (20 years), who has been, for the past 15 years, training educational psychologists at RMIT University - with a particular emphasis on literacy development, instruction, and remediation. I am committed to promoting educational research as an under-used, but valuable, informant of educational policy, and am attuned to the findings of the literacy research around the world through assiduous reading. I also consult in the RMIT Clinic with individuals with literacy problems, and this work along with my previous experience, has confirmed for me a number of disquieting conclusions about the education system.

We have an unnecessarily high proportion of students who cannot achieve their potential because of their low literacy skills. Literacy is pivotal to every aspect of our life, yet we have made little inroad into providing an effective educational environment that alters the trajectory of the unacceptably high number of students failed by that system. This has occurred despite the well-intentioned attempts to redress educational disadvantage. The failure of the system to draw inspiration from empirical research is puzzling, given its positive impact on other professions such as medicine, psychology, technology, and agriculture.

There are a number of reasons why this has occurred, among them a science-averse culture endemic among education policymakers and teacher education faculties. Education has a history of regularly adopting new ideas, but it has done so without the wide-scale assessment and scientific research that is necessary to distinguish effective from ineffective reforms. This absence of a scientific perspective has precluded systematic improvement in the education system, and it has impeded growth in the teaching profession for a long time.

As an example, consider these practices, based solely upon belief unfettered by research support, that have been shown to be incorrect, and have led to teaching particularly unhelpful to struggling students.

- Learning to read is as natural as learning to speak (National Council of Teachers of English, 1999).
- Children do not learn to read in order to be able to read a book, they learn to read by reading books (NZ Ministry of Education, as cited in Mooney, 1988).
- Parents' reading to children is sufficient to evoke reading (Fox, 2005).
- Good readers skim over words rather than attending to detail (Goodman, 1985).
- Fluent readers identify words as ideograms (Smith, 1973).
- Skilled reading involves prediction from context (Emmitt, 1996).

- English is too irregular for phonics to be helpful (Smith, 1999).
- Accuracy is not necessary for effective reading (Goodman, 1974).
- Good spelling derives simply from the act of writing (Goodman, 1989).

These assertions have influenced educational practice for the last 20 years, yet they have each been shown by research to be incorrect. The consequence has been an unnecessary burden upon struggling students to manage the task of learning to read. Not only have they been denied helpful strategies, but they have been encouraged to employ moribund strategies.

There have been signs that change may be in the air. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy has pointed to, and urged us to follow, a direction similar to that taken recently in Great Britain and the USA towards evidence-based practice. However, little productive change has eventuated as yet 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 many of them in their own school education, nor in their own teacher training.

I teach final year education students a course on disability, and note that when I discuss issues such as phonemic awareness and phonological processing – few students have heard of these concepts. If I discuss explicit phonics or direct instruction, again they have no knowledge, but do have an attitude that these are inappropriate practices for teachers. So, their training has been both lacking and misdirected. Teachers need to be not only literate but also have a good understanding of literacy. Plainly the latter is not occurring - a 2005 study found 36 per cent of beginning primary teachers felt ill-equipped to teach reading. Their senior mentors considered the real figure was close to 50 per cent. Teacher training does not seem to be equipping students with the requisite skills and attitudes consonant with good practice.

I also teach masters and doctoral students in psychology about evidence-based practice in psychology and education. These are bright students; however, the generally low quality of their written expression is unsettling. I find myself correcting fundamental errors in reports and assignments by these masters and doctoral psychology students. The problems are evident in spelling and in basic grammar mistakes: inappropriate use of commas, colons and semi-colons, conjunctions; producing run-on sentences, or overly long sentences; and a lack of understanding of how best to join sentence fragments. Other problems include subject-object agreement, tenses, and singular/plural confusions. When university post-graduate students need help with spelling and punctuation, it appears that we have a significant problem with the teaching of literacy generally.

When I discuss these issues in their writing, students confess to not having ever been taught either the language of grammar or the rationale for grammatical construction. If this is an experience seen in other universities, then how widespread must it be among the non-tertiary population?

We have significant problems in education from the beginning stages – in that we do not teach reading well. We do not monitor student progress in a comprehensive manner that allows for remediation. We do not effectively redress our early system failure during middle primary years. In the secondary years, we have a vast group of disillusioned students who have lost contact with the curriculum because of these earlier issues. We focus attention and resources upon compensatory educational options instead of emphasising the resolution of our earlier mistakes. The sequence of initial failure-shame and 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 (from preschool to tertiary teacher training), and by turning our gaze to educational practices supported by empirical research we can find the resources to complete the task with security and efficiency.

Regards,

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