

Submission from Learning Difficulties Australia to the Review of the National Curriculum

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LDA welcomes the review of the National Curriculum, to be undertaken by Professor Ken Wiltshire and Dr Kevin Donnelly

We note that one of the aims of the review is to ‘help ensure the curriculum improves student outcomes, as part of a focus on putting students first’.

We believe that the review is timely, given the increasing concerns about student outcomes, particularly in the area of basic literacy and reading skills (see, for example, Buckingham et al, 2013).

Over recent years there has been accumulating evidence that despite substantial increases in funding, there has been no improvement in student outcomes in reading, with Australian students’ ranking on international studies falling in relation to that of students from other countries, and an unacceptably high proportion of students at or below the ‘low’ benchmark in international studies such as the Progress on International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). This failure has been attributed to two main factors: an ineffective approach to the teaching of basic reading, and lack of adequate training of teachers to provide them with the knowledge and skills to teach reading effectively. These problems are not new, and were comprehensively covered in the report of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005).

In its response to the Draft Australian Curriculum in May 2010, LDA drew attention to flaws in the section of the curriculum relating to the teaching of beginning reading. It noted in particular a failure to distinguish between the two processes involved in reading, ie. decoding and reading comprehension, and a confusing mix of methods, with a continuing reliance on the three cueing system, which is associated with the whole language approach. This approach relies on pictures, guessing and use of context to ‘make meaning from text’, rather than word identification based on grapheme phonemic correspondences. Failure to distinguish between strategies used for word recognition and strategies used to gain meaning from text leads to the encouragement of inappropriate strategies in teaching children to read.

In a subsequent comment on the final version of the English curriculum, published in the LDA Bulletin, Margaret Cameron (2011) noted that in the section relating to phonological and phonemic awareness there is a listing of the relevant skills to be achieved, but that ‘teachers will need to look elsewhere to find depth and detail concerning appropriate sequences and contexts for teaching these skills’.

In the following section relating to letters and sounds, she noted further that reference is made to ‘identifying familiar and recurring letters and the use of upper and lower case in written texts in the classroom and community’ and ‘using familiar and common letters in

handwritten and digital communications', but there is no detail in terms of the sequence of stages in acquiring phonics skills in the first years of school, as is the case in the UK Letters and Sounds program. As Cameron notes, Australian teachers *could* follow a carefully sequenced and detailed phonics program, but they will not find it explicitly set out in the Australian Curriculum'. Given that few Australian teachers since the 1980s have had any training in the teaching of phonics, and have little if any understanding of the role of phonics in learning to read, it is clear that the Australian curriculum does not provide sufficient guidance to ensure effective teaching of reading using a phonics approach.

The fundamental problem of the section of the Australian curriculum that deals with the teaching of initial reading is that it is based on a model which is 'a little bit of phonics and a lot of whole language', and fails to identify the critical processes that are necessary for the effective teaching of reading.

While recognizing the importance of a language-rich environment, where books, multi-media and literate language are high priorities in the classroom, the Curriculum does not provide sufficient attention to the critical skills of word recognition which must first be secured by beginning readers. For those students who are showing signs of struggling and who are at risk of having a specific learning difficulty it is absolutely essential that teachers are confident to teach the alphabetic principle in a systematic, sequential and explicit way if these children are not to experience ongoing academic failure.

While this is a particular problem for children at risk of learning difficulties who need consistency between being taught letters and sounds and applying this knowledge as the primary strategy for decoding words, the research evidence indicates that it is not only these children but all children who benefit from explicit, systematic teaching of phonics.

In reviewing the section of the Australian curriculum that deals with the teaching of beginning reading, we would strongly recommend that careful attention be given to the essential skills that are required for effective reading, and also to the strategies that are most effective in teaching these skills, and that clear guidelines be provided to enable teachers to distinguish between effective and ineffective strategies in the teaching of initial reading. This would require a clear distinction between the skills required for reading, or decoding text, and the skills (and knowledge) required for comprehending text. Both processes are necessary, and both are required for effective reading. But confusing these two processes has led to the encouragement of inappropriate strategies in teaching children to read in the current Australian curriculum.

Addressing the flaws in the curriculum is only one side of the story. For effective implementation of the curriculum, we also need to have teachers who have a good understanding of the processes involved in learning to read and the research evidence relating to effective and ineffective approaches to the teaching of reading.

References

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Molly de Lemos
President
Learning Difficulties Australia
PO Box 349
Carlton South, VIC 3053

Phone/Fax: (03) 9890 6138
Email: ldaquery@bigpond.net.au
Website: www.ldaustralia.org