

Undertaking a school literacy review

By Rosie Clarke, Editor

Learners are failing to meet literacy standards at an alarming rate, prompting schools to review their literacy programs.

Among the concerning trends are significant gaps between literacy levels of boys and girls increasing between Years 3 and 9. In a 2020 analysis of NAPLAN writing test results, University of Queensland scholar Damon Thomas finds that “while boys fell further behind girls at every tested year level, the rate at which girls outperformed boys was greatest between Years 5 and 7”, with corroborating studies from Edith Cowan

What changes are schools implementing to improve outcomes?



University and the University of Tasmania, such as Vesife Hatisaru and David Hicks’s discussion of gender differences in reading achievement, suggesting the transition from primary to secondary school in particular poses

challenges for boys’ literacy achievement. Researchers also suggest teacher perceptions, style of test questions, and parental expectation of academic achievement contribute to widening gender gaps in literacy outcomes.

Immense pressure has been placed on schools to improve these outcomes by taking a more structured literacy approach, so how should schools review their existing approach? What changes are schools implementing around the country?

We sought these answers from some leading literacy programs to find out more.

Industry expertise on literacy program design:

Evidence-based instruction

“Schools that are changing their practice are all moving towards adopting evidence-based instruction,” says Dr Jennifer Buckingham, the Director of

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Strategy and Senior Research Fellow at MultiLit: "It is never the reverse; I never see schools giving up systematic and explicit instruction and taking up whole language or balanced literacy!"

She affirms: "Schools should make sure their literacy programs include systematic synthetic phonics for beginning and struggling readers, as well as in-depth vocabulary and comprehension instruction, plus lots of opportunities for students to practice reading and access great books".

"Evidence-based literacy instruction is systematic, sequential and explicit. That is, there is a planned sequence of content in all the essential aspects of literacy from phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, to vocabulary and

comprehension. It is also taught through explicit instruction methods with cumulative reviews and progress monitoring using valid assessments."

Especially so since COVID: "Teachers and schools are expected to meet an enormous range and diversity of student needs. Following a 'Response to Intervention' (RtI) protocol, if students receive high quality evidence-based instruction from their first weeks at school, a minority (around 25 percent) will need some extra support. Of these, most will make good progress if they are given an effective and appropriate intervention program. If the RtI protocol is followed rigorously, around 5 to 7 percent of students have more significant educational or behavioural

needs that require specialist and targeted intervention. This allows resources to be focussed on students with the greatest need."

Encouraging schools to evaluate programs very carefully before investing in one, Jennifer says to "make sure it aligns with the findings of scientific reading research and has some evidence of effectiveness", and cautions schools not to rule out using a published program: "A good, published program has been tried and tested, and can significantly reduce teacher workload once they have gained some experience in using it."

Long-term focus

Jen McVeity, *Seven Steps* creator and CEO believes that: "All programs and approaches aim to improve literacy

outcomes, but it is the long-term outcomes that are key."

She says: "Schools need to source programs that suit their needs, onboard teachers prior to training, have a 'driver' in the school to keep up momentum, and carry out regular fidelity checks to identify who needs support, share successes, and fine-tune the program.

"The responsibility of any program provider, meanwhile, is to create high-quality materials that leave room for teachers to make the program their own based on their expertise and knowledge of students. They also need to provide ongoing support to schools and teachers to ensure that the program is implemented effectively and has the desired outcomes. ►

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◀ “A huge benefit of COVID (yes, there were a few) is that students have been given more control over their own learning. Teachers need to scaffold and support the learning process, but students need to be empowered to create their own learning paths. Very few students will need to write an essay or formal narrative outside of the classroom. Instead, they will need to be able to write blogs, web content, social media posts, and short-form videos. Teaching resources that reflect real-world contexts are more engaging for students at both primary and secondary levels.”

Additionally: “Engagement improves when there is peer-to-peer collaboration and feedback. Research shows that feedback, interaction, and collaboration are beneficial to the learning process. This is not something that comes naturally to all students though, so explicitly teaching and facilitating collaborative learning is essential.

“Often, writing is seen as a quiet, silent activity, yet it is much more effective when students collaborate. There is an overemphasis on the secretarial

side of writing—spelling, grammar, and punctuation—in schools. However, brainstorming ideas and getting peer feedback facilitate learning and should be kept at the forefront of any writing classroom.”

Phonic methods boost acquisition

Fitzroy Readers founder Philip O’Carroll acknowledges that “literacy education in Australia has gone through a major change”.

“It is now obvious to many primary schools that phonic

methods greatly boost the acquisition of literacy. By introducing one spelling pattern at a time in a sequential fashion, children are saved from the jumble of scores of English spelling patterns that must eventually be mastered in readiness for secondary education.

“Before the return of phonics, the sheer volume of raw memory required to accumulate the spellings of English left hordes of students floundering. Phonics became permissible again after the 70s and this opened a door to greater literacy. By selecting digestible vocabulary in the early years, and introducing odd spellings only in small steps, much progress has been made.”

The English language is *tricky*: “Hundreds of groups of words share their own spelling pattern, i.e., *mark*, *Mars*, *yard*, and *farm*. Further, there are English words that don’t belong to any group of similar spellings, i.e., *busy*, *sew*, and *choir*. Suitable reading books for the early years employ



