



## **THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY**

On 30 November 2004 Brendan Nelson, the Minister for Education, Science and Training announced a national inquiry into the teaching of literacy. The inquiry was described as a 'broad, independent examination of reading research, teacher preparation and practices for the teaching of literacy, particularly reading'. A committee representing researchers, policy makers, teachers and parents was established and AATE was invited to be a member of a reference group drawn from government and non-government school education authorities, universities, professional associations, parents and researchers. This group has met three times in 2005 to discuss and comment on the directions of the inquiry.

While the inquiry does use the term literacy, reading really has been its focus. The original deliberations of the inquiry were more about reading in the early years and while the Four Resources Model (Freebody and Luke, 1990) was acknowledged as a useful framework phonics was still presented as being an instructional priority. Secondary teachers were seen by the majority of people on the reference group as lacking the skills to address the teaching of reading. Throughout the meetings AATE has argued that members of our association are skilled to address the teaching of reading and understand the complexity of teaching reading in the secondary years through issues such as intellectual quality, engagement and the importance of critical literacy.

The final report of the inquiry will be issued later in 2005. The messages that teachers take from this inquiry will influence the approaches taken up in schools. It will be interesting to see if the secondary voice has been included and whether the inquiry will present the teaching of reading in minimalist reductionist ways rather than reinforcing the rich approaches which acknowledge the complexity of teaching reading in today's world.

# **AATE's SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY**

*Submitted to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy on behalf of the AATE National Council by Rita van Haren, ACT Delegate, on 25 April 2005.*

AATE represents 6,000 teachers of English and literacy from government and non-government sectors across Australia. AATE members are part of an international network of teachers with a commitment to teaching and learning in the field of language and literacy.

AATE's focus is to provide teachers with a voice in national issues related to the teaching of English and literacy. It reviews and responds to state and national educational initiatives and is a member of the *International Federation for the Teaching of English* and the *National Education Forum*. AATE publishes its quarterly journal, *English in Australia*, which includes research and a diverse range of opinions on issues of concern to English teachers and literacy educators. It also publishes and distributes quality resources for teacher and student use in English and literacy education and assists with the organisation of national and state conferences and seminars.

## **Literacy in the Middle and Secondary Years**

While membership of AATE is open to all educators interested in the teaching of English, members of AATE come mainly from the secondary sectors of government and non-government schools and from the tertiary sectors. Hence our focus in this submission is on adolescents and the middle and secondary years of literacy learning.

AATE welcomes the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy and its potential to affirm the practices of Australian literacy educators. In particular AATE would like to endorse key ideas that were endorsed in the early discussions of the inquiry (meeting 11 March 2005), that teachers need a repertoire of practices in literacy teaching, particularly the teaching of reading, to meet the diverse needs of students.

Further AATE agrees that there is no single method or approach which can address this diversity and teaching literacy is just as critical in the early years as it is in the middle and secondary years. This was one of the main conclusions of the *Mapping the Territory: Primary School Students with Learning Difficulties in Literacy and Numeracy* (Commonwealth Department of Education, Training & Youth Affairs 2000) in discussing support in the middle and upper years.

In an increasing globalised society in which knowledge management, information and information transfer are becoming more important, access to the wider range of literate practices is necessary (New London Group, 1996). This requires more than basic foundational and codebreaking skills or knowledge transmission. Literacy involves managing a variety of texts in a variety of social and cultural contexts. This definition of

literacy as a social practice emphasises the importance of meaning making in different contexts. So rather than just developing functional or generic skills for work and economic independence, AATE also emphasises the importance of literacy skills that enable and empower individuals with skills for critical reflection and questioning. Such skills will equip students to be informed participants in our democratic society, allowing them to thoughtfully consider issues, and effectively articulate their own point view in keeping with their developing moral and ethical frameworks.

The definitions of literacy and what is effective practice in literacy teaching and learning are critical here and the Inquiry must address the issue of defining literacy in ways which address the complexity of reading and what it means to be a successful reader in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Reductionist definitions will simply promote simplistic practices which AATE believes will not improve learning outcomes for underperforming students. In fact all recommendations of the Inquiry will hinge on these definitions and must be informed by the theories which underpin the definitions.

Adolescent students who need support in developing their literacy skills have very different needs than early years students. They may struggle with reading linguistic texts but they may be very competent readers of visual and digital texts. Many adolescents are also able to decode words but need support to develop their comprehension skills of linguistic texts. A common area of need for middle years students is to develop inferential and critical comprehension skills, as they are already able to read competently at the literal level. A basic skills approach that focuses on decoding sound symbol relationships or literal level comprehension would not meet the needs of the majority of underperforming adolescent students in literacy.

In addressing the needs of underperforming adolescent readers, it is not helpful to configure the literacy debate as a simple dichotomy between whole language and phonics based approaches. The high stakes demands of public examinations in the secondary system and the imperative for schools, and indeed society more broadly, to help young people make a productive transition to the workplace, mean that it is concomitant on us all, teachers, education bureaucrats and politicians, to ensure that each individual leaves school with the best possible credentials. An approach that says 'first we will teach students how to decode and then we will let them comprehend and think critically about a text' is patently inadequate, as it is denying these students access to essential subject content as the rest of their class moves forward through the curriculum.

Underperformance in reading then must necessarily be addressed concurrently with subject content. This has the extra and obvious benefit of ensuring that students remain engaged in their subject learning, and accords these students the dignity of recognising that they are more than capable of participating in the 'regular' classroom on an intellectual level and through the full range of language modes.

Underperforming adolescent students are too often placed in catch up programs which focus on basic skills. These programs build on the idea that students, once identified as having literacy 'problems' can be 'cured' with intense exposure to a particular

methodology, which, far too frequently, takes the form of a readily marketable reading program that is sold by a commercial entity as a 'cure all'. This very simplistic notion and programs based on this notion generally widen the gaps between performing and underperforming students as the underperforming students miss out on the challenging intellectual curriculum that performing students are accessing.

Instead underperforming students should be developing their literacy skills through the rich intellectually challenging and engaging curriculum which is offered in regular classrooms. To do this, teachers need to have the repertoire of practices in literacy through which they scaffold students' access to more challenging texts. Hence the Inquiry must look at the complexity of the teaching reading and not reduce the focus of the Inquiry to narrow or reductionist approaches which cannot incorporate the complex cognitive, social, linguistic and emotional variables which all impact on student learning.

### **Engagement, Intellectual Quality and Diversity**

Teachers of English in the middle and secondary years recognise the importance of issues such as engagement, intellectual quality and diversity and that these issues are just as important in addressing literacy and language as in other areas of the curriculum. These issues have been identified by extensive research in Australian classrooms and reported through reports such as the *Beyond the Middle* report (DEST, 2003), The *Middle Years Research and Development* (MYRAD) Project (1999-2002) and the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (QSRLS, Education Queensland, 2001).

These reports emphasise the importance of teacher quality and that teachers need a repertoire of practice to address the diversity of students in their classrooms. For example the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (QSRLS, Education Queensland, 2001) identified the key components of effective teaching and learning as intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment and recognition of diversity; these were conceptualised in the *Productive Pedagogies* framework.

The ideas of *Productive Pedagogies* challenge pedagogical approaches which focus on basic skills and which many teachers have adopted in well meaning attempts to support underperforming students. The QSRLS in fact found that teachers rated basic skills as a greater priority than intellectual quality. The *Beyond the Middle* report (DEST, 2003) reinforces the findings of the Queensland research and states the importance of a pedagogical shift and a need to emphasise intellectual quality, student engagement and diversity.

'There needs to be a more systemic emphasis on intellectual demand and student engagement in mainstream pedagogy that moves beyond and capitalises on current foci on increased participation rates and basic skills development for target group students. This will require a much stronger focus on quality and diversity of pedagogy, on the spread and mainstreaming of approaches to teaching and learning that stress higher order thinking and critical literacy, greater depth of

knowledge and understanding that increases in overall intellectual quality and expectations of middle years students.’ (p 8)

The *Middle Years Research and Development* (MYRAD) Project (1999-2002) also reinforces the importance of teacher pedagogy particularly in relation to student engagement and well being, and a thinking-oriented curriculum. Diversity is a strong theme in the work of Comber et al (2002), Comber and Kamler (2004) and Thomson (2002) who argue for the need for teachers to develop repertoires of practice to address the diverse learning needs of students. They emphasise the importance of non-deficit approaches to students by teachers, approaches which recognise and value the resources students bring to classroom as well as addressing their needs.

International research also supports the focus on the importance of intellectual quality, engagement and diversity. Strong *et al* (2001), working with over 300 schools in USA, identified rigour, thought, diversity and authenticity as all necessary to student improvement; they were insufficient on their own. Newmann and Associates (1996) also emphasise the importance of teacher pedagogy and in particular how teachers address and implement intellectual quality. They state that intellectual quality is the key factor in improving overall student academic performance and diminishing equity gaps.

The findings of all of this research are critical to all areas of the curriculum, particularly literacy teaching and learning. Single method approaches do not engage students in the middle years or in fact in any years of schooling.

### **The Four Resources Model**

Literacy learning in 21<sup>st</sup> Century requires students to read multimodal texts, ie from a range of different media, including visual, linguistic, audio, gestural and spatial texts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2002). Hence it is important to draw on approaches which address this complexity of reading. Definitions of literacy already provided by the Inquiry to its members reflect this complexity and include the *Four Resources* model (Freebody & Luke 1990, 1992, 1999).

AATE promotes the use of strong theoretical frameworks such as the *Four Resources* model. This framework extends the repertoires of teachers to address the diversity of their students’ needs. The framework was developed as a means of responding to the complexity of reading and the changing and challenging demands in order to be a successful reader in today’s world.

- Through the **codebreaker** resource the student develops understandings about the relationship between spoken sounds and written symbols, the grammar of texts and the structural conventions of texts.
- The **text user** resource supports students to understand that different types of texts have different purposes and these purposes shape the way texts are structured and formed. It also supports students to apply this knowledge in comprehending, creating and transforming texts.

- Students draw on their own experiences and prior knowledge of similar texts to make meaning of written, spoken and visual texts through the **text participant** resources.
- The **text analyst** resource focuses on understanding how texts position readers, viewers and listeners. It supports students to be aware and identify how texts are not ideologically natural or neutral but are crafted to represent the views and interests of the writer. Through this resource students understand that information, ideas and language in texts influence reader perceptions and texts empower or disempower certain groups.

The *Four Resources* model can be used by teachers to develop a range of literacy skills in context and through texts and strategies which ensure engagement, challenge and intellectual quality. In fact this is central to the *MyRead* resource ([www.myread.org](http://www.myread.org)) developed by AATE and the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) with funding by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to support underperforming students in reading in the middle years. It promotes practices based on the beliefs that:

- All students can be successful readers
- All teachers are teachers of reading
- Teachers make a difference
- Monitoring and assessment inform teaching and learning
- Teachers need a repertoire of flexible practices

The guides in the resource promote a range of rich practices including:

- Direct, explicit instruction in reading comprehension at literal, inferential and applied levels (eg Three Stages of Reading and Three Level Guide)
- Direct, explicit instruction in decoding texts (eg Phonemic Awareness and Read Alouds) and word building (eg Nail That Character and Reading as a Writer)
- Motivation for students to become self-directed and independent readers (eg Cooperative Reading and Frontloading)
- Use of technology to support reading (eg Powerpointing Narrative and Interlinks: Annotated Learning)
- Critical literacy (eg Critical Analysis using Clever Cloze and Visual Text Analysis)
- Continuous assessment of students to monitor and adjust teaching and learning (Monitoring and Assessment).

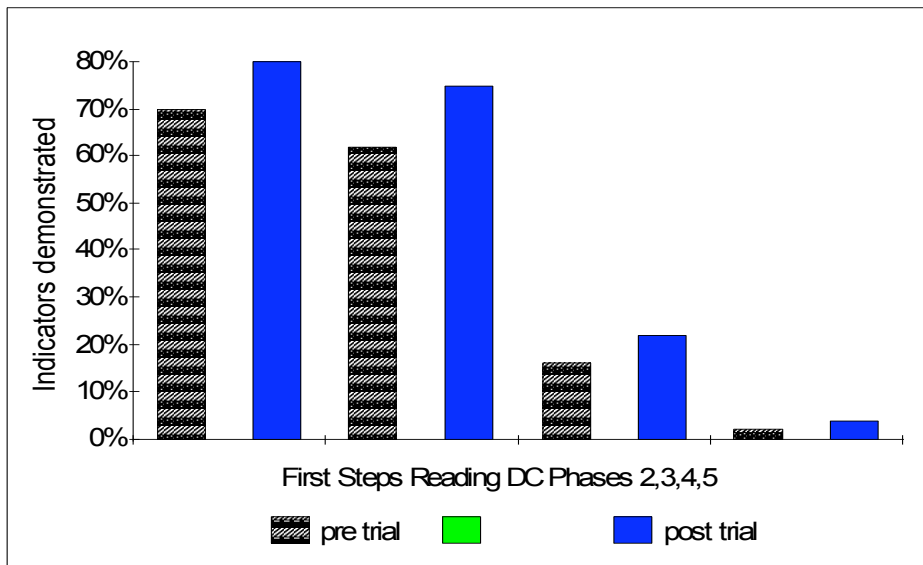
Teachers trialled the guides in a range of classes, from years 4-9, multi-age groups, whole class multi-ability groups and small 'pull out' groups. However, in all groups there was a significant component of underperforming students. The following qualitative data involved 22 year 6 and 8 students (12-14 years) who took part in assessment to evaluate the *Cooperative Reading* strategy which is included in the *MyRead* resource. These students had all been identified in the lowest performing 20% of students in the ACT Assessment program and eligible for learning assistance support.

Students' reading was mapped on the *First Steps Reading Developmental Continuum* both before and after the implementation of the strategy. The implementation of the strategy occurred over an eight week time period with students participating in approximately three-four hours of *Cooperative Reading* per week. The total time period with the pre and post mapping was over ten weeks.

*First Steps* was the tool used to assess and map student reading outcomes. *First Steps* was researched and developed over five years by the Education Department of Western Australia and has been validated by ACER. The *First Steps Developmental Continua* are particularly rich assessment tools which provide a framework for linking assessment with teaching and learning. Developmental reading indicators over six phases identify what students *can* do and provide teaching suggestions for further development. The assessment is based on ongoing assessment and values teacher judgment over time and through prolonged engagement with the students.

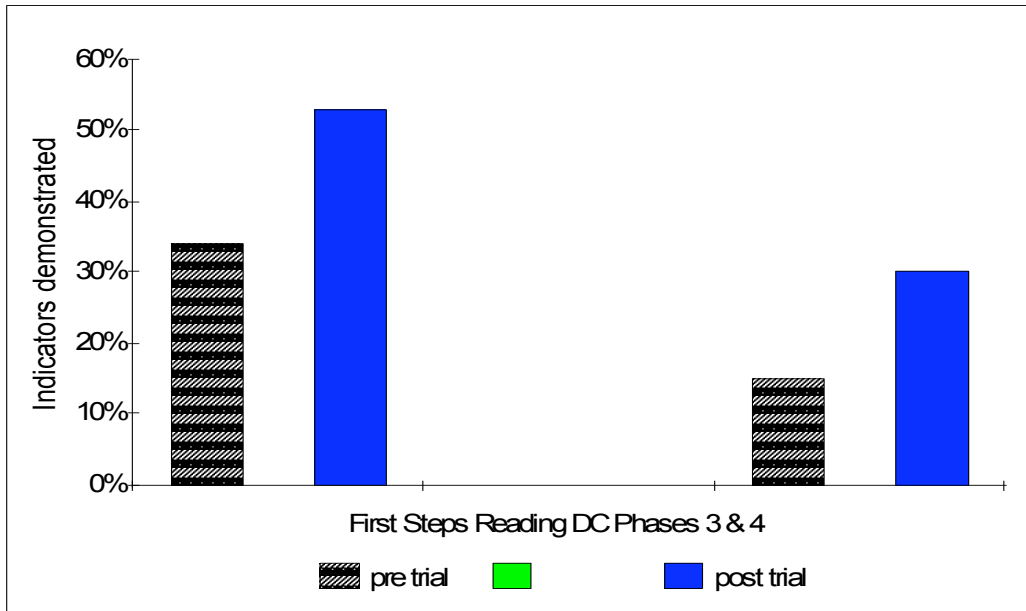
Improved outcomes for students in both years 6 and 8 in the trial were shown by the increased number of indicators students demonstrated over each of the phases. The improved outcomes are significant given the short time frame of ten weeks. Generally movement from phase to the next phase is expected over a 12 – 18 month period. After 10 weeks some students did progress to the next phase while others remained at the same phase but were able to demonstrate a greater number of outcomes by the end of the 10 weeks. The data also reflected a major shift in reading attitude indicators at all levels and teachers triangulated this with evidence in student reading journals.

**Year 6 Student Outcomes  
Pre and Post Implementation of a 6 week cycle of *Cooperative Reading***



Year 6 students were mapped over Phases 2-5 of the *First Steps Reading Developmental Continuum*. The majority of students had been identified for Learning Assistance support and were mapped at Phases 2 and 3.

**Year 8 Student Outcomes**  
**Pre and Post Implementation of a 6 week cycle of *Cooperative Reading***



Year 8 students were mapped over Phases 3-4 of the *First Steps Reading Developmental Continuum*. The students had all been identified for Learning Assistance support.

**Literacy Across the curriculum**

While AATE has provided rich professional learning to its members in literacy and language learning, most teachers in other key learning areas in high schools have not had access to quality professional learning in the teaching of reading. Hence literacy across the curriculum, while commendable in its conception, has not been implemented successfully in Australian schools. It is important that the inquiry makes recommendations which support the professional learning of all secondary teachers, not just beginning teachers or at teacher education institutions, in language and literacy learning. It should:

- include approaches to professional learning in reading that will support all teachers across the curriculum with a focus on how to enable teachers to expand their repertoires of practice in teaching reading to address diversity.

- incorporate essential issues such as engagement and intellectual quality in middle and secondary years learning
- acknowledge the complexity of teaching reading and what is effective teaching of reading in 21<sup>st</sup> century

## **Acknowledging the professionalism of teachers**

The messages that teachers take from this inquiry must be clear. Rather than seeing the inquiry as a demoralising attack on teacher professionalism, effective practices in literacy must be affirmed and support provided for teachers to build their repertoires of practice where necessary. Acknowledgement of teacher professionalism is essential so that the teaching profession is not undermined further and the inquiry resonates with teachers.

The newly established National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) might have a role in addressing literacy issues. A model of collaborative research that recognises the voices, practices and experiences of teachers in a wide range of contexts, is another AATE /ALEA collaboration, Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA). The model clearly takes up NIQTSL's motto: 'Of the profession, by the profession, for the profession'.

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