



AUSTRALIAN LITERACY
EDUCATORS' ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY

Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA)

Address: PO Box 3203, Norwood SA 5067

Phone: (08) 83322845

Email: alea@netspace.net.au

ALEA National Council Representative: Dr Jan Turbill (President)

Email: jan_turbill@uow.edu.au

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THE AUSTRALIAN LITERACY EDUCATORS' ASSOCIATION (ALEA)

The Australian Literacy Educators' Association is an independent professional association dedicated to literacy development and English language learning at all levels. It supports teachers in their current practice; provides leadership for literacy educators; and influences future development in literacy by building effective literacy communities.

ALEA advocates:

- i. a balanced and informed eclectic perspective on issues related to literacy teaching and learning
- ii. takes a critical stance on theory development and research findings relating to literacy teaching and learning
- iii. makes recommendations to membership based on (i) & (ii) above

MEMBERSHIP OF ALEA

ALEA has 2000 members representing individual practising teachers, schools (mainly primary), from all states and systems, researchers, teacher educators and student teachers from across Australia and many international countries.

RANGE OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES ALEA PROVIDES

ALEA convenes high quality conferences at national, state and local council level throughout the country. The program for the annual national conference, held in the states and territories on a rotational basis, features national and international literacy educators, researchers, classroom teachers and publishers.

ALEA sponsors and publishes results of significant research into literacy practice. A recent project, conducted jointly with the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, was the publication of MYRead, a set of strategies for teaching reading in the middle years. The result of this project, which is available as a web site www.myread.org and on CD-Rom, was awarded *The Australian Award for Excellence in Educational Publishing* in 2003.

ALEA publishes three major journals:

The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy is a refereed journal that provides balanced and indepth investigations of literacy practice and theories in everyday settings, including classrooms. It also aims to enhance understanding of literacy issues in relation to their wider educational and social contexts.

Practically Primary is designed specifically for primary classroom teachers. Each issue is full of accounts of classroom practices, practical ideas, useful resources and teacher recommendations.

Literacy Learning is designed for teachers of literacy from year 5 through secondary school. This refereed journal provides reports of classroom practice, research and current resources for teachers of those year levels.

OVERVIEW OF SUBMISSION

ALEA welcomes the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. We believe that such an inquiry has the potential to highlight the excellent literacy practices in this country that have made Australia's literacy standards the envy of many English speaking countries, particularly the USA and the UK. Our children's performance in the OECD's PISA initiative, the willingness in the UK and the US to employ our graduates, and the many opportunities our literacy educators have to lecture and work in schools in the USA (New York City employs some 200 literacy experts to work as staff developers in their city schools) are all testimony to the high level of literacy education in Australia.

Therefore it seems when it comes to literacy education, ALEA and the Australian Government seem to want the same things for Australian children. Since its inception in 1975 as the Australian Reading Association (ARA), ALEA has been not only been committed to *ensuring that all Australian children achieve high standards of literacy and the essential reading skills to make satisfactory progress at school* but has also dedicated a significant proportion of its expertise and resources to the *'identification of literacy teaching approaches which assist students, especially those with reading difficulties'* (National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Australian Government Department of Education, Science, and Technology Website, 2004).

Despite some uniformity of purpose however, ALEA has some concerns about the potential outcomes of this Inquiry. A major concern we have is what we perceive to be a reductionist focus of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. By limiting the Terms of Reference to *identification of literacy teaching approaches which assist students, with reading difficulties* we are concerned that the Inquiry may be unintentionally forced into treating the 'symptoms' and not the underlying causes of what the key issues under inquiry are.

Put simply, ALEA is concerned that by restricting the terms of reference this way, the Inquiry is implicitly accepting the premise that literacy can be compartmentalised into independent, discrete sub-domains, such as reading, writing, talking listening, spelling, grammar, and these in turn can be further subdivided into reading for children with difficulties, reading for those who don't have difficulties and so on.

This means that the complex, systemic, nature of learning and teaching literacy in Australia in the 21st century is potentially ignored, and that important interdependencies between the multiplicity of complex linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and other variables that must be orchestrated by both teachers and students, are lost. ALEA believes that this kind of reductionism tends to 'frame' (Lakoff, 2004) the Inquiry in such a way that it must unquestioningly accept a reductionist epistemology. It also runs the danger of implicitly promoting and sustaining an outdated, reductionist ethos, which in turn runs the danger of supporting the worst aberrations of behaviourist pedagogy.

ALEA therefore does not wish this Inquiry to be forced down the same reductionist ‘track’ which similar inquiries in other western democracies such as USA and UK have followed with quite negative results.¹

Given these concerns ALEA’s submission will focus on four aspects of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference that we believe will be affected by the implicit reductionist ethos inherent in the terms of reference. These are:

- Ensuring high standards of literacy, developing essential reading skills, and identifying effective literacy teaching approaches.
- Educational science, scientifically based instruction, and the use of ‘evidence based research’ (EBR) to inform policy.
- The teaching of phonics.
- Assessment, evaluation, and monitoring the progress of students’ literacy development K- 12.

ISSUE 1. ENSURING HIGH STANDARDS OF LITERACY, DEVELOPING ESSENTIAL READING SKILLS, AND IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE LITERACY TEACHING APPROACHES

While ALEA strongly supports attempts to achieve these *key deliverables*, its long involvement in promoting professional development in the literacy field has shown that before they can be delivered, operational definitions of ‘effective literacy behaviour’, ‘essential reading skills’ and ‘effective teaching approaches’ must first be identified so that the outcomes such as ‘high standards of literacy’ can be ensured, ‘essential reading skills’ can be developed, and ‘effective literacy practices’ identified.

ALEA’s members have often been caught up in the debates that inevitably accompany attempts to develop operational definitions of value-laden concepts like ‘effective’ or ‘good’ reading, learning, teaching etc. They have also observed how such debates can deteriorate into artificial adversarial, dichotomies such as ‘code-based vs meaning-based’, ‘bottom-up vs top-down’ and ‘whole language vs phonics’. Understandably ALEA’s membership has become somewhat cynical of such simplistic dichotomies and has grown to distrust them. Therefore ALEA has consistently adopted the position that the points of view held by those who engage in these arguments and debates are always based on the different theoretical perspectives and practical experiences that have professionally nurtured those who hold them. ALEA’s stance on this issue has been to advise its membership that what others count as ‘effective’ literacy practices, and/or ‘effective teaching approaches’ and/or ‘essential reading skills’ is always determined from inside a particular domain of inquiry, epistemological framework, or theoretical perspective, and therefore they should expect those who operationally define these terms to make explicit the values and beliefs about whatever it is they’re attempting to define.

¹ USA’s National Reading Panel’s inquiry was based on an unquestioned reductionist philosophy. Serious negative educational outcomes of this Panel’s policy recommendations are just coming to light in USA (Allington 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Garan, 2002; Garan, 2005; Krashen 2001; Pressley et al 2004).

Therefore given this history, ALEA believes that its membership will expect this Inquiry to address two key issues, namely:

- *Who decides what constitutes 'effectiveness' in literacy behaviour, in teaching approaches, and reading skills?* and
- *What theories underpin and therefore guide such decisions?*

ALEA believes that developing operational definitions of these essentially qualitative concepts is a fundamental and necessary prerequisite for this Inquiry, If these concepts are not defined carefully we believe it could create significant problems of credibility for the conclusions and/or recommendations that the Inquiry will ultimately make. Our experience in the field has consistently shown that Reports which fail to make the underpinning theoretical perspectives explicit, and which cannot justify (in coherent and persuasive ways) the conclusions and recommendations which are based on these theoretical perspectives, typically lose *credibility* and tend to be disregarded altogether.

What happens if these issues are not appropriately addressed?

In order to respond to this concern we turn to the example from the USA's National Reading Panel's 2000 Report into 'scientifically based reading instruction'. This Report concluded that the scientific research which its Panel selected and analysed, unequivocally showed that beginning readers needed phonemic awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words) as a necessary prerequisite for learning to decode, that 'good readers' are fluent and automatic decoders, and that poor readers rely overly on context.

Despite the fact that throughout the report the terms 'reading', 'effective reading' 'good readers' etc. are liberally used, nowhere is the question of what constitutes 'effective reading' posed. Rather, the definitions are ever-changing. In some of the studies selected for analysis 'effective reading' might mean the ability to pronounce nonsense words, in others the ability to pronounce real words in isolation, in yet others it might mean reading aloud smoothly and rapidly. Rarely in any of the studies analysed was 'reading' defined as 'comprehending text'. While it is true that the USA Report overtly promotes a so-called 'balanced approach to reading instruction', educational researchers Richard Allington and Michael Pressley observed,

As we reviewed the list of 2,500 NICHD-supported articles, we detected much less attention to the higher order processes related to comprehension than to the more atomistic components of reading, such as sound-letter and word skills. Moreover when we have been in the company of NICHD-supported researchers and leadership, there has been much too little discussion above the word level. It is easy to leave NICHD-driven discussions with the impression that sound-, letter-, and word-level processes are all that really matters in reading, that if sound-, letter- and word-processes could be solved, literacy problems would be solved (Pressley & Allington, 1999, p 169).

It is clear that the members of the USA's National Reading Panel held a theoretical perspective that defined reading as predominantly a word level process that in turn demanded decoding skills as the key to constructing meaning. This perspective is explained and supported in the Report with citations and references to the publications of one of the panellists, Linda Ehri. Summarising these publications, the Report explains, *research on word reading processes has distinguished several ways to read words*. A reader might identify a word from memory (*sight word reading*), or if

encountering a word *never read before*, could *transform graphemes into phonemes* and then *blend the phonemes* to form a word *with recognisable meaning*. Or the reader might use *analogy to known words* (Ehri, 2004, p325).

Nowhere in the Report is any reference made to a reader's use of context, syntax, or other written language information gleaned from a sentence or the broader context containing the word.

The Report justifies this omission by citing Ehri's explanation that her *focus is on how readers develop skill at reading words by alphabetic processing* but not on how readers use *contextual information (textual meaning, syntax etc.) for identifying words* (Ehri, 2004, p327).

What is not apparent to those who are not reading specialists is that Ehri's model of learning to read and of reading words out of meaningful context is simply that--- a model, one among many that has both scientific and theoretical support. However, it is presented as if it is an established fact. Any models or theories that might run counter to Ehri's have no voice in the USA Report.

Furthermore it is a concern that nowhere in the Report is an explicit declaration or qualifier that the model of decontextualised word-level reading is based on one specific theory; rather it implies that it is simply a scientific fact. The Report also leaves unaddressed the effect that adherence to this theory has on the ultimate validity of both the Report's conclusions, and any recommendations for policy.

In effect the USA Panel produced a Report which 'frames' (Lakoff, 2004) 'reading' as a stand-alone curriculum subject, predominantly involving psycho-perceptual processes, distinct from, and unrelated to, other language based systems of making meaning. We believe that because of this the Report promotes (and endorses as 'scientific') a 1950s view of reading. A psycho-perceptual perspective locks the USA Report into a view of reading as a 'complex set of skills' made up of an hierarchical set of complex 'habits', which in turn promotes lock-step, teaching based on behaviourist theories of learning and teaching.

ALEA urges the Panel of this Inquiry to cast a broader net so that an Australian Report cannot be subjected to the same criticisms of narrowness and bias.

How might the Australian Inquiry best proceed?

ALEA contends that the profession has moved beyond a 1950s view of reading and literacy. Like Rowe and Rowe (1999) ALEA believes that,

'simplistic single-level, unidirectional models, and the outdated approaches to analysis which dominate this field of inquiry, have hitherto failed to account for the common-sense notion that students' behaviours and learning outcomes are mediated by complex, interrelated factors which operate over time and interact in dynamic contexts – the most crucial of which are homes, classrooms, schools, and specific sociocultural milieu. In the interests of maximizing 'explanatory power', it is argued that to meet the criteria of adequacy, explanatory models formulated to examine the overlap must reflect this complexity (Rowe & Rowe, 1999, p2).

Given these beliefs, ALEA recommends that this Inquiry carefully address the question,

What constitutes effective literacy in the 21st Century?

We also urge that the Inquiry draw from the multiplicity of theoretical orientations that have emerged over the last forty years. For example, the psycholinguistically oriented work of Roger Brown (1970), Frank Smith (1971, 1994), and Kenneth Goodman (1969) strongly suggests that reading is more a language process than it is a perceptual process. This has been complemented by later work in reading comprehension inspired by the cognitive revolution in psychology (see Anderson & Pearson, 1984) that established meaning as the core, not the residual outcome, of reading. Finally, advances in sociolinguistic theory in the 1980s (Bloome & Green, 1984; Heath, 1983) and critical literacy in the 1990s (Gee, 1989; Luke, 1995), *established the understanding that all language and, hence, all literacy learning is grounded in the material motives of human interaction, with all of its social, political, and economic faces (however endearing or ugly they may be) (Pearson, 2004, p220).*

Like Walsh (2005), ALEA believes that if this Inquiry is to avoid the accusations of being ‘outdated’ or ‘too narrow’ it must also include *discussion of the textual shift, and thus paradigm shift (Bearne, 2003) that has occurred for today’s students whose environment is filled with visual, electronic and digital texts, those texts that are referred to as ‘multimodal’ (Walsh [in press]).* ALEA therefore recommends that any discussion of effective literacy in the 21st century must not only consider the multiple theoretical orientations outlined above but must also consider, *what new theories of literacy and new pedagogies are needed to respond to a changed learning environment (Walsh, in press, p1).*

ALEA’s Response to ‘What is Effective Literacy in 21st Century Australia?’

ALEA’s position on this issue is closely aligned with those of similar professional organisations in comparable English speaking western democracies. For example the Reading Commission of the largest professional organisation in the world, (the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]) recently issued a document entitled *On Reading, Learning To Read, And Effective Reading Instruction: An Overview of What We Know and How We Know It*, (NCTE 2003) which clearly outlines the multi-theoretical framework deemed necessary for explaining the nature and purposes of reading. We find that NCTE’s operational definitions of reading and the reading process are comparable with ours and have inserted their section on Reading and the Reading Process below. A close examination of the mandatory curriculum documents in most Australian states (especially NSW which consistently outscores other states on Basic Skills Tests) demonstrates that they are also closely aligned with NCTE’s perspective.

Reading and the Reading Process

Reading is a complex and purposeful sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and their knowledge of their culture to construct meaning with text. Each of these types of knowledge impacts the sense that readers construct through print. Readers easily

comprehend text with familiar language but are less successful at comprehending text with unfamiliar language. Readers easily comprehend text on familiar topics but are less successful at comprehending texts on unfamiliar topics. At the same time, the interpretations readers construct with texts as well as the types of texts they read are influenced by their life experiences.

The sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic systems readers use to make sense of print are largely intuitive. For example, few are aware that they use their life experiences to interpret text, and that as life experiences differ from reader to reader and from community to community so, too, do interpretations of a given text. Similarly, few are aware that when they are reading about statistics they understand the phrase all the figures on the right hand side of the table means numerals in rows and columns, but when they are reading about crafts they understand the same phrase means figurines on a piece of furniture;¹ nevertheless, they do.

The systems readers use to make sense of print are interrelated and partially redundant. For instance, in the sentence, There are some books on the table, the words some and are and the letter s in books signal that there is more than one book. This redundancy permits readers to sample print, using only what they need to construct meaning effectively and efficiently. Readers also use these interrelated systems to make predictions concerning what the print says, to confirm or disconfirm their predictions, and to connect these meanings to form a coherent understanding of the text.

Readers read for different purposes. Sometimes they read for pleasure. Sometimes they read for information. Their reason for reading impacts the way they read. They may skim or read carefully depending on why they are reading. Throughout this process, readers monitor the meaning they are constructing. When the text does not meet their purposes they may switch to another text. Readers expect what they are reading to make sense. They use a repertoire of strategies, such as rethinking, re-reading or reading on to clarify ideas, to make sure they understand what they read in order to accomplish their purposes.

Writers also contribute to how well readers are able to read a text. The writer's language and knowledge of the topic as well as skill in using written language influence the reader's ability to construct meaning. The degree to which readers and writers share the same understanding of the language and the topic of the text influences how well they communicate with each other.

NCTE is one of the largest professional teacher organizations in the world with a membership of over 70,000. ALEA is the largest professional teacher organisation which deals directly with the teaching and learning of literacy in Australia. The writers of the various state curriculum documents inform over a million Australian teachers. It seems improbable therefore that such large groups of teachers and educators who have spent decades studying, debating, and disseminating all the complex issues associated with the teaching and learning of reading would converge with such internalised conviction to such consistent language-based, constructivist views of reading and learning to read if these views had little or no external validity or practical value.

ALEA believes that this Australian Inquiry needs to adopt the multi-theoretical stance of the major professional teacher organizations when defining and framing ‘reading’ and effective reading, learning, teaching.

ISSUE 2. EDUCATIONAL SCIENCE, SCIENTIFICALLY BASED INSTRUCTION, AND THE USE OF ‘EVIDENCE BASED RESEARCH’ (EBR) TO INFORM POLICY.

ALEA supports the Federal Minister’s commitment to improving the literacy standards of Australian students, especially in the area of beginning reading instruction and for those children who experience difficulties in learning to read. ALEA also supports the objective of using ‘evidence based research’ (EBR) to identify and validate effective teaching approaches and to formulate educational policy. Notwithstanding this general support, ALEA believes the issue of what should and should not be counted as ‘evidence-based research’ begs some prior questions which need to be addressed if this Inquiry’s ultimate conclusions and recommendations are to be perceived as credible, trustworthy, and of use to practising literacy educators.

These prior questions are:

- What kinds of evidence *currently inform* classroom practice and government policy?
- What kinds of evidence *should inform* classroom practice and governmental policy?

What Kinds of Evidence Currently Informs Classroom Practice and Government Policy?

Since inception in 1975 ALEA has identified several kinds of evidence that are continually drawn on to inform policy. These are:

- i. Anecdotal
- ii. Investigative and ‘Current Affairs’ Journalism
- iii. Government/Bureaucratic Reports and Evaluations
- iv. Peer-reviewed academic papers, presentations and, chapters in books

i. Anecdotal evidence and education policy and practice

Although often used as a pejorative term, ‘anecdotal evidence’ has, and continues to have, a major impact on educational policy and practice in Australia. ALEA’s audit of the official press releases, media reports, Minister Nelson’s speeches and interviews shows that this Inquiry was in fact set in train by anecdotal information relayed to the Minister’s department by letters, email, and phone calls from, as well as formal and informal conversations with, parents, individual experts, talk back radio hosts and/or other media celebrities, and lobby groups with vested interests in literacy and literacy education. The use of anecdotal evidence to inform policy is not restricted to the Federal level of government. ALEA’s archives are replete with multiple instances (across all States and Territories) of anecdotal evidence which produces educational policy.

At the classroom level, anecdotal evidence is just as significant. Reviews of the research literature related to teacher learning, teacher change, professional growth, professional development consistently emphasise the need for teachers to have

opportunities to discuss, reflect on, ‘have conversations about’ their professional learning and classroom practice (Beattie, 1997; Beattie, 2000; Clandinin, & Connelly, 1996; Clandinin, & Connelly 2000). Irrespective of whether they are formal or informal discussions, group reflections, or ‘conversations’, the research literature consistently shows that teachers will engage with and trial classroom activities and strategies, and ultimately change their classroom practice on the basis of the predominantly anecdotal evidence (often referred to as ‘sharing best practice’).

ALEA believes that anecdotal evidence will continue to be the basis of much policy development and classroom practice. Its value lies not in its scientific rigour, but in the processes that are set in train if time and opportunity for teachers to have regular ‘professional conversation’ is provided. Its value in the context of professional learning and development should be both acknowledged and used.

ii) Investigative and ‘Current Affairs’ journalism

While there is not much difference between some so-called ‘investigative journalism /current affairs journalism’ and anecdotal evidence, one significant difference is obvious: Investigative and current affairs journalism expects some kind of evidence to be provided to support the situation being investigated; there is typically an explicit attempt to provide some kind ‘proof’ for the points being argued. Some may argue that the validity of much of this ‘proof’ is often considered rather dubious, ranging from highly selective images, sound bites, interviews, and edited, decontextualised segments of video and audio tape to sophisticated audit trails of documents, receipts, electronic bugs. However what separates this category from anecdotal evidence is an explicit acknowledgement of the need for some kind of ‘proof’. Again ALEA’s archives are filled with multiple versions of this kind of journalism, especially in the field of literacy education. It is not unknown for such journalism to set in train a series of events that ultimately result in government policy being modified and/or created or at least investigated.

ALEA also believes that the use of investigative and ‘current affairs’ journalism has value in some contexts ought to be acknowledged.

iii) Government/bureaucratic reports and evaluations

Governments at both Federal and State levels have large budgets for commissioned research and consultancies. Typically those who win these contracts use qualitative and quasi-qualitative methods such as case studies, surveys, polls, etc. to investigate issues and/or evaluate the implementation of previous policies or programs. Governments tend to use the results of these studies to justify the legislation of certain policy decisions during parliamentary debate. They are thus a significant source of policy decision-making, and will continue to be so for the immediate future.

While ALEA supports the use of EBR for developing policy and implementing ‘best practice’, it also acknowledges that there is a lack of consistency between the rhetoric used by policy makers extolling the virtues of EBR and the practice of developing policy using evidence which has low degrees of reliability and/or validity. One of ALEA’s roles is to keep its membership informed of such inconsistencies.

iv) Peer-reviewed academic papers, presentations and, chapters in books

ALEA has always strongly supported the use of evidence from this category to inform both policy and practice. ALEA provides international journals and national conferences in order to bring such research to the world of education. ALEA contends that it is evidence of this kind which should be used to address the second question signalled above, namely, ‘What kind of evidence should inform classroom practice and government policy?’

In order to respond to this question it is important to firstly discuss *what constitutes ‘Evidence Based Research’ (EBR) in education?*

Until this prior question is addressed, justified and resolved, it is impossible to begin to address the issue of what kinds of evidence **should** or **ought to** inform policy and practice

ALEA is very aware that the issue of what counts as ‘evidence-based research’ in literacy education is a contentious one, especially in the area of reading education, mainly because the question of how best to teach reading has been controversial for a long time (Adams 1990, Chall, 1967). ALEA’s members have been key participants in this controversy, which seems to have intensified in the last decade or so, especially in Western democracies, fuelled predominantly by the persistent message that educational interventions and policies which are funded by taxpayers should be based on ‘evidence-based research’ (EBR). In some cases EBR is used synonymously with descriptors such as ‘reliable’ ‘replicable’, ‘scientifically rigorous’, and ‘data-informed’.

While ALEA agrees with the Inquiry’s *focus on identifying ways in which research about approaches to teaching literacy. . . . can best inform teacher education and classroom teaching practice* (National Inquiry into the Teaching Of Literacy, Australian Government Department of Education, Science, and Technology Website, 2004), it has serious concerns about the potential danger of defining EBR in terms of particular methods which privilege some kinds of evidence (and conversely marginalise others) as the ‘gold standard’ for evaluating educational practice. ALEA’s stance on this issue is quite explicit - if educational research is going to address the complexity and messiness of ‘practice-in-context’, it must draw from an expansive definition of scientific evidence, specifically one that includes more than experiments and quasi-experiments. It is imperative that such a definition be underpinned by the principle of ‘complementarity’-*it must be a definition which draws on the full range of available research paradigms and their methodologies in ways that complement the building of knowledge and theory.*

ALEA’s Rationale For An ‘Expansive’ Definition of EBR

ALEA’s membership firmly believes that complex issues associated with literacy instruction policy (indeed educational policy in generally) should be informed by a wide range of research methodologies.

Accordingly in what follows we will illustrate how literacy instruction (and policy) can be effectively informed if the full range of scientific evidence is considered.

1. Experimentation and Related Quantitative Methodologies

Randomised Assignment to Control and Experimental Groups

There is no doubt that conducting an experiment is the best way to find out about 'cause and effect'. In the ideal experimental design students are randomly assigned to instructional conditions some receiving an instructional intervention of interest to the researcher and others receiving a control intervention. If achievement is higher amongst those receiving the intervention, the most likely explanation is that the intervention 'caused' the achievement difference.

While random assignment to control and experimental groups is preferred to non-random, for complex ethical and contextual reasons it is not always possible².

Quasi-Experimental Research In Education

Because of ethical and/or contextual issues alluded to in footnote 2, researchers are forced to adopt a quasi-experimental design. In quasi-experimental research groups are matched and/or controlled for characteristics such as gender, intelligence, learning disability, social class, etc. that researchers believe *could* have an impact on the way they respond to the intervention.

However, as with randomised field trials, researchers who opt for a quasi-experimental approach frequently cannot match and/or control for every characteristic that might impact on participants' responses. Furthermore, often quasi-experimental designs are limited to single studies. This means that interpretations of the findings are severely circumscribed and limited.

Meta-Analysis

A statistical procedure called meta-analysis has been prominent in recent discussions of EBR for dealing with the limitations of quasi-experimental designs (Rowe and Rowe, 1996). In effect, meta-analysis makes it easier to draw conclusions across experimental and quasi-experimental studies (Glass, 1976).

Basically the size of the intervention effect is calculated for each experiment, and these are arithmetically averaged, usually giving greater weight to studies with larger samples. Meta-analyses illuminates the average effect sizes produced by interventions and provides information about when an intervention produces an effect and when it fails to do so (Pressley et al, 2004, p36).

While ALEA agrees that meta-analyses is a robust form of evidence, it does not accord it the 'gold standard' status that some researchers claim it should have (NRP, 2000). On the contrary, ALEA contends that there are significant shortcomings associated with this method that this Inquiry needs to take into consideration. Meta-analysis focuses exclusively on identifying what works best generally, by comparing how treatment and control groups perform *on average*. Essentially it deals in *probabilities* and not in *absolutes*, whereas teachers deal in *variation* not *sameness*.

² Researchers cannot match or control for every participant characteristic that could have impact on how they respond to the instruction. Nor is it ethical to allow students in control groups to receive 'no instruction' or 'deleterious instruction'.

Finding enough studies to subject to meta-analysis is very difficult, especially if the issue being investigated has not been repeatedly examined. This means that there is a danger that the search process misses studies that others might consider important.³

Meta-analysis demands sophisticated statistical skills (Rowe and Rowe, 1996; Cooper and Hedges, 1994) This not only precludes many researchers from using it, but it alienates many teachers from even attempting to read it, let alone apply its recommendations.

Meta- analysis is further complicated because it requires more than sophisticated statistical skills. The meta-analyst must have sufficient understanding of the issues being analysed to be able decide which experimental tests are comparable and which are not. For example, if a researcher is conducting a meta-analysis of phonics instruction he/she must first acquire a detailed understanding of the various types of phonics instruction, most critically what constitutes more (or less) ‘explicit and systematic’ instruction, what qualifies as ‘effective reading’, or ‘conventional instruction’ and whether each experiment in meta-analysis includes credible and appropriate dependent measures. Too often such detailed understanding is not acquired by the meta-analyst, which in turn results in findings which are questionable.

As previously stated, ALEA has consistently adopted the position that the points of view held by those who engage in [academic] arguments and debates are always based on the different theoretical perspectives and practical experiences which have professionally nurtured those who hold them.

This means that others who come from different theoretical traditions will analyse studies differently and reach quite different conclusions. Ehri’s (2004) research into word recognition and use of the alphabetic principle is a good example of how the interpretations and perspectives of the researcher can shape the conclusions and recommendations which flow from them.

ALEA fully supports Pressley et al’s position on the value of experimental evidence for informing policy and practice:

In summary, although meta-analysis is a powerful method for synthesising and reviewing outcomes when a number of experimental and/or quasi-experimental studies of an intervention have been conducted, it is also like any single method, limited, and it cannot be applied mechanically. The meta-analyst must understand well both how the studies being analysed were conducted and what issues they addressed. Moreover the analyst will sometimes confront a situation when meta-analysis is not possible (Pressley et al 2004 p 39).

2. Non-Experimental, Naturalistically Oriented, Qualitative Methodologies

While the majority of ALEA’s members agree that experimental methods are useful for discovering ‘what causes what’ they also believe that there is a great deal of useful and informative evidence about literacy instruction which cannot be generated by either experimental or quasi-experimental methods. In particular, ALEA’s members believe that even the most meticulously designed randomised field trial can never address some questions that are highly significant for literacy education, questions like:

³ See ALEA’s critique of Draft Review of Literature, (Turbill & van Haren 2005) p 4

- What is happening here?
- What do these happenings ‘mean’ to those who are engaged in them?
- Are these happenings just and in the best interests of people generally?
- Do they contribute to or inhibit human life chances and quality of life?

ALEA is convinced that not only are such questions as important and significant as ‘what causes what’? but also answering such questions is what non-experimental, naturalistically oriented research is best at.

Accordingly in what follows ALEA will illustrate how literacy instruction (and policy) can be effectively informed by non-experimental, naturalistically oriented research.

Grounded Theory Analyses of Literacy Instruction

ALEA’s experience since its inception in 1975 clearly shows that construction of grounded theories (Strauss & Corbin 1998) has been extremely informative for literacy instruction. Grounded theories of literacy instruction are constructed by ‘human instruments’ watching teaching *in situ*, conducting interviews with teachers and learners, and analysing the documents and artefacts they produce to support teaching and learning. They then analyse the data which are generated, developing categories and relationships between categories, and through this process develop deep understanding of the instruction being watched.

ALEA has identified two important aspects of grounded theory research that it wishes to draw to the Inquiry’s attention:

- Grounded theory analysis results in a theory that can be translated into hypotheses. (Many important hypotheses about how to teach literacy have emerged from such studies.)
- Grounded theory building is a necessary pre-requisite for guiding and shaping evaluations of intervention studies.

For example the understanding that made it possible to design and carry out a high quality evaluation study into comprehension instruction gained from previous grounded theory research, made it possible for Brown et al (1996) to design an intervention study that evaluated comprehension instruction as it was being done in schools. ALEA strongly believes that without access to the years of qualitative study conducted by teachers it would have been impossible to design such a high quality evaluation.

Another example of the value of grounded theory studies are the series of studies of ‘best practice’ and ‘exemplary classrooms’ which have been carried out in the last five years in USA (Wharton-McDonald et al 1998; Pressley et al 2001). What emerged from these studies was a grounded theory that ‘effective’ primary grade instruction is a complex balancing of

- a. teaching reading and writing skills
- b. students reading excellent literature and composing increasingly longer and more communicative texts
- c. teachers in this classrooms developing management plans that were so effective they appeared ‘seamless’, and

- d. the teachers' substantial efforts to engage and motivate their students and their success in doing so.

Pulling Some Threads Together: Why The Inquiry Needs An Expansive Definition of EBR

When the value of non-experimental, naturalistically oriented, qualitative research perspectives is added to those emerging from experimental and quasi-experimental studies, it is clear that ALEA's claim that a broad range of complementary instructional studies can be defended with scientific data (i.e. EBR). Thus when the findings from the full range of research methods are summarised some highly significant recommendations can be made, including:

- The process of enriching children's lives should begin in infancy, with a specific emphasis providing rich linguistic and conceptual experiences (NICHD Child Care Research Network 2004).
- Quality pre-school, excellent educational television, captioned entertainment television accompanied by many experiences with literature can promote literacy (Barnett 2001, Ball & Bogatz, 1970, Bogatz & Ball 1971).
- Formal teaching in schools matters. Explicit and systematic teaching of skills needs to be 'mindful' (rather than 'mindless') and 'contextualised' (rather than 'decontextualised') for learner engagement to be high (Allington, 2002, 2004; Cambourne, 2002; Langer, 1990, 1997; Eldredge, et al. 1996).
- Teachers who use diverse, scientifically defensible instructional, managerial, and motivational practices engage their students more thoroughly, which in turn results in substantial gains in reading and writing (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Wigfield, 1997; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Frepon, 1991).
- Teaching of 'basic' (as opposed to 'extreme') phonemic awareness and phonics makes sense in the mix, as does guided and repeated reading (Krashen, (in press); Elley et al., 1983; Bloome et al., 1985; Clarke, 1988).
- In the best literacy classrooms such instruction is balanced by students experiencing authentic books and writing every day (Allington, 2002, 2004; Weaver, 2002; Cantrell, 1999; McGill-Frazen, et al. in press; Taylor. et al., 2002; Kucer, 2005).

ALEA firmly believes that without a wide and expansive definition of EBR the many complex 'bits' of scientific evidence that have converged to support recommendations like those above, would not be possible.

ISSUE 3. THE ROLE OF PHONICS IN LEARNING TO READ

One of the objectives listed in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference alludes to the role of phonics in learning to read thus:

Identify the extent to which prospective teachers are provided with reading teaching approaches and skills that are effective in the classroom, and have the opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to implement effective classroom reading programs. Training in both phonics and whole language approaches to reading will be examined. (National Inquiry into the Teaching Of Literacy, Australian Government Department of Education, Science, and Technology Website, 2004).

ALEA is concerned that this dichotomy has been set up within the terms of reference. For some ten years now ALEA's journals have been publishing peer-reviewed articles that clearly demonstrate that such dichotomy no longer exists in the Australian literacy field. Furthermore it is a fallacy that something called 'whole language' precludes the systematic and explicit teaching of phonics. We believe that there is a series of unquestioned assumptions implicitly embedded in this objective. These are:

- Reading is a separate, discrete, independent curriculum domain in its own right, quite independent of other accoutrements of literacy.
- There is consensus on what constitutes 'effective' reading, teaching, learning etc.
- There is consensus on what constitutes an 'effective classroom reading program'.
- There are just two discrete 'approaches' to 'effective reading instruction' worth considering.
- These approaches comprise a set of 'procedures' that teachers need to acquire.
- Because these 'procedures' can be acquired through 'training' they can be mechanically and invariantly applied across all classroom contexts and all children.

ALEA recommends that more useful framework for examining various approaches and practices in the teaching and learning of reading is Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model or framework (1990, 1999). Such a framework appropriates many sets of practices or approaches that a reader must acquire in order to be effective in the 21st century.

The Teaching of Phonics

Krashen (2004) has identified three broad instructional approaches for teaching phonics. These are:

Instructional Approach 1: Intensive, Systematic Phonics.

Instructional Approach 2: Basic Phonics

Instructional Approach 3 Zero Phonics

1. Instructional Approach 1: Intensive, Systematic Phonics

This approach is advocated by those who define reading as a process of that requires automatic phonological recoding of print to sound as a necessary prerequisite for constructing reading.

Ehri (2004) defines this approach as follows: *Phonics instruction is systematic when all of the major letter-sound correspondences are taught and covered in a clearly defined sequence.* (p. 180). In order for this to happen, first the ‘major phonic rules’ must be identified and then codified. In Ehri’s work such codified rules include, *long and short vowels and vowel and consonant digraphs consisting of two letters representing one phoneme, such as oi, ea, sh, and th.* Also, *phonics instruction may include blends of letter sounds that represent larger subunits in words such as consonant pairs (e.g. st, bl), onsets, and rimes* (p. 180).

Instructional Approach 2: Basic Phonics⁴

According to this position, *it is helpful to teach some rules of phonics, but just the basics, just the straight-forward rules.* (Krashen, 2004) A critical difference between this approach and the ‘Intensive Systematic Phonics’ approach centres on the claim that learning all the major rules of phonics is an essential prerequisite for constructing meaning. Proponents of the ‘Basic Phonics’ reject this premise and argue that while phonics instruction is *extremely helpful*, detail knowledge of a large set of complex phonics rules is not *essential* (Krashen, 2004) and certainly not for all children.

At the core of the Basic Phonics approach is the conviction that sustained engagement in reading is a ‘knowledge-and-skill-generating-process’, and that once a learner has basic phonic knowledge and is provided with repeated opportunities to apply it appropriately, the more he/she learns about phonics.

Rather those who adopt a version of the ‘Basic Phonics’ approach would justify their decision thus:

- that the complex phonic knowledge which effective readers seem to possess is the end product of frequent sessions of sustained reading, not the cause.
- that conscious knowledge of basic rules can help children learn to read by making texts more comprehensible⁵.
- that regular engagement in purposeful and authentic writing tasks which encourage young learners to ‘approximate’ conventional spellings using a mix of letter names, and letter sound correspondences (‘invented’ or ‘temporary’ spellings) provides a more effective medium for learning and acquiring complex phonic knowledge than lock-step, teacher-controlled, ‘telling’ of this knowledge (Clark. 1988).

Basic Phonics also appears to be the position of authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a book widely considered to provide strong support for phonics instruction:

...phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships ... once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter- sound correspondences is through repeated opportunities to read. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive (Anderson, Heibert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985, p.38).

⁴ ALEA maintains that the term ‘Basic Phonics’ as coined by Krashen, merely provides a label for a position that already exists, but which has not previously been made explicit.

⁵ Smith (1994) explains how this can happen: The child is reading the sentence ‘The man was riding on the h ____.’ and cannot read the final word. Given the context and knowledge of ‘h’ the child can make a good guess as to what the final word is.

Finally a 'Basic Phonics' approach is also commensurate with the establishment of a classroom ethos that:

- Encourages ALL children to invest large amounts of personal energy needed to become a highly productive, critically literate member of society (Gee, 2003).
- Makes use of the most recent EBR into 'motivation' and 'engagement' in learning which clearly shows that there are larger effect sizes in reading achievement in classrooms which emphasise setting knowledge goals rather than performance goals, providing students with choices about what to read, where, and with whom, supplying interesting texts allowing students to collaborate while reading, than effect sizes produces in classrooms which adopted a version of the 'systematic intensive 'phonics approach (Guthrie and Humenick, 2004)

Instructional Approach 3. Zero Phonics

This view claims that all phonics rules can be acquired by reading, and that direct of phonics teaching is not necessary or even helpful. While there is some evidence that some children do successfully learn to read for meaning, write comprehensible texts, and acquire many conventional spellings prior to coming to school, ALEA does not believe that the complex factors which enable this to occur are sufficiently understood for them to be applied to the classroom situation.

ALEA's conclusions concerning teaching of phonics

Having reviewed the literature, analysed the EBR, ALEA believes that the evidence from a wide range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives supports the position that it is possible to construct meaning from alphabetic scripts by accessing meaning directly.

While there is certainly strong support among the public and the media for 'phonics' instruction, what is not clear is whether the support is for Intensive Systematic Phonics, or Basic Phonics. Those who advocate Intensive Systematic Phonics regularly accuse teachers and school systems of supporting the Zero Phonics position (Hempenstall, 1996, Donnelly 2005).

ALEA's membership is representative of those involved in literacy education. The evidence presented in articles in ALEA journals, and in presentations at ALEA conferences over many years indicates that most ALEA members adopt a Basic Phonics approach, and argue that basic phonics is an important and vital component to help make texts more comprehensible. Public opinion might be much closer to this view than to the extreme positions taken by those who are promoting Intensive Systematic Phonics.

ALEA agrees that not only is it possible 'to construct meaning from alphabetic scripts by accessing meaning directly', it is also more effective, reliable and valid to base the pedagogical approaches recommended to teachers on this position. Given this, it is therefore logical that ALEA supports the 'Basic Phonics' approach above 'Systematic, Intensive Phonics' and the 'Zero Phonics' approaches described above.

ISSUE 4. ASSESSMENT, EVALUATION, AND MONITORING THE PROGRESS OF STUDENTS' LITERACY DEVELOPMENT K- 12

Assessment of literacy is a critical component of the teaching/learning cycle.

ALEA argues therefore that assessment falls broadly into two categories:

1. assessment for teaching and learning (often called 'formative assessment')
2. assessment for reporting to parents, students and other stakeholders (often called 'summative assessment')

There are many 'stakeholders' who have an interest or 'stake' in the assessment of students. Each of these stakeholders requires or needs something different from the assessment process. The following identifies the most obvious stakeholders and their needs.

- Education decision makers need to ensure that schools are delivering quality education
- School leaders need to ensure there is quality teaching and learning in the schools for which they are responsible
- Parents need to be certain they are receiving reliable information about their children's progress
- Students need feedback which will enable them to focus on their learning and to set goals for future learning.
- Teachers need to ensure that students remain the central focus in their classrooms.
- Teachers need to know their approaches and chosen strategies are meeting the needs of all students.

ALEA contends that valid and reliable information is necessary to inform all these stakeholders and must be acquired in ways that lead to as little interruption to the daily teaching and learning experiences as is possible.

Teachers therefore need knowing about what and how to collect data as well as when how to analyse such data in ways that will lead to valid and reliable judgments.

Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson and Preece (1991, 30 -31) developed a framework for 'data' collection that they called 'the quad'. This framework outlines four categories of data collection: observation of process, observation of product, classroom measures and decontextualised measures.

Observation of process includes:

- Anecdotal comments from classroom observation and reflection
- Interviews/conferences with students, parents and other professionals who may teach the students
- Responses to reading: written retellings, text reconstruction

Observations of product includes

- Published work samples
- Drafts
- Notes and entries made in learning journals, diaries and other workbooks
- Reading logs, including responses to readings
- Running records

Classroom measures include

- Text related activities that the teacher assigns a grade or score
- Teacher made units and assessment tasks

Decontextualised measures include

- Criterion reference measures
- District or cross-grade tests
- State and national tests

ALEA recommends a balanced approach to assessment that serves the purposes of all stakeholders, but particularly provides useful data that assists teachers make informed decisions about future learning experiences. Where possible assessment must occur within the normal classroom literacy periods.

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