

## Questioning the credibility of the Donnelly Report: Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula

For someone who is purporting to champion rigour and academic standards, Dr Kevin Donnelly has produced a flawed and cynically inaccurate report in the interests of promoting ideological goals.

While there is much to criticise in terms of methodology and 'findings', I will take just one example: his review of the NSW English K-6 Syllabus<sup>1</sup>.

In his 'international benchmarking' exercise, Donnelly selects three syllabuses from other countries – USA (California), England and New Zealand - against which he compares the Australian syllabuses. In the process, he dismisses the New Zealand syllabus, leaving the Californian and UK syllabuses as those he feels are superior to the Australian syllabuses.

Donnelly selects two areas of the English curriculum for analysis: 'early years of reading' and 'literature'.

In relation to '**early years of reading**', Donnelly assigns 'top marks' to the Californian standards statement. However, using Donnelly's preferred approach of quantitative analysis, the following is revealed in relation to descriptors of development of basic reading skills:

California:	44 instances
England:	8 instances (ranked equally with NSW)
NSW:	91 instances

In addition, English K-6 has a 124 page Literacy Support Document for Students Experiencing Learning Difficulties outlining in great detail the support to be provided for such students.

Donnelly himself admits that English K-6 '*gives teachers detailed guidance as to the types of skills needed related to phonics*', providing numerous examples from the syllabus. One is forced to question, therefore, the inferior ranking to the Californian syllabus.

Mischievously, Donnelly criticises English K-6 for not using terms such as 'phonemic awareness' and 'phonics'. He fails to acknowledge, however, that synonyms for these terms (eg phonological awareness or sound awareness and graphophonic relations or sound-letter relations) are used quite freely in the syllabus.

In terms of '**literature**', the Californian document was ranked as exemplary, receiving twice as many stars as English K-6. And yet, it is hard to know the basis for this judgement. His criticism of English K-6 is that '*very few of the indicators deal with the technical aspects of literature*' (p.74). However an examination of the indicators reveals equal attention as the Californian syllabus to traditional aspects such as author, illustrator, characters, setting, events, plot, conflict, resolution, acts, scenes, stage directions, cinquain, haiku, visual images and to the use of such stylistic devices as repetition, synonyms, antonyms, rhyme, syllables, rhythm, simile, metaphor, idiom, personification, alliteration, and assonance.

With regard to English K-6, Donnelly states that the indicator '*interprets a variety of literary and factual texts*' begs the question of what types of text - but then omits to mention the accompanying indicators which refer to:

- 'more lengthy and challenging **stories** and **poems**'
- 'longer, more involved **recounts** (eg historical, empathetic)'
- '**reviews** of children's literary works'
- 'more complex **procedures**'
- '**instructions** and sets of **rules**'
- 'more complex **information reports**'

---

<sup>1</sup> I am focussing on English K-6 as that is the syllabus with which I am most familiar, having been a member of the writing team.

‘**electronic texts**’  
‘**causal explanations**’  
‘**sustained arguments**’

English K-6 is criticised for failing to define what is meant by ‘text structure’ or identify which ‘grammatical features’ need to be covered. And yet there are two substantial support documents which address these aspects comprehensively. In this area, Australia are world leaders, well beyond both the UK and USA.

Donnelly claims that ‘many of the curriculum descriptors show little evidence of any increase in complexity or difficulty across the levels (see, for example, RS1.5-RS2.5-RS3.5)’ (p.72). An examination of these descriptors however reveals a distinct recognition of increase in complexity (which is then further illustrated by the indicators):

- *RES1.5: Demonstrates **developing reading skills** to read **short, predictable** written texts on **familiar** topics.*
- *RS1.5: Reads a **wider range** of texts on **less familiar** topics with **increasing independence and understanding**, making connections between **own knowledge and experience and information in texts**.*
- *RS2.5: Reads **independently a wide range** of texts on **increasingly challenging topics** and **justifies own interpretation** of ideas, information and events.*
- *RS3.5 Reads **independently an extensive range** of texts with **increasing content demands and responds to themes and issues**. (my bolding of aspects of development)*

These descriptors are grounded in sound developmental theory with regard to the degree of autonomy in reading, the familiarity and predictability of the content, the degree of challenge and complexity in the texts, the sophistication of the reader’s response, the length of the text, and the range of types of texts. It is hard to imagine fitting more developmental description into such brief statements.

From the information available in the Report, it appears that Donnelly has been able to identify only one syllabus internationally that he considers to be superior to English K-6, and from the above observations, even this is open to question. Using different (and more theoretically appropriate) criteria, it could even be demonstrated that English K-6 is a far superior document to the Californian syllabus in many respects.

It would appear that, with regard to English, the Report has maligned a locally produced syllabus in favour of a foreign one which is not remarkably different from the home-grown product when judged by Donnelly’s own criteria.

If Donnelly’s Report is so wilfully inaccurate in terms of one of the Syllabuses it criticises, then how credible is the rest of the report? One would need to ask why DEST would give its imprimatur to such a poorly researched document - unless the ‘findings’ conveniently supported a conservative push to discredit current Australian syllabuses in order to pursue its own agenda. One might also ask about the process used to select Donnelly, a former chief-of-staff to Federal Liberal Minister Kevin Andrews, to produce the report.

Literacy educators are becoming increasingly demoralised and frustrated at the relentless, simplistic, headline-grabbing attacks on their professionalism. Literacy research in Australia is well-regarded internationally and English K-6 has been recognised as a comprehensive, detailed, balanced and practical syllabus. Why, in the context of international competition, would Australia want to be seen to be denigrating its own?

Dr Beverly Derewianka  
Director, Centre for Research in Language and Literacy  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong