
Breaking some of the myths – again

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Recently some of you may have read the superb article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "The Great Escape", written by Deirdre Macken. One section deserves exact citation.

Australians are losing touch with reality. Traumatized by change, cynical of authority and pressurised by the pace of life, people are embracing myths and misconceptions: they increasingly rely on personal anecdote rather than on expert opinion to inform their view of the world and they are more likely to view statistics as an attempt to lobby rather than an indicator of reality.

This skewered (sic) view of the world is not just a curious aberration, one of the hiccups of society in transition. The flight from reality is gathering momentum. It is feeding on itself; myth, repeated enough, becomes part of the community's pool of knowledge; misconceptions, held with enough passion, set the agenda for society.

As the polls of perceptions divert further from the grounding of sense, logic, statistics, research, considered opinion, analysis and expertise, society is becoming more vulnerable to manipulation by political groups and vested interests.

More importantly, myth is receiving the imprimatur of authority as the most powerful institution – politics – is forced to respond to perceptions of reality rather than actual causes of concerns. The list of legislation crafted to quell misplaced fears grows annually.¹

Ms Macken proceeded to provide a number of striking examples, such as the myth that most single-parent pensioners are teenage girls, whereas in fact only 2.9% of sole-parent pensioners in Australia are under 20 years of age.

Of course, some "myths" are valid and can be substantiated. One myth which Ms Macken showed to be true is that large numbers of extremely wealthy Australians don't pay their fair share of tax. Ms Macken cites an Australian Taxation Office survey of 100 of the *Business Review Weekly* magazine's Rich List which found that 80 of them had declared an income of less than \$25,000, a fact which I, as an ordinary PAYE wage-earner, find to be utterly offensive.


Ms Macken's article makes no reference to false myths associated with literacy, but her observations are absolutely apposite to this continuously controversial area of policy, perception, and practice.

There was also the attack in the Sydney "contemporary" press on "modern methods" in to the teaching of reading and writing:

The wholesale substitution of "modern methods" has been found to be unwise. The defects apparent in school children at the present day are summarised thus: (a) the children are not thoroughly grounded in essentials; (b) they are not accurate in their work. Business people in Sydney... find these and similar defects in the children they are at present taking into their employment and they attribute them largely to the new methods of education.²

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– Deirdre Macken



Our students need to be able to write grammatically, to spell correctly, to read fluently, flexibly and critically, as well as being able to use language imaginatively, creatively and purposefully in a wide variety of contexts.

I must confess: I am misleading you. This contemporary criticism was made in an editorial in *The Catholic Press*, a New South Wales publication, in 1909.

This leads me into the first of the Literacy Myths I wish to explore.

Myth 1 - Things were always better in the “good old days”

The most constantly recurring issue in our field, maybe since early Greco-Roman history, has been the lament of the aged and the conservative about the “decline in literacy standards” in the young being perpetrated by dreadful, “soft, touchy, feely” contemporary teacher “revolutionaries” accused of lacking the intellectual rigour of their predecessors.

To say this is not to deny the absolute legitimacy, indeed the utter imperative, of the ever-recurring concerns throughout history for maintaining and increasing the literacy skills of young people within a world of ever rapidly changing and demanding contexts for textual, oral/aural, visual and what might broadly be called technological, literacies.

Our students need to be able to write grammatically, to spell correctly, to read fluently, flexibly and critically, as well as being able to use language imaginatively, creatively, critically and purposefully in a wide variety of contexts.

And one does not learn to read merely by osmosis. It demands the informed, skilled and explicit intervention of good teaching, whether this be undertaken by parents, school teachers, or others, such as volunteer aid workers in Africa, or those children in Nicaragua who taught their own illiterate parents how to read in Paulo Freire’s famous literacy program.

But it does not matter where you dip into the history of education, you will find thunderous roars of utter conviction that standards are “now” palpably worse than they were a generation ago. The 1990s Jeremias hark

back to the 1950s. It is necessary, however, to apply an informed historical perspective to untrammelled cries of gloom and doom. For example, if you go back to the newspapers of the so-called “good old days” of the 1950s you will find identical lamentations for contemporary disasters, and calls for a return to the presumed halcyon days of the 1930s.

So, let us go back nearly 50 years to those “good old days” and listen to the comments of the Chief Examiner in English for the 1948 Leaving Certificate examination, Professor Waldock, thundering about the students sitting for the Leaving Certificate in 1946: “It is disappointing to find that students imagine they can pass a Leaving Certificate Examination without being able to write a sentence”.³

Reviewing what he had seen in the 1948 LC Examination Waldock lamented:

*Examiners again stress the weakness is spelling. Here are some of the words that seem to confound large numbers of students (nearly 80 words followed including “tragic”, “practical”, “clever”, “hungry”, “persuade”, “believe”, “enemies” and “sensitive”)...It was felt too that errors in grammar and syntax are still too common. It seems that many pupils are conversant with the correct theory of good usage, but from lack of practice or attention continue to commit the old mistakes. ...The examiners...feel that candidates are still very weak in fundamentals - that far too many, for example, do not know what a noun is, let alone an abstract noun.*⁴

Professor Waldock’s successor, Professor Alec Mitchell, declared in 1951 that he agreed with the withering criticisms made in the Norwood Report of 1941 on “the serious failure of the British secondary schools to produce literate students” and declared that, without a doubt, the same situation existed in NSW in 1950.⁵

Let us not forget that these Leaving Certificate students were the *crème de la crème*. In the 1940s and early 1950s, of every 100 students commencing sixth class, fewer than 20 or so completed their Leaving Certificate five years later. For example, of the 50,000 who enrolled in first year government high schools in 1948, only 16.1% survived to commence their LC year in 1952.⁶ The comparable figure today, of course, is around 70%, and almost certainly about to climb following the Commonwealth's latest edict on abolishing dole payments for 16 to 18 year olds.

Ah, but how knockers of modern teaching hark back to the mythical "good old days" when, they assume, everything was wonderful.

This process of lamentation for the present and exhortation for a return to some mythical halcyon past era can be traced continuously back into the 19th century and beyond. George Elliott, President of the prestigious Harvard College, lamented in 1871 that: "Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared for college."⁷

One of the many modern scholars who have drawn our attention to the "declining standards" myth, the American Andrew Sledd, has observed that:

*the discussion of this (declining standards myth) is not timely – it is timeless; for although Newsweek certified our crisis a mere decade ago... no fewer than five consecutive generations have been condemned for writing worse than their predecessors. By now our students should hardly put processor to paper; it's a wonder they can write at all.*⁸

Another American historian of literacy practices, Harvey Daniels, traces this pattern back as far as George Puttenham's despair about the declining standards of literacy amongst the young of his day in 1586!

Daniels sums up in this way:

To conclude: literacy has been declining since it was invented; one of the first ancient Sumerian tablets deciphered by modern scholars immortalised a teacher fretting over the recent drop in (standards of) students' writing. It is Sledd's cryptic conclusion that "there will always be a literacy crisis, if for no other reason than because the old never wholly like the young".⁹

I wish to discuss three big "literacy crises", each of which have enjoyed massive media coverage and assumptions of certitude – and each of which has turned out to be a furphy. Yet, in all three cases, any exposure of the myths was relatively ineffectual in weakening the power of the mythology of crisis or the skewing of public perceptions of reality.


(a) 1950/51

In a book published in 1996¹⁰, I detailed the extraordinary chronicle of errors and false premises which led to the erroneous conclusions in the report on student performance in the 1951 English Leaving Certificate written by the Chief Examiner/Chairman of the English Syllabus Committee, Professor Mitchell, and presented to his colleagues on the Board of Secondary School Studies. Mitchell alleged that, compared with the 1950 candidacy and "pass mark", nearly 50% of all metropolitan candidates and about 25% of all non-metropolitan candidates should have failed English in 1951. He informed his Board colleagues that the required proportion given at least a "Pass" result had been achieved only by lowering the pass mark of 44% in 1950, to 40% in 1951.

In his report to his colleagues on the Board, Professor Mitchell was adamant about the disastrous situation facing everyone. There could be only two possible explanations for the 1951 literacy crisis, said Mitchell: "the performance of the candidates and the effectiveness of the teaching".¹¹

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– Andrew Sledd



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All sorts of “reasons” for this apparently disastrous result were proffered by Mitchell and his colleagues on the Board of Secondary School Studies. They included assertions such as that country teachers were more dedicated than city teachers; that fewer students than ever had studied history (in fact, the very opposite was the case); that because of the introduction of what Mitchell referred to as the new “non-academic” schools for girls known as Home Science schools, a “weaker”¹² candidacy had joined the cohort in 1951 (in fact, the average mark in English of all students at these schools was higher than the State average). Similar claims were made about the products of Technical High Schools for boys.

R. G. (Phil) Price, who was Director of Secondary Education and was the lone member of the Board in any way to contest Mitchell’s sweeping allegations, suggested that the city students were more susceptible than their country cousins to the distractions of the wireless, “with its ready choice of serials and hit parades to which the children become addicted at an early age”.¹³

The errors or irrelevancies of all these assumptions and assertions were subsequently exposed by the research of the then relatively junior officer with the Department of Education, Dr (later, Sir) Harold Wyndham.

Using the new “SILIAC” computer (which filled a room at the University of Sydney), Wyndham undertook a comprehensive analysis of the marking records of the ten markers (6 of them were academics on Mitchell’s staff at the University of Sydney) who had marked the 1951 Leaving Certificate English examination.

Wyndham found that once corrections were made for marker bias (which, in the case of two markers, was quite dramatic) not only was there no significant difference between the 1950 and the 1951 Leaving Certificate English results, there was also no significant difference between the metropolitan and non-metropolitan candidates in 1951. Wyndham’s report was tabled at the Board’s meeting in November, 1952.¹⁴

But this report was not presented to the Board until after the 1953 Syllabus had been completed and was never, at any stage, considered by the English Syllabus Committee. Nor did it ever enter the public domain.

What was to drive the English curriculum in NSW for the next decade was not Wyndham’s exposé of the false interpretation of the 1951 exam results, therefore, but Mitchell’s paper and the enthusiastic response to it by his colleagues on both the English Syllabus Committee and the Board of Secondary School Studies.

Because of the presumed “crisis” of 1951, the Board decided to add a second Leaving Certificate examination focussing specifically upon English usage, expression and comprehension and thereby redress the “serious weakness in written expression” revealed in the Chief Examiner Reports in English and ‘most subjects’¹⁵. The Board also resolved to rewrite the 1944 English Syllabus. Both the additional examination and the new syllabus came into operation in 1953.

(b) 1992/3 - The Literacy Challenge

Let me jump ahead forty years. Emblazoned across Australia in late 1992 were headlines thundering outrage that one in four students entering high school from primary school was illiterate. Throughout that year, and into 1993 and beyond, this myth flourished and was rarely contested. The background to this furphy is as follows.

At the end of 1992, the Keating Labor Government tabled a report on literacy in schools entitled *The Literacy Challenge* produced by a House of Representatives committee chaired by Mary Crawford, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Employment, Education and Training. By and large its recommendations were sensible.

Later, we* on the Australian Language and Literacy Council, in association with the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), successfully urged the government to respond to *The Literacy Challenge* by establishing a National School English Literacy Survey (NSELS), which subsequently Prime Minister Keating established in *Working Nation*. It is fair to say that this survey was the most comprehensive and educationally credible national survey of literacy at Years 3 and 5 ever undertaken in Australia. I was a member of both the National Steering Committee and the Management Committee of the Survey from its inception until just after the Federal Election of 1996. The new Minister, Dr Kemp, removed all members other than State and Commonwealth Government officials, though after a strong campaign by both national unions of teachers he allowed the representatives of the Australian education Union (Sharan Burrow) and the Independent Education Union (Lynn Rolley) to remain on the steering committee.

We conducted the trial survey in 1995. The survey was conducted in 1996**. It is crucial that this thoroughly researched, effectively monitored project, which involved so many classroom teachers and their professional development, significantly influences the establishment of literacy benchmarks at Grades 3 and 5 by the Ministerial Council's (MCEETYA) national literacy and numeracy taskforce, whose preliminary drafting of such benchmarks has not had the degree of scope, funding, quality of research, professional development, and classroom trialling enjoyed by the NSELS.

It is possible, for example, that the NSELS research may demonstrate that the draft benchmarks established by the taskforce of the Council of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers have been set at inappropriate levels.

*I was the Council's Special Adviser 1992-1996.

**Subsequent to the "Refocus on reading" conference Minister Kemp released the results of the NSELS along with an additional report he had commissioned from Australian Council Educational Research (ACER).

But none of the "good news" associated with *The Literacy Challenge* hit the press. The one sentence which was to generate the sensationalist headlines all around Australia in early 1993 was the unproved, blunt assertion that "ten to twenty percent of children are finishing primary school with literacy problems".¹⁶

Yet, the very next sentence in *The Literacy Challenge* seems to contradict the confidence of its predecessor: "The actual numbers of children with such problems are not known".¹⁷

There is just no empirical evidence to prove that our primary schools in 1991 or 1992 were graduating such large numbers of sixth class students with serious literacy problems. What can be found is an implied assumption on page 2, paragraphs 1.6 and 1.7 of *The Literacy Challenge* that, because in its previous report on adult literacy the committee was presented with evidence that "between ten and twenty percent of the adult population is functionally illiterate", then it must therefore be true that "ten to twenty percent of children are finishing primary school with literacy problems".¹⁸

This was an unproved assertion based on a flawed extrapolation from the only comprehensive survey of adult literacy conducted in Australia, that of Rosie Wicker's, *No Single Measure* published in 1989.¹⁹ Ms Wickert studiously avoided the term "functionally illiterate" to describe the proportion of her survey who manifested literacy difficulties. And, above all, she categorically did not make any assertions about the literacy standards of contemporary sixth class children.

The subjects in the Wickert survey, if they had been at school at all in Australia, would have been in sixth class in the years between about 1919 and 1979. In fact, her research showed clearly that there were two categories within her sample which consistently had literacy difficulties: those over 60 years of age (products of the so-called good old days) and those who had experienced fewer than six years of schooling. It was absence from, not attendance at, schooling which is the issue here.

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Teacher-bashing and the slamming those of us who try to introduce enlightened balance into the perennial and simplistic rantings of some of our media pontificators as they peddle their "we'll all be roon'd" mythologies, is an age-old sport.

Evidence that a new piece of politically correct cant had entered the lexicon of literacy mythology soon appeared when a major EPAC Report, *Education and Training in the 1990s* (Paper No.31) ratcheted up *The Literacy Challenge's* statement that "ten to twenty per cent of children are finishing primary schools with literacy problems" to its own hyperbole of "around 25 per cent of children beginning secondary schooling are not able to read and write properly"²⁰!

The data which the authors of *The Literacy Challenge* ignored or overlooked in having arrived at their position about students entering secondary school was quite breathtaking. The Report admitted that the governments of Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory had not provided "any estimates of the number of children considered to be at risk": the same was true for Queensland²¹. Not a shred of evidence was presented from the ACT to support the Report's assertion. Only one of the eight States and Territories, South Australia, provided any evidence that could remotely substantiate the claim. The South Australian submission noted that its WRAP program "found that one in five Year 6 students across the school population was having difficulty with the demands of school reading and writing"²². But that is well short of asserting that one in four sixth class graduates could not read and write properly.

And the NSW data was fearfully distorted. The Report claimed that the NSW Basic Skills Test (BST)"showed that twenty per cent of children required 'some intervention'"²³. But "some intervention" is light years away from the catastrophic situation claimed by *The Literacy Challenge* and EPA.

Later that year the then Director of Curriculum in the Department of School Education tore apart these furrphies. Commenting on the 1993 BST for Year 6, which showed that fewer than 150 of the State's 58,000 sixth class students in government schools were found to be illiterate (Band 0), that more than 50% of all boys and girls had to be grouped in the two highest bands, and that students in Band 1 could not be classified as illiterate, the Director declared:

unsubstantiated reports had created the image that the nation's education system was in a woeful state. A Commonwealth parliamentary inquiry at the beginning of the year which revealed that 25% of young Australians were illiterate was shattered by these results²⁴.

The 1992 BST results had been very similar. They should have been known to the authors of *The Literacy Challenge*.

But the myth that one in four sixth class graduates cannot read or write persists, and its perpetrators love to propagate it with embellishments.

The media had great fun. For example, the *Brisbane Courier Mail* headline proclaimed, as fact, that "one in four are poor readers and writers"²⁵. *The Hobart Mercury* went one better, asserting that "a House of Representatives committee... revealed up to 25 per cent of children were unable to read or write"²⁶.

Teacher-bashing and the slamming those of us who try to introduce enlightened balance into the perennial and simplistic rantings of some of our media pontificators as they peddle their "we'll all be roon'd" mythologies, is an age-old sport.

(c) The ACER-Kemp shock horror story of October, 1996

Now let us proceed to 1996, and go to the other side of Federal politics. From October of that year onwards the nation has been assailed by assertions that one in three of all Year 9 students (14 year olds) cannot read or write. Throughout that year, and often since, we have heard this assertion repeated as "gospel truth" by certain politicians, journalists, some talk-back radio jockeys, and in various current affairs programs. The day after the outraged Minister Kemp launched the story (five months before the ACER Report was published) the ABC's "AM" program's presenter prefaced Ross Solly's interview with the Minister on 22 October as follows:

A twenty year survey has revealed that about a third of fourteen year olds don't have basic skills. The Federal Schools Minister, David Kemp, says the figures show that education policy and practice over the past twenty years have failed and in some cases there's actually been a decline in standards .²⁷

Dr David Kemp issued statements of outrage through media outlets all over the place that the ACER's survey had proved that one in three Year 9 Australian students were virtually illiterate and that it had shown a serious decline in standards since the equivalent 1975 survey.

Of course, the survey had shown nothing of the sort.

I and some of my academic colleagues, as well as two outstanding journalists Brian Toohey²⁸ in both the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Sun-Herald*, and Adele Horin²⁹ in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, have exposed this as yet another myth.

The comprehension "test" claimed to measure what the ACER defined as "mastery literacy" in students. Not "basic skills". Not "functional literacy". To be so classified, a student had to get 80% of the answers correct: nothing less. About one third of the students scored less than 80%.

All of these things were made perfectly clear in a two page "support" document produced at the time jointly by EPAD and ACER and distributed to people like myself, keen to look at the data upon which Dr Kemp's claims had been made, but who found out that the report itself had not even been written – and was not due to appear for approximately five months!

The tests do not measure "functional literacy", nor are they as wide ranging as assessments such as the current National English Literacy Survey, which assesses progress against curriculum profiles in the domains of reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing.

In the context of literacy tests, "mastery" means the capacity of a student to correctly answer (sic) items used to measure performance on a set of specific items. ...Following reviews of existing research on this question, the prescribed level for mastery was set at "correct answers to 80% of the population of all particular items associated with a task or objective". Thus in the 1995 test the 30% of students deemed not to have a mastery of literacy have failed to achieve an 80% correct mark on the literacy test.³⁰

In a delightfully bizarre twist, Brian Toohey decided to ask Martin Flanagan, *The Age* journalist who was the very author of the comprehension passage used in the test, to take the test himself. And what did the author score? 60%! Well short of the 80%! There were two questions which asked students to state what the author meant. Flanagan got both of these "wrong": or rather, his obviously correct answers were deemed to be "incorrect" by the ACER markers! Flanagan, the author, wrote what the author meant, but the answers determined by the examiners were different. Whose "illiteracy" is on display here?

Anyhow, the text was heavily metaphorical and validly open to a variety of interpretations. As Toohey pointed out:

"What is being tested is not a basic ability to read. Students are expected to give unequivocal answers about the meaning of a piece of prose in which the writer deliberately avoids stating plainly what he means".³¹

In its report, which was not released publicly until about five months after Dr Kemp had launched the latest literacy furbury rocket into the Australian atmosphere, the ACER explicitly confirmed that its instrument was not one to assess "functional literacy" or "basic skills" at all.

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But none of this prevents various talk-back disc-jockeys, or editorial writers, or teacher-bashers, from continuing to assert as 'fact' the furphy that one in three of our Year 9 students cannot read or write.

Occasionally it's good to look at the fine detail. The published data on the 14 year olds, said by the Commonwealth Minister and the media purveyors of gloom and doom to show one-third of Australian 14 year olds to be lacking basic skills and to reveal a dramatic decline in standards since 1975, demonstrated but a 2% decline overall since 1975. Yet the data described in the media showed a rise of 2% for the NESB girls in this age group, but this same figure of 2% was described in the media as "no noticeable rise"!³² This is, of course, a patently ridiculous contradiction. *The Australian* wrote that "while the proportion of Year 9 girls who failed to attain basic literacy (sic) skills was 26 per cent in 1975 and 27 per cent in 1995, there was an alarming decline in boys' reading comprehension levels".³³ A 4% difference was thus interpreted as "alarming"!

But all this playing with statistics further exposes a remarkable ignorance of quantitative research analysis. These tiny percentages fall well beneath the standard allowance for error in research analysis of this kind.

And as for screams of declining standards, even allowing for all the inconsistencies and contradictions already alluded to, there was virtually no difference at all between the performance of the 1975 and 1996 cohorts.

The most statistically honest thing to say about published comparisons between the 1975 and 1995 figures is that the performances of the two groups are not significantly different.

And what would such a "non-change" result mean? Statistics being statistics, they are actually capable of being used to argue the very opposite to the position taken by Dr Kemp. Associate Professor Brian Cambourne, for example, has claimed that:

rather than a decline in literacy standards the data strongly support a quite different interpretation, namely that given the incredible increase in the complexity of literacy demands over the last 20 years,

given the increasing number of students (especially boys) who are staying on at school, ...and given the increase in the multicultural mix of students whose first language is not English, our schools and teachers have held the literacy line.³⁴

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Myth 2 - Literacy in a vacuum

There is a popular notion among some sections of the wider community that skills can be developed in a vacuum devoid of the richness of linguistic contexts defined by critical variables such as the pursuit of meaning, the shaping influences of purpose, and the subtle yet profound influences determined by diversity of audiences. Skills just cannot be developed effectively in a vacuum. We become literate through the exercise of literary practices, i.e. by reading texts, and through the informed practices of intervention as exercised by parents, guardians and teachers.

Purveyors of this myth seem also to assume that literacy development occurs in lock step, easily identified, hierarchical stages and that the various dimensions of literacy, which over-simplified can be described as:

- phonemic-phonetic syllable/sound/word recognition;
- the comprehension of meaning; and
- the informed response to, or critiquing of, the meaning enunciated in the utterance.

These can be stratified into discrete layers of ages or stages as performance indicators. These are the crucial and essential components, of course. It has been the particular strength of the Anglo-Australian tradition that we have always recognised the interrelationships between these three dimensions within and across the modes of reading and viewing, writing, listening and speaking.

This has not, however, been the tradition in the USA, where these organic relationships have too often been separated into discrete components. And while in recent years, in particular, we have heard the strident cries of protagonists within certain camps that “phonics”, for example, is the only way to teach literacy, by and large the common sense of teachers has prevented the wholesale capture of pedagogy by any single camp.

Yet in recent months we have witnessed the orchestrated attack in California and Texas upon any approaches to the teaching of reading in kindergarten other than direct, systematic decontextualised phonics, as delivered through “basals” books. Textbooks have been banned which do not trumpet the phonics approach. I will quote from an e-mail I received recently from an Australian colleague in the United States.

Very carefully worded Legislative Bills have been devised and sneaked through State government sittings which legislate that all kindergarten children shall be taught to read through direct, systematic decontextualised, phonics. The only readers they will be allowed to read will be decodeable books (Dan tan fan the fan man) for the first 6 months of kindergarten. The teaching of the use of context clues is explicitly forbidden. In California a bill known as AB 1086 (Assembly Bill 1086) has just been passed on to the main Senate for approval. PD by people like Connie Weaver, Ken Goodman, Frank Smith, Stephen Krashen, Leanna Trail, programs like ELIC, Reading Recovery, and books and/or PD programs offered by publishers like Rigby, The Wright Group, Heinemann, Shortland Press (Wendy Pye’s company) have all been blacklisted.


Many of our University colleagues over here are talking about a New McCarthy-ism.³⁵


Ironically, this represents a return to what Professor Alan Luke, in his doctoral thesis, demonstrated were the “bad old days” in North American education. In his highly detailed study of the 1946-1960 history of literacy education in North America in general, and British Columbia in particular, Luke describes the enormous emphasis placed on the phonics-based basal readers like the ‘Dick and Jane’ series and other methodologies dear to the hearts of Back to Basics advocates. He concludes that

in the era examined (1946-1960) the quality of literacy learning and of learned literacy was constrained and delimited significantly by official norms for the acquisition of literacy (emphasis mine).³⁶

As any teacher knows, the Californian decision to ban any approach other than phonics is nonsense. Of course teachers should be able to teach the phonemic-phonetic relationships. Of course teachers should be able to use whole language approaches to learning. Of course teachers should be able to use their knowledge of grammar and the multiple functions of language. Of course teachers should be able to use their knowledge about the psychology of the reading process. Of course teachers should be able to use their knowledge of literary and reader-response theory. Of course teachers should be able to draw upon their knowledge of a wide range of literary, factual, and media texts. But teachers will use these methodologies as appropriate to the needs, interests and capacities of their children and according to the contexts within which they are teaching.

Good literacy teachers go beyond the parameters of phonemic/phonetic decoding and accurate comprehension of texts. While these are necessary skills, they are not sufficient to describe the fully literate person.


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And we should not forget that human beings have been learning to read for thousands of years - well before the modern era, replete with its internecine warfare over competing ideologies, fads, and reputable pedagogies.

Modern literacy curricula demand that students go further in order to be able, at a third level as it were, to respond critically, sensitively and with discrimination to what they read, hear and view: to be “critically literate”. They need to be able to deconstruct texts: to be aware of the assumptions, purposes and presumed audiences of the writer, speaker, editor, producer, director and so on. Teachers are required to educate critical readers and writers, not to produce mere sponges whose literacy skills stop at the accurate assimilation and reproduction of text. This is even more crucially important in the era of interactive information technology and the Internet.

It is so necessary that students are armed with critical literacy; often they will be threatened by those who use language, not as a medium of searching for or communicating the truth, but as a weapon for obscuring, and even perverting, that search.

Myth 3 - Literacy acquisition commences in Kindergarten

There is the myth, that some education policy framers seem to hold, that language acquisition and its enhancement commence with Kindergarten, and that K-2 is the initial stage for early intervention, when all of us who are parents – and I am the father of two beautiful girls aged five and two – know that the prior-to-school experience is almost certainly the pivotal time for literacy. My five year old Sophie writes beautiful sentences, replete with meaning, more often than not accurately spelt (and she learns by having her spelling “guesses” corrected), but she is incapable of explaining the grammatical, syntactical, or philological theories which underpin her correct usage. She relies upon the grounding in and her mimicking of these literacy practices – and their correct formulation – which she has received in our home along with the richness of texts.

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Shakespeare, after all, never enrolled in any courses in Process Writing, Systemic Linguistics, Semiotics, Phonemic-Phonetic Phonics, Whole Language, or Functional Grammar. But he, and those who transcribed and printed his folios and those who read them down through the ages, seem to have learned to read and write pretty effectively!

That is not to say that competing and complementary theories do not have their place in teacher education courses. They certainly do. After all, we have come a long way from the early 19th century, where in British schools liberal – or, rather, illiberal – thrashings with the cane were applied to “reluctant” readers and where, if this failed, the poor child was labelled “purblind” and therefore deemed to be incapable of learning to read. Humanity has a long history of washing its hands of responsibility by sticking a label upon a condition which it could not explain or sought to oversimplify: the great medieval Scholastic philosopher and theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, called this the myth of “Nominalism”.

Myth 4 - Graduates: literate one year; illiterate the next

A particular literacy mythology has grown up around the break-points in the educational continuum. How often, for example, have the literate graduates of sixth class been condemned a few months later as “illiterates” by the Year 7 teacher; or the literate HSC graduates of Year 12 been condemned several months later as people “who can’t read or write”, by the academics teaching them in first year or by employers? And how often do we not hear the wails of complaints as the literate graduates of our universities hit the world of employment, to be condemned as lacking basic communication skills?

What perfidious alchemy blisters the no-man’s-land between these staging points? Or, how much is it all to do with the initial difficulties experienced by the graduate of the previous stage as he or she attempts to come to grips with new forms of discourse peculiar to the new educational contexts?

*T*ransference of literacy skills from one set of contexts to another is not a simple process.

And how much has it to do with low teacher expectations? Especially the hiatus between, say, the high expectations made of Mary, the primary school “graduate”, by her 6th class teacher, and the low expectations of the Year 7 “baby” Mary exercised by her “new” secondary school teacher. Or you could substitute this with the equivalent hiatus between Grade 2 and Grade 3; between Year 10 and Year 11 (especially with regard to senior colleges); between the teachers of graduating HSC students and their university counterparts, as these mature young men and women become identified as naive, inexperienced, “freshers”.

Now I am not denying that there can be problems. Nor that there are problems. But I believe that these criticisms often pay too little heed to the new linguistic contexts within which the educational graduate from the former “institution” is usually expected to operate immediately, and to the unfamiliarity of content with which the ex-student now has to deal. Transference of literacy skills from one set of contexts to another is not a simple process.

Australia’s language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy noted:

*Research in the United States indicates that people who perform literacy tasks adequately in a high school setting cannot necessarily perform literacy tasks of similar complexity in a workplace or community setting.*³⁷

My friend and colleague, Professor Ian Pringle, who is Director of the Centre for Applied Language Studies at Carleton University, Canada, has demonstrated a similar hiatus between the allegations of unsatisfactory literacy attainment levelled at first year English literature students by university English lecturers, and the manifestly satisfactory levels of literacy displayed by the same students a year earlier in their final year secondary school English literature essays. He demonstrated that the students’ writing deteriorated when suddenly hit with “new” writing tasks when they had no experience of what was acceptable or unacceptable in first

year English literature essays. Pringle recommended that the staff replace their lectures and tutorials in the first few weeks of the semester with practical writing workshops to enable the students to discover and practise the kinds of discourse demanded by the academic milieu of English literature. It worked, spectacularly. And the University saved itself the million dollars it had decided to waste on setting up “remedial” writing programs for these alleged illiterates!

Myth 5 - The either/or myth

Invariably associated with the “literacy crisis” syndrome are the cries of those who pursue their own exclusivist nostrums for literacy remediation and who fiercely oppose the claims of any other theoretical and pedagogical positions within language and literacy education. A British colleague of mine describes as “intellectual terrorists” those who fiercely adhere to their own narrow remedies and who refuse to consider the claims of other theoretical and pedagogical approaches, irrespective of the variegated nature of the learners and the diversity of learning contexts.

Education discourse in general, and literacy education discourse in particular, seems persistently soured by what the great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called “the either/or heresy”. So often we have witnessed the erection and dismantling of caricatures of points of view other than one’s own, or particular ideological cultural or political empires being built by acolytes of fashionable gurus – often according to principles that would be anathema to the gurus.

Donald Graves, for example, in a seminal essay “The Enemy is Orthodoxy”, has listed some of the more bizarre distortions of the writing theory and practices that he has heard proclaimed as being advocated by him.

1. Children ought to revise everything they compose.
2. Children should write only in personal narrative; imaginative writing ought to be discouraged.

If anything has been learned from the research on teaching literacy skills it should be that it would be arrogant to assume that all of the answers are known.

3. Children should have several conferences for each piece of writing.
4. Children should publish each piece of writing.
5. Children should make each piece of writing last four days.
6. Children should share each piece with the entire class.
7. Children should own their own writing and never be directed to do anything with their writing.
8. Children should choose all their topics.
9. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are unimportant.³⁸

Graves rejects everyone of these statements.

Chesterton once remarked, melancholically, that Christianity could never be said to have failed because it could never be said to have been properly tried.

Similarly how many valuable insights into educational advancement have been repudiated and condemned not too many years later as having produced lower standards when in reality both the understanding and implementation of such insights have been honoured "more in the breach than the observance"?

Too frequently the acolytes of a theory or movement proclaim the teachings of their masters with a degree of certainty and a black-and-white exclusivity that sullies the more modest hesitancy and carefulness of their intellectual mentors or forbears

A submission from the Tasmanian Council of State School Parents and Friends Association to a House of Representatives Inquiry into literacy education during the early years of schooling, and cited in *The Literacy Challenge*, deserves to be "up in lights" on noticeboards in every school and, perhaps more importantly, in the office of every newspaper editor and the studios of all talk-back radio pontificators.

If anything has been learned from the research on teaching literacy skills it should be that it would be arrogant to assume that all of the answers are known. It would also be misguided to assume that evidence points to a single model of learning or teaching, or that one model will necessarily be appropriate to all developmental levels or for all children.³⁹

We need to know and value the history of the teaching of literacy. This will not only help the profession to retain what is of value and let go what is not, but – perhaps even more importantly – will safeguard it against any later attempts to ignore or distort that history by any later whiz fad geniuses, gurus or whatever, who might seek to erect their "new" empires by demolishing their own straw-person versions of earlier edifices.

As teachers, policy advisers, academics, or whatever, we need to deal intelligently and constructively with diversity and not succumb to the "us versus them" bitterness of ideological bigotry. The field of literacy education has already been hurt by this kind of immaturity.

We need to resist, as far as possible, empire building and destructive infighting within and between opposing "camps". We need to identify and resist those false either/or dichotomies and ideological entrenchments often predicated upon straw-person arguments and sometimes even "the cult of personality". We should be on our critical guard to identify and contest theory that becomes dogma, critical enquiry which becomes worship, leaders who become gurus, bridges that become barricades, concepts that become articles of faith, followers who become acolytes, approaches which become religions, and dissent which becomes heresy, irrespective of the various intellectual or professional cultures from which they may come.

Whether we are teachers, researchers, policy makers, bureaucrats or a mixture of any of these, we must always be, to quote from W. H. Auden's fine poem September 1, 1939, "ironic points of light" idealists but armed with a healthy and informed scepticism of all preachers of orthodoxies.

What do we know about literacy?

Well, what can we say with confidence about the nature of language and literacy ?

It is well worth repeating, three decades later, those wise words of Michael Halliday that “what is common to every use of language is that it is meaningful, contextualised, and in the broadest sense ‘social’”⁴⁰.

Building on the excellent foundations established in the *1971 Syllabus in English - Forms I-IV* (later renamed Years 7-10), in 1987, the members of the Years 7-10 English Syllabus Committee set down the following principles upon which the now current syllabus was based.

1. Growth in language is integral to the student's personal growth as a thinking, feeling person.
2. It is mainly through language that human beings explore their public and private worlds, organise their experience and form their values.
3. Language is best developed by having all students engage in an abundance of purposeful language activities that are appropriate to their needs, interests and capacities.
4. While students do learn in other ways, learning for the most part occurs as students use language: as they talk, listen, read, write and observe. Hence English is central to the achievement of the aims of the total curriculum.⁴¹

As part of the small team which wrote the 1990 Commonwealth Government's White Paper, *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* a colleague and I came up with the following “definition” which, I am delighted to say, has since been adopted in the DSE's recent excellent document, *Focus on Literacy*:

Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text.


*Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop throughout an individual's lifetime*⁴².

Now let us come forward to 1998.

If you want a superb exposition of the richness and complexity yet, in another sense, common-sense simplicity of literacy education, you need go no further than the NSW Department of School Education's recently published official policy document, *Literacy 97 Strategy: Focus on Literacy*. It provides a splendid overview of literacy teaching and learning.

- I. *Since 1991, the very nature of what constitutes literacy has been expanded by the emerging multimedia and information technologies, the appearance of the Internet and further developments in computing and word processing.*
- II. *Literacy is learned in social contexts as people use literacy practices to interact with each other to achieve particular purposes. It occurs in a variety of situational contexts – in the home, in the community, at school, on the job, in recreational and other informal learning contexts. In the contemporary world, we employ literacy practices to argue, to explain, to debate, to demonstrate how something can be done, to provide information, to explore issues, to entertain, and to communicate creatively.*
- III. *The literacy needs of individuals change throughout their lifetimes. As they move into different situations or specialised areas of learning and experience new technologies, they are continually required to adapt and extend their knowledge and literacy skills so that they can understand and use language appropriately.*
- IV. *Practices of literacy evolve over time in accordance with changing demands made on individuals and changing expectations within the social and cultural context.*

Growth in language is integral to the student's personal growth as a thinking, feeling person.


Good literacy teaching recognises the variety of ways in which literacy is relevant to the daily lives of students within diverse social and cultural contexts.

- V. *Good literacy teaching recognises the variety of ways in which literacy is relevant to the daily lives of students within diverse social and cultural contexts. Students must know what to do with text in particular contexts, both within and outside the classroom. To be literate in the contemporary world requires an understanding of, and the ability to apply, the wide range of written and spoken forms or types of text which are essential to effective communication.*
- VI. *Development of literacy competence is necessary if an individual is to develop fully as a person, able to participate in the work force, to engage in the democratic process and contribute to society in an educated manner⁴³.*

Concluding reflections

The notion of informed, critical, eclecticism is central to my beliefs as a teacher, academic, and policy adviser. There is a wealth of splendid insights and scholarship to draw upon as a teacher/researcher/academic. While some are either/or mutually exclusive positions, many are not. We have so much to learn about reading from philology, psychology, literary theory, semantics, grammar – or rather grammars – phonics, whole language theory, systemic linguistics, reader-response theory, semiotics, history of pedagogical practices, and so on.

The splendid teacher draws upon these insights and applies relevant theory to relevant practice as she or he faces the daily task of identifying and responding to the needs, interests and capacities of each of her or his students. Good teachers have always been both idealistic and pragmatic.

1. A teacher of literacy needs to have a thorough grasp of the subject matter of the specific curriculum area or areas he or she is teaching that is well beyond the specific parameters within which he or she might be expected to work in the classroom.
2. Modern teachers of literacy must have a grounding in scholarly theories of reading, writing, communication and language use in general.
3. Teachers need to be able to draw upon a wide repertoire of strategies appropriate to the needs, interests and capacities of their students.
4. We educators must practise what we preach. All teachers need to be exemplary users of the language: to read widely and critically; to write with flair, imagination, accuracy, and lucidity; to speak with clarity, verve and wit; to listen with acumen, accuracy and sensibility. We need to be fine models for our students. One of my favourite maxims comes from Chaucer's description of the "poure persoun" the humble and dutiful country priest whom we meet in *Canterbury Tales*: "first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte". To teach effective literacy we must be "practitioners" of effective literacy.
5. Effective teachers of literacy have a commitment to sharing their enthusiasm and expertise with their students. They are able to lead their students well beyond those starting points of learning, i.e. students' needs and interests, way out towards those unmapped horizons limited only by students' capacities. They need to be able to inspire, drive, motivate and correct, and demand the highest standards of their students. We all know that teaching is an art and a science – and it's mostly hard, sloggy, work. We teachers have also to be actors, head coaches, naggers, humdrummers, stirrers, listeners, susser-outers, intuiters, creators, pacifiers, and masters of repetition. Above all, we have to be people who keep hanging in there.
6. We must be eternally vigilant to ensure that our students are literate in the fullest sense of the word. There is no place for sloppiness or carelessness or ignorance or error within our teaching profession, especially in the field of literacy education. For a student to leave school illiterate is an indictment on our society.

To finish on a personal note. I am sure that when I accompany my daughter Amelia on her first day at Kindergarten at Narellan Vale Public School in the year 2001, I will be as confident about the quality of the literacy education that she will experience, as I was last Tuesday when Sophie returned there to commence her second term in Kindergarten. And irrespective of whether I am speaking as a teacher, or an academic, or a policy adviser, but above all as a parent, that makes me feel pretty happy about the future of literacy education in NSW.

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This paper has been published to stimulate informed discussion on key issues pertaining to effective literacy teaching and learning but do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Education and Training.

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