



SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND REHABILITATION SCIENCES

THE LITERACY DEBATE IN AUSTRALIA - A POSITION PAPER May 2007

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The Phonics v. Whole Word Language debate in Australia

In recent years, there has been a great deal of media attention focussed on the style of literacy teaching employed in schools. This has centred on whether or not schools should teach children literacy through the methodology of 'phonics' or through the deployment of 'whole-word language' approaches. The National Reading Panel (USA) advises that most students need phonics approaches and phonological awareness instruction for literacy acquisition, as well as instruction aimed at developing vocabulary, comprehension and fluency (the traditional domain of whole language approaches). The issue of phonological awareness is often ignored in this debate.

What research tells us

At least 10-16% (maybe up to 20%) of students have specific difficulties with reading and writing. For most of those students, this is due to missing the first building block to literacy - phonological (sound) awareness. Phonological Awareness (PA) is the conscious awareness of the different sounds in words, which allows one to learn to break words up into sounds (sh-op) and substitute sounds in words to make new words (swap /p/ in 'shop' for /d/ = 'shod'). Students with reduced PA skills pay less attention to these sound-letter associations, and may spend a lot of time trying to recognise or guess words. These students have difficulties reading and spelling new words independently and literacy does not progress normally. With PA training, children start to notice the sounds in words, and learn to accurately break words into individual sounds. For many students, this is the 'lightbulb' moment, when they start to understand how they can play with sounds, become more automatic with associating sounds with written letters, and read or spell words in a strategic way.

At least half of these students also have some 'soft' neurological signs such as low muscle tone, poor sensory processing, delayed establishment of hand dominance and less dexterity in fine motor skills. These cause difficulties with posture, movement coordination and, frequently, handwriting. The strong association between reading, attention, and academic difficulties and motor/sensory difficulties has been indicated in many research endeavours. Students who have difficulties with posture or coordination need to learn in positions other than sitting at the desk (e.g. lying on floor, sitting on floor, as well as through movement-based activities).

The importance of a cross- sector approach for assisting students with literacy

When students have difficulty acquiring literacy, they receive remedial support from specialist teachers, whose expertise is in the pedagogy of teaching literacy. The students may be offered programs in phonics and other elements of the literacy process.

However, some students do not learn well, either from the initial teaching of the material or from the remedial processes, because they lack early developmental skills that precede and underpin literacy. The skill of phonological awareness often needs to be explicitly developed in conjunction with school-based phonic approaches, for the phonics to be effective. A core skill of speech pathology is the science of phonology. This involves more than just an understanding of 'phonics'. Rather, it is the study of speech sounds that occur in the languages of the world, how the sounds are made, and the patterns of sounds that make up meaningful words. Speech Pathologists are expert at helping children to develop a conscious and timely processing of speech sounds so that they can link these sounds to letters to develop reading and spelling.

Occupational Therapy is concerned with the sensory and motor systems of the child and the way in which these skills underpin the activities required for daily living. In terms of literacy, the skills of Occupational Therapists lie in identifying these difficulties in children and interpreting how they affect the development of literacy. For example, a child with low muscle tone may have difficulty with trunk and joint stability, and this may impact on the acquisition of handwriting as well as attention and participation in learning situations.

These sciences are the knowledge base upon which speech pathologists and occupational therapists develop their therapeutic interventions. When the research tells us that

phonological awareness difficulties and difficulties within the sensory-motor systems frequently co-occur in children with delayed literacy, then it is clear that these two professional groups have useful tools, knowledge and approaches to augment the approaches used by teachers to remediate the children who are struggling.

Queensland has long recognised the necessity of cross-sector collaboration to improve education outcomes for school students. Education Queensland, as well as many schools in the private sector, employs allied health staff, including Speech Language Pathologists and Occupational Therapists to assist students to more fully participate in school settings.

International Focus on the 'Health-Education divide'

Internationally, a huge amount of research and debate has been generated addressing the extent to which literacy should also be included within Health portfolios. In Canada and USA, literacy has long been a health issue in terms of Health Literacy – 'functional health literacy is the ability to apply reading and numeracy skills in a health care setting'. These skills include the ability to read consent forms, medicine labels and inserts and to understand written health information. Beyond this debate, however, the issues of emergent literacy and literacy remediation are now firmly on the health agenda.

In the United States, the increased employment of therapists in education settings signals recognition that health professionals have an important part to play in the participation of children in education. Therapists assist in the remediation of literacy difficulties, alongside and in collaboration with, teachers.

Cross-sector collaboration the best approach

In this Policy Statement, we maintain that cross-sector collaboration is the most efficacious approach to literacy development. Teachers provide the front line of literacy teaching and remediation, but are supported in this role by a range of other health professionals, particularly Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy. These professions offer a crucial component to the assessment and effective remediation of many children with complex literacy difficulties. In order to increase literacy outcomes for Queenslanders, and to increase the mutual collaboration between Education and Health professionals, the following recommendations are made regarding funding to support literacy remediation.

- That any additional funding for literacy remediation be directed at schools rather than external service providers.
- That funding supports the employment of more specialist teachers and health professionals in schools to work with students with reduced literacy. This particularly affects occupational therapists who, in Queensland, work solely with children with more severe disabilities but not with children with specific literacy difficulties.
- That existing models of collaboration are further developed to allow teaching and learning support staff to have increased access to health professionals.
- That health professionals have more time for direct intervention and supporting the integration of newly acquired skills into the classroom.
- That health professionals are involved in the initial training and ongoing professional development of teachers, teacher-aides and learning support teachers.