

Letter to the Editor: Ideology is dooming thousands of children to illiteracy

We need to put ideology aside and implement the mid-year 1 literacy and numeracy check across Australia says **Jo Rogers**.

NAPLAN year 3 results usually show that 90 per cent-plus of students “pass the National Minimum Benchmark” in reading. Yet UNICEF rated Australia as 39 out of 41 countries “in achieving quality education” and the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) found that 21 per cent of year 4 children cannot read,

with a “significantly long tail of under-achievement”. Is there an illiteracy problem in Australia or not?

NAPLAN gives parents an independent indicator of their children’s progress and is important to keep. But with questions having only four multiple choice answers, giving a 25 per cent chance of a false positive result, reports of teachers “helping”, and no one actually knowing what the National Minimum Benchmarks scores are, they paint a much rosier than true picture.

When the PIRLS 2016 results are considered, 70,000 year 4 children are illiterate, and at all year levels there will be 400,000 children in schools who cannot read. Schools blame parents for not reading enough to their children and blame older children for “not wanting to learn” as if it is not a school problem. This was apparent on the recent ACE/ CIS Phonics Debate on YouTube.

Before the 1980s, older teachers remember it was unheard of that any

child could go to year 3 without the foundation literacy skills necessary for further learning being established. But since whole language/balanced literacy approaches were adopted in Australia, literacy standards have consistently fallen. These ideas are based on a falsehood that children learn to read naturally by being read to, as they learn to talk. Advocates won’t accept that while oral language is inherent; reading is a skill that needs to be systematically taught to be learnt.

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In 2005 the National Inquiry into Teaching Reading (NITL) found that Australia’s low literacy standards were unacceptable then and that “scientific evidence for best practice for the teaching of reading was to teach the systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children can master the essential alphabet code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency”.

When this report was accepted by Federal Parliament in 2006, it should have then been implemented into all primary schools by all state education departments then. But it was and still is blocked by teacher unions, English organisations and their advocates, who still hold on to false ideas.

If the NITL recommendations had been implemented into teacher training and into every Foundation to Year 2 (F-2) primary classroom, Australia’s illiteracy rate would have dropped to a small percentage by now and Australia’s literacy rating in the world would be



back in the top 10 countries where we belong.

And so many children would not have suffered illiteracy and all that brings. Specialist teachers like me have been teaching struggling children privately for decades and we see the devastating effects illiteracy has on innocent children's self esteem and mental welfare.

We teach them to read using the NITL approach above, but most illiterate children don't get help. So they can't catch up to their peers and get an education. Secondary teachers struggle to teach their subjects to semi-illiterate classes and the public's respect for teaching is at an all-time low.

Now the Federal Government has an excellent strategy for each state to implement a mid-year 1 literacy and numeracy check, which would find those children before they fail, let their parents know and then implement an appropriate teaching intervention in class, so that those children can catch up to their peer group and avoid illiteracy. This is an excellent initiative supported by plenty of scientific evidence.

But teacher unions and English organisations are trying to block this check with all sorts of misinformation and weak excuses. They say "teachers don't want to give more tests" when they give students spelling tests every week, which many fail. Or "young children should not be tested" when the South Australian trials showed the children enjoyed the 1:1 time with their teacher. Other excuses are "children should not have to read single words in isolation" when all F-2 children are subjected to memorising isolated "golden-magic words" daily. Another objection is that some items are "nonsense words", which is totally valid when children decode a word such as "fantastic" and

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the second syllable is "tas". Others say the NITL 2005 is out of date, but that's false too when the alphabet, spelling and child development do not change over time.

There is no valid reason for each state not to implement the year 1

literacy and numeracy check; just ideologues' obstruction at the expense of the educational welfare of thousands of young school children. When South Australia trialled it, the children were not stressed by the five-minute check with their class teachers, who were satisfied with giving the test.

It is particularly difficult to understand when unions recently campaigned for more funding for kindergartens, praising "early intervention is best". Teacher unions do not understand that all teachers will benefit by having all students in their classes able to read, as would all employers, who've been complaining for years about illiteracy. And the public's respect for teaching would be restored.

Most importantly, another 70,000 six-year-old innocent children who, statistically, are doomed to illiteracy by year 3 would be noticed, given intervention and then be able to progress academically with their peers. Or will they be another education elephant in the room?

Jo Rogers is a semi-retired special education teacher and active advocate for those with learning difficulties who was a consultant member of LDA for over 20 years.

This article was originally published in the Sydney Morning Herald <https://www.smh.com.au/education/ideology-is-dooming-thousands-of-children-to-illiteracy-20180830-p500pk.html>

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