

Literacy Advisory Panel's Community Consultation

Attention: Literacy Advisory Panel

GPO Box 123

Hobart TAS 7001

Via Email: policy@dpac.tas.gov.au

Dear Panel,

RE: Literacy Advisory Panel's Community Consultation

"Reading is Rocket Science" Dr. Louisa Moats

Our Story

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission. I am a parent of two boys attending a State government primary school in Northern Tasmania.

It was very surprising for us that our eldest son was not able to start to work out how to read the home readers at the end of Kinder in 2016. Then we saw him struggled to learn and retain sight words ('magic words program'), and to read the levelled home readers in Prep. We understood the importance of reading and talking to him from pre-birth, we had done all the 'right things', e.g. reading extensively to him, providing and encouraging a literacy-rich environment. Our son was born to parents who are tertiary educated, able to provide for him materially and emotionally, and yet he failed to launch in reading and writing.

At the end of the prep year in 2017, I decided that I would put in a lot of effort with him over the holidays to master the magic words and to keep practicing reading every day. That's when I really realised that this method of learning to read was just not working.

I then started researching. I've learnt a lot about how literacy is acquired, the skills and subskills required and a whole new vocabulary. I soon realised that there were very few teachers who knew about this.

What I found is unequivocal, empirical evidence that supports the explicit teaching of systematic synthetic phonics as part of a structured literacy program. This is the most effective way to give all children, no matter what their background or Specific Learning Disability the skills they need to become literate. This approach offers the best chance at acquiring literacy skills. The evidence suggests that this early, strong foundation continues to provide benefit by supporting effective spelling and writing skills in later grades.

We were extremely fortunate that Clare Weare and Tania Innes began Start Smart in 2018, and our son has attended weekly tutoring sessions based on the Multisensory Structured Language approach since then. I am aware that the waiting time for literacy intervention is now over a year - the families in this situation must feel so desperate.

Our family spends thousands of dollars every year on interventions to support our son. I have reduced my work hours to support him, forgoing career opportunities, income and superannuation.

Every year since 2018, my son's classroom teachers have become interested in this approach as it clearly works. There was initially no support from the school's leadership team and it is now what I would call limited due to him being in upper primary. I am pleased, however, to report that our next son who is in Prep this year will have access to the Little Learners Love Literacy materials which was implemented by the school last year. I believe that this initiative has been lead from the classroom teachers up, headed by one passionate AST. I am grateful that our school has now began the long journey to implement a science of reading approach.

Despite being well educated, confident and secure in myself, I found it very difficult to advocate for my child. Initially, it was to have my concerns about his literacy development taken seriously, then it was about him having access to evidence informed teaching practice and effective intervention. I can only image that it would be impossible for many parents who have concerns to have them adequately addressed and many students don't have anyone to advocate for them. Every year I look around my child's classroom and see at least 5 other kids that needs someone to advocate for them. It makes me incredibly sad that we accept that 5 or 6 kids in every class are poor readers, and that everyone involved justifies it by thinking it was most likely their parent's fault because they didn't read to them. This blame-shifting must end.

In the past, I have been admonished by the school's leadership for teaching my child phonics and using decodable readers, for not letting him guess words but sound them out. I was told that my son was not a high enough priority for the school to even submit the referral to the school psychologist. Luckily, our family could afford a private assessment and he was subsequently diagnosed with Dyslexia, DCD and ADHD. We have then paid for four years of private tutoring and purchased multiple sets of decodable readers. The emotional and financial toll have been high – but we are the lucky ones as we have the resources to do something about it. Not everyone is so lucky.

Initially, I was baffled that so much high-quality evidence from numerous disciplines about how children become literate could be unknown or ignored. I was confused as to why practises known to be harmful, e.g. the three cueing method, were being promoted. Yet, methods demonstrably known to work, such as explicit phonics, were actively discouraged. I looked at the Department of Education policy settings and found the answer there. Then I looked around at what professional learning and resources teachers had access to and also found the answer there. I also became aware that it was uncommon for pre-service teachers to be taught any of this material or very much about common disabilities. I am glad to note that some of these things are starting to change however the gap between policy and practice/evidence and practice is still very wide.

I am also baffled by the sustained push by professional organisations such as Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) to discredit the advocates of synthetic phonics programs as simply being motivated to sell commercial products. ALEA seem to advocate for the teaching of phonics through the analytic method based on 'authentic texts'. How this is actually different from the current teaching practices that have failed so many children is not clear to me. I find the ALEA arguments tend to rely on a 'strawman' that phonics by itself is not enough (e.g., Ewing, 2018 and

Emmitt et. al, 2013). I have never read in any structured literacy/science of reading proponents arguing to only teach phonics at the exclusion of everything else. This approach doesn't diminish teachers, instead it further highlights the expertise and knowledge a teacher must have.

The programs I am familiar with, MSL and Little Learners Love Literacy, both have a strong initial focus on phonics and phonemic awareness to get children up and decoding, but very quickly incorporate grammar, morphology, etymology and extending vocabulary. This is all the while encouraging parents to assist to provide access to rich and varied texts and experiences.

General Comments

1. The time has come for Tasmanian educators to embrace the science of reading.

The panel's documents contain a number of paragraphs on oral language and an emphasis on the importance of parents' role in children becoming literate. The document does not contain a similar statement about the importance of schools in teaching children to read and write. The document also does not contain any explanation as to how all people actually become readers.

2. The panels document contains the following statement on page 13,

"While there are differing views on the best approach to teaching literacy, there is general agreement about the skills needed to become literate."

I can appreciate that statements like this are often necessary when committees are preparing documents.

My observation as a parent is that in Tasmania there are two main ways of teaching literacy at the moment, I will describe them very simply based on what parents see during K-2. Each approach has an underlying pedagogy that informs how higher grades are taught and what is appropriate intervention:

1. A newly emerging practice that includes the use of an explicit systematic phonics program with decodable readers, students are encouraged to sound out words when reading, reading and spelling being taught as a reciprocal process; and
2. One based on previous practices that includes some phonics in context with levelled readers and the requirement to memorise a list of commonly used words, students are taught a 'range of skills to read a word, as no one way works all the time', practice spelling high frequency words and then other spelling list come later.

I can appreciate that there are different core beliefs about teaching and learning, different experiences of what works and different exposure to the published work and debate about the best way to teach literacy. However, to me this is not a benign choice to be balanced by the panel. The first method gives every child, regardless of where they start, the best chance to become literate. The second method gives some children the chance to be literate and harms many others. My child has been harmed by the beliefs and practice outlined in the second method. It has been a long road to remediation.

It is not ok to continue to support a method that fails so many children, particularly when the weight of 30 years (and still piling up) worth of evidence shows there is a better way. As a parent, I demand better. As a proud Tasmanian, I demand better.

I will now address the questions raised by the panel, where I can.

Questions on current activity

1. What is currently working well to improve literacy?

The policy settings of the Department of Education are pointing in the right direction. However the challenge is closing the gap between policy and effective, evidence based practice.

3. Considering the organisational map (on page 35):

- **What do you think the gaps are?**

Kindergarten 4-5 Year olds

Structured phonemic awareness programs for early years, critically for Kinder through to 2 and beyond as an intervention.

The DOE Kindergarten checklist should be revised. The checklist places a heavy importance on motor skills. It is a missed opportunity to identify children who have low phonemic proficiency.

Increased access to allied health professionals, to provide high quality intervention for children identified having risk factors.

LIFT and Let's Talk Campaign

These campaigns are worthwhile and needed, however I would just like to remind the panel that being immersed in a language-rich environment is not enough to make all children readers. There is a real sense of blame that parents feel when their children fail to launch as a reader, and then they are continually asked,

"Do you read to your child?"

"Did you read to your child when they were little?"

The School Years 6-12 year old

Literacy Coaching Initiative

I would like to draw the Panel's attention to an exchange on a Tasmanian produced podcast in September 2021,

Presenter: "Is the emphasis on phonics in the media warranted?"

Guest: "I don't think so, I actually think it's quite confusing for people. Phonics has been around for ever, certainly, though my whole career. I am confused as to why it is such a big topic. There is no

teacher alive who has taught classrooms full of children, who hasn't taught phonics within their classroom, I don't understand why it is being emphasised in the way that it is....."

It is my understanding that the guest has been providing professional development for the literacy coaches. I find this disturbing for a number of reasons.

Parents, Carers and Guardians

Give parents access to information that describes the process of learning to read.

• What opportunities are there?

Implement a high-quality structured literacy program that explicitly teaches the 'big six', that gives a central emphasis on a high-quality synthetic phonics program as Tier 1 instruction.

Provide schools with the resources and training to replace Running Record assessments. The continued reliance on running records is problematic. I think that Running Records conflate decoding and comprehension skills/expressive language skills.

Ensure funding is provided for schools to purchase decodable readers.

Implement Targeted Tier 2 intervention programs as soon as issues are flagged. Do not wait until children fail.

Implement high quality professional learning opportunities to give all teachers the knowledge that they deserve.

Implement high quality professional learning opportunities to ensure school leaders.

• What supports need to be in place?

Greater access to psychologists, speech pathologists and other allied health professionals. There are simply not enough speech therapists to go around. Children are waiting to see professional and in the meantime, the achievement gap continues to widen.

Target Tier 2 intervention programs.

Questions on measures and targets

I don't feel I can make any meaningful contribution to this other than supporting targets that aim high.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comment. The work of your panel is appreciated and is to be commended.

Kind Regards



Claire Gregg

A parent who never thought she would need to teach her kids to read.