

**Response to Paper One Setting the Scene. Tasmania's Community-Wide Framework –  
Literacy Advisory Panel Jan 2022.**

*There can be no doubt that we must raise the literacy of our young people in Tasmania if we are to maximise their life opportunities as outlined in the Tasmania's Community-Wide Framework. Effective literacy teaching transforms a child or adult's existence from being a passive participant in life to one of empowerment, bringing joy and having potential to be an active and effective contributor to society. The paper's key component of a state community framework to guide literacy development is meritorious and it clearly identifies that literacy development underpins social and economic prosperity, that literacy is a fundamental right and that it is the responsibility of the whole community. So much we have to offer in Tasmanian education is world class, yet we continue to be plagued by issues so often underpinned by poverty. Social and Economic disadvantage sits under many of the issues that schools face, including the literacy scores and, as the gap in public schools widens, we see the data of our most vulnerable reflect the struggles they are facing. Our research shows us that from as early as the KDC and PIPS data we can already identify those children that will potentially struggle with literacy and attendance in school, yet we battle to halt that pathway because of the complex elements of the disadvantage. Unfortunately, the model proposed in the paper is based on an old paradigm of education, old resourcing models, deep-rooted beliefs in the what and how of teacher education and foremost it has a constricted view of achievement and is focussed on ill-conceived accountability and wholesale testing regimes. The notion of "one size fits all", regrettably implied in the approaches and strategies in the above-mentioned paper and outlined in *The road map to a Literate Tasmania*, is fundamentally flawed and the application of "science based" research is narrowly conceived and reductionist by nature. Student engagement and enjoyment is a critical component of literacy learning and yet this essential element is overshadowed by the pervasive notion of testing regimes of achievement and effort instead of inclusion, identity and wellbeing. (Shirley. D and Hargreaves. A, 2021)*

*As an effective principal of primary and secondary schools and a successful State-wide leader of Student Engagement, I deeply understand the critical importance of literacy for our young people to remain engaged in life long education. As a beginning principal at Devonport Primary in 1997, which at the time was a non-preferred school, performing well below state averages in literacy and numeracy, our team achieved significantly improvement in the literacy outcomes of our students. It took us 12 months to rise above the state average and we were recognised with awards at both a state and national level for our work and outcomes achieved. This achievement was grounded in improved quality teaching, strong literacy leadership by our AST, who was a literacy expert, a clear vision by the principal that literacy was the priority and therefore the resources and time had to be given to the teachers and students for outcomes to improve, and strong engagement with our school community.*

*We had a carefully developed literacy plan based on a range of approaches, depending on cohort and individual need. At its core sat an oral language- whole language approach, surrounded with many other strategies including explicit phonetics teaching for those individuals or small groups that required this. At the time we described it as a balanced integrated approach. Each week our team met and reviewed where we were at, what we needed to do next and maintained a steady focus on upskilling teachers with professional learning and regular feedback and coaching. The culture of the school was focussed on engagement with our community, creating flexibility in time provisions to enjoy learning, building a strong sense of belonging and creating a strengths-based approach. Key elements included strong leadership, quality teachers engaged in ongoing learning, solid educational research to drive our work continuously informed by our individual students' progress and ongoing formative assessment for our students. We sought to engage our students in a variety of ways, we responded to identified need, every student did not sit through ongoing phonetic testing and we were not influenced by commercial literacy gurus who had vested interests. Our teachers were empowered and students were not pressured and made anxious by ongoing mandated testing or wholesale delivery. Student outcomes lifted in both literacy and numeracy. Student numbers and outcomes at the school increased dramatically over the coming years with our community confident that their children were happy and successful. Pasi Sahlberg, (2022) encourages us to think more deeply on the issues that underline low test scores, especially for those students' experiencing issues of significant disadvantage. He also implores us to remember that through the ages children have learned through engagement and enjoyment, having time to explore new passions through experimenting and play. Our constant push to increase accountability and measurement of our children 's' learning at school is detrimental to their wellbeing and their engagement with the learning process.*

*As an experienced leader, I recognise the importance of quality literacy teaching and excellence in teacher preparation that is based on educational research and informed by educational literacy experts. A wide range of approaches, strategies and tools need to be utilised in the complex teaching of literacy and a phonetic approach is definitely one of them. Notwithstanding this fact, the paper's suggestion that the intensified mandated teaching of phonics over a number of years will lift literacy rates, is refuted in both Australian and overseas educational research suggesting in fact negative results from increased pressure on our students (Sahlsberg, P. 2022). Skills gained through mandated phonics and ongoing systematic phonemic awareness drill and practice does not equate to knowledge and understanding, nor indeed enjoyment and engagement with literacy learning. The measurements using fluency do not equate to reading comprehension. Cross- sectional and longitudinal research reveals that decoding is most successful for novice readers and comprehension successively becomes more important as text becomes more complex and decoding skills advanced. Students who come to school with these skills become disengaged through ongoing mandated explicit teaching and screening once an initial assessment is completed, (Thomas P.L. Jan 2022). This type of approach is often*

referred to as “science based” and frequently delivered through packages such as Multi Lit and the ‘Science of Reading’. They are “based on a narrow view of science, and a restricted range of research, focused on word learning and, more recently, neurobiology, but paying little attention to aspects of literacy like comprehension and writing, or dimensions of classroom learning and teacher preparation.” (Johnston. P and Scanlon. D, 2021). As educators we are all open to biases and these must be continuously challenged. The constitution of Boards informing critical state-wide literacy decisions needs to be constantly scrutinised to see it is truly representative of effective educators, educational literacy experts and informed current school leaders, and not unduly pressurised by political or lobby group pressure.

Students and adults need to be engaged to learn deeply; this is a missing key element in our current paradigm. Our state has a strong push on wellbeing yet it is too often implemented as an add-on in school. It is not yet deeply embedded in our pedagogies, and this is reflected in a growing number of young people becoming disengaged, not attending and getting suspended. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs must be applied to create conditions that enable our young learners to be engaged and yet the gap continues to widen in our public schools. This needs to be addressed if we are serious about lifting literacy rates across the state. On reading this paper two key thoughts sprung immediately to mind. Firstly, that the reductionist notion from science does not consider student engagement nor does it best fit the complexity of effective teaching and learning, and it reduces the professionalism and creativity of teaching to a simple process, for a very complex undertaking.

A recent critical review reveals

“The paper concludes that phonics and reading teaching in primary schools in England has changed significantly for the first time in modern history. The most robust research evidence, from randomised control trials with longitudinal designs, shows that the approach to phonics and reading teaching in England is not sufficiently under-pinned by research evidence. It is recommended that national curriculum policy is changed and that the locus of political control over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should be re-evaluated... Our findings from analysis of tertiary reviews, systematic reviews and from the SQMS do not support a synthetic phonics orientation to the teaching of reading: they suggest that a balanced instruction approach is most likely to be successful.” (Wyse, D. and Bradbury, A.2022)

The second thought was that despite decades of student engagement research, we see declining engagement levels across many nations around the world. Engagement is essential for meaningful student learning. Professors Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves (2021) suggest ‘misguided testing policies, underfunded public education systems, overloaded reform agendas, distorted power relationships, and hasty introductions of digital technology’ have created institutional and societal barriers to the engagement for our young people in learning. Pedagogical design and effective leadership must consider engagement, affording students opportunities to use their strengths and learn deeply, enabling them time to explore and enjoy the many aspects of learning new skills and

*knowledge, not be constantly anxious and concerned about achievement and effort. For young children to engage in learning they need to be connected.*

*“Affect and emotion play a pivotal role in young children’s literacy practices and in literacy learning and teaching. Affects and emotions contribute to (children’s) general well-being and learning outcomes” (Burnett. C and Merchant. G, 2018).*

*Having worked closely with disengaged youth I understand that accountability through testing causes extreme anxiety amongst this group and vulnerable young people. At Montrose Bay High School, during NAPLAN testing, despite enormous effort, reassurance, support and food, our attendance numbers would plummet. Our students told us they did not want to sit for hours to be tested and judged and then wait for months to get a results letter home telling them weren’t as good as everybody else. Shirley and Hargreaves (p.159, 2021) stated that “there’s scarcely anything more disengaging for students than high-stakes standardized testing”.*

*We know that the number of vulnerable youths is growing at an alarming rate, the pressure of keeping up has reached the tipping point and we are seeing dramatic behaviours from youth around the world. The BBC reports nearly a million young people in Japan are classified as hikikomori (shut-ins) refusing to leave their homes, attend school or engage in life outside of their house. We need to change our whole approach, not continue to do more of the same in different guises. It isn’t working, our young people need us to change and adapt to a new way of engaging and educating them. Shirley and Hargreaves (p181, 2022) suggest from their research in Ontario, that if we persevere with even moderate versions of existing methodologies to testing entire student cohorts as modes to drive improvement, this will undermine the efforts to bring about the changes in learning and motivation that many now want.”*

*In conclusion, increasing the testing, mandating phonetic approaches, micromanaging our teachers, and intensifying the accountabilities will not engage our learners, nor be an attractive prospect for high performing teachers or creative leaders and is clearly not in the best interest of students or staffs’ wellbeing. There is no easy answer or recipe, it is a complex problem and requires a strong whole of government approach to enable significant transformation of our system. If we are to truly engage our young people and give them the joy of life-long learning through proficient literacy skills, we need to seriously revisit the purpose of schooling. We need to consider how we work with youth to connect and engage them and how we use the data we already have to support and encourage their pathway in an increasingly complex world and build their self-belief and confidence in their capacity to not only survive but thrive.*

***‘Engagement is a battle for the hearts and minds of all our students, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised, every minute of every day.’ (Shirley. D and Hargreaves. A. p 221, 2021)***

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