ALEA Position Paper on the National Year 1 Phonics Check

Does Australia need an assessment tool to measure literacy and numeracy achievement in Year 1 classrooms?

By Eileen Honan, Jenni Connor and Diane Snowball

The Australian Government has announced the introduction of a National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check (Year 1 check). The terms of reference for the panel appointed to investigate this introduction recommends a National Year 1 check of all children in the areas of reading, phonics and numeracy. Leaving the numeracy part of the assessment aside, there is some confusion about the relationship between literacy, reading, and phonics in the terms of reference relating to the Australian Government proposal.

ALEA supports the definition of ‘literacy’ provided in the Australian Curriculum:

Literacy is the capacity to interpret and use language features, forms, conventions and text structures in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts. It also refers to the ability to read, view, listen to, speak, write and create texts for learning and communicating in and out of school. (ACARA, 2016, p. 6)

From this definition, it is clear that one part of literacy is reading. According to the Australian Curriculum, to read is:

...to process words, symbols or actions to derive and/or construct meaning. Reading includes interpreting, critically analysing and reflecting upon the meaning of a wide range of written and visual, print and non-print texts (ACARA, 2016, p. 142).

ALEA accepts that the acquisition of knowledge about the relationship between sounds and symbols (phonics) is part of learning to read. However, the overemphasis on this one part of the process of learning to read is unreasonable, especially in relation to the costs associated with introducing a national assessment tool for use in Year 1 classrooms.

This position paper examines the need for an assessment tool to measure literacy achievement in Year 1, whilst also examining the research related to the focus on phonics knowledge or the use of a ‘phonics check’.

1. ALEA supports an evidence-based approach to improving learning outcomes for Australian students.

This position paper is based on a review of current research (from 2013 to 2017) that has reported on three areas related to the current inquiry.
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• Research that reports on the effectiveness of literacy instruction based on different approaches in the early years of schooling;
• Research that reports on the impact and validity of the UK Phonics Check; and
• Research that reports on the factors influencing early years students’ literacy achievement that impact on later literacy success.

2. ALEA acknowledges that phonetic knowledge is an important component in learning to read, together with strong oral language, a wide receptive vocabulary and an understanding of the grammatical structures of English for reading and writing.

An integrated approach to the teaching of reading is essential, as supported by the recommendation of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy: Teaching Reading (Rowe, 2005). Recent research has supported this recommendation, with the Language and Reading Research Consortium (2015) reporting on the failures of ‘simple models of reading’ used in many assessments of children’s reading abilities. They conclude that “no one measure of word recognition, listening comprehension, or reading comprehension is best. Reading is complex, and different assessments tap different things” (p. 166, emphasis added). Sparks et al., (2014) found that exposure to print is a potentially powerful experiential predictor of early reading acquisition and its relationship to reading experience and reading skills. In a systematic review of thirty-two studies evaluating 22 programs, Chambers, Cheung and Slavin (2016) found that young children learn best in programs that balance skills-focused and developmental activities. Importantly their definition of these programs as ‘comprehensive’ includes “phonemic awareness, phonics, and other skills along with child-initiated activities” (p. 88).

Allington (2013) reminds the reader of the full recommendations of the National Reading Panel (2000), often cited by phonics supporters who fail to read the full report. Allington says that one of the reasons for the failure of the US Reading First Program was:

First and perhaps foremost, much emphasis was placed on explicit and systematic phonics instruction, although the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) report warned against such excesses while at the same time making the commonsense recommendation that effective decoding instruction become a small part of every kindergarten and first-grade reading lesson. The NRP report also noted that such an emphasis produced a moderate positive effect on later decoding performance but a trivial positive effect on later reading comprehension. The report noted that no significant positive effects for decoding emphasis lessons were found for students, including struggling readers, beyond first grade (p. 521, emphasis added).

3. ALEA can see some value in developing an agreed ‘light touch’ national literacy screen that encompasses all key aspects associated with student success in reading and writing to inform teachers and parents.

The purpose of the Year 1 check appears to be to ensure students who are behind are identified early and can be targeted with interventions before the achievement gap grows. There is some evidence that state systems and schools already can identify those students who need assistance with literacy learning generally and learning to read in particular. Each State and Territory currently uses diagnostic tools to assess children’s literacy abilities in the early years of schooling. Forster (2009) reported on the ‘diagnostic power’ of the instruments being used at that time, and recommended:

That a set of measurement instruments be developed to assist teachers (and schools) to better monitor literacy learning from Year 1 to Year 3. These instruments would be of level 4 diagnostic power—focusing on the sub-skills of early reading. The instruments would include sets of parallel forms to allow teachers to assess students twice yearly (Forster, 2009, p. 6).
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4. However, ALEA believes that the focus of attention and resources should be on developing appropriate, strengths-based intervention programs that are sensitive, timely, flexible and responsive to the individual child and their family context.

There is significant research into the success of various models of intervention programs. Blachman et al., (2014) examine the effects of an eight month reading intervention more than a decade after completion. They find that “students in need of explicit and systematic instruction in the early stages of reading acquisition are likely to require ongoing evidence-based support to acquire more complex skills” (p. 55). That is, interventions in the early years can be viewed as ‘insulin therapy’ rather than ‘an inoculation against further reading failure’.

Snowling and Hulme (2014) provide an overview of research into early interventions reported in a special issue of Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness. Importantly they point out that interventions may only be successful if “coupled with increasing time spent reading outside the classroom, including in the home” and that “for interventions to be truly effective, it is likely that they will need to increase students’ enjoyment of reading” (2014, p. 303, emphasis added).

There is sufficient evidence available to support interventions that are based on providing extra support for the development of oral language skills in the early years (Snow et al., 2014; Snowling & Hulme, 2014). The pilot program reported by Snow and her colleagues recommends professional development for teachers in this important area of language development.

Lonigan, et al., (2013) report on the dangers of focusing on one ‘domain specific’ reading intervention; a focus on code skills such as phonics knowledge can improve skills in that area, but does not lead to improvements in meaning-focused skills. “Consequently, many children are likely to need interventions targeting each of the specific domains in which they have relatively weak development” (p. 128, emphasis added).

5. ALEA draws from rigorous international contemporary research that demonstrates that a range of other factors, such as the home environment and quality pre-school experiences, impact on a child’s literacy success, beyond simple knowledge of letter-sound correspondences.

There is a wide range of evidence that supports claims that there are other factors that determine literacy success apart from knowledge of phonics. Those studies that can make connections between literacy achievement in the early years and literacy achievement in the later years of schooling claim that literacy achievement is:

- related to attendance at preschool;
- affected by the home environment including parental attitudes to literacy, and their interactions with children; and
- the provision of literacy rich environments including access to libraries (Arya, et al., 2014; Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015; Emmitt, et al., 2013; Krashen, et al., 2012; Krashen, 2013; Snowling & Hulme, 2014; Sparks, et al., 2014).

Arya, et al., (2014) report that across all countries examined, later literacy achievement is related to preschool attendance, home/parent/child interactions, and attitudes to reading. Country policies on preschool funding can have an impact, with Arya, et al., concluding that “an implication from this study is that early home literacy practices matter more for later school achievement in the absence of publicly funded preschool services” (p. 13). Krashen, et al., (2012) examined PIRLS data to find that access to libraries is a powerful predictor of reading achievement. They also report on findings that, even after controlling for the effects of poverty, access to books in the home affects reading achievement of students in the USA.
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ALEA therefore recommends the funding of other reforms, including a free, high quality preschool experience for all Australian children; support for parents and families with children 0-8; programs to enhance the knowledge of early childhood educators and teachers working with those children and families.

6. Publicity about the National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check (Year 1 check) has centred around the model provided by the UK Phonics Check. ALEA is concerned that recent research has reported on limitations related to its proven value and fit for purpose.

Claims that the phonics check in the UK has been extremely successful are not supported by evidence (Wyse & Styles, 2007; Duff, et al., 2015, Ellis & Moss, 2014; Walker, et al., 2013; Walker, et al., 2015; UKLA, 2012; Gilchrist & Snowling, 2017, Hodgson, et al., 2013; Roberts-Holmes, 2015).

With regards to ‘proven value’, the authors of the final evaluation report of the UK Phonics Check (Walker, et al., 2015) report that the UK spent £865,000 on the initial phase of test development (p. 58). Ongoing costs have been around £370,000-380,000 for the years 2012-2014. Additionally, there are costs to each participating school, including costs of replacement teachers for those administering the check, plus un-costed expenses related to teachers’ time spent on planning and preparation and training. In summarising their expert opinion of the value of the Phonics Check they conclude:

> It is not possible to determine how far the costs of the check displaced other costs that would have been incurred, and the longer term impacts are uncertain. It is therefore not possible to estimate the value for money of the PSC (p. 60, emphasis added).

In relation to ‘fit for purpose’ and whether the UK phonics check was ‘valid and reliable’ there is current research reporting on many concerns. Once again, the final evaluation report’s finding is of concern because “the study has found no clear evidence of improvements in pupils’ literacy performance, or in progress, as result” (Walker, et al., 2015, p. 60).

Duff, et al., (2015) compared the UK phonics check with a ‘gold standard’ reading test and a teacher phonics assessment tool to assess its validity and reliability. They claim that the phonics check does not perform any better or worse than anything else. Although it meets its aims, the authors argue that resources may be better spent on supporting and training teachers for ongoing monitoring of phonics.

In a further analysis of the data, Gilchrist and Snowling (2017) report that the phonics check, compared to the gold standard test, has false positives; in other words, more children are identified as requiring further support than is actually the case. A survey of teachers and principals conducted by UKLA in 2012 found that:

> The Phonics Screening Check misidentifies pupils who are beyond this stage of development as readers and favours less developed/emergent readers (UKLA, 2012, p. 3).

These findings also point to the hidden cost of these types of standardised tests for children in the early years of schooling such as their impact on children’s self-esteem and motivation. There is already evidence of the negative impact of NAPLAN on student health and well-being (Rice, et al., 2016).

Gibson and England (2016) have examined the use of pseudo words in the Phonics Check and report on inconsistencies and errors in application of this practice. They report issues related to lack of guidance and advice about pronunciation; that there is evidence that “real rather than pseudo word reading may be at least if not more accurate in predicting future reading fluency” (p. 499); and that the rapid growth of research into neural processing is “a potentially valuable resource here, although complex, volatile and contested” (p. 500).
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7. ALEA has concerns about potential detrimental effects from the implementation of an unhelpful screening device in the Australian setting.

Roberts-Holmes (2015) reports the focus on narrow and limited assessment styles detracts from young children’s growth in other areas as well as teachers’ changing focus away from pedagogy and towards data collection. As well, Snowling and Hulme (2014) claim that there is a ‘critical age or sensitive phase for reading acquisition’, thus, if reading instruction is started too early, this could have detrimental effects (p. 304). Evidence from the UK finds that teachers are spending more and more time on phonics instruction (UKLA, 2012). Evidence from Australia (Campbell, 2015) suggests that preschool teachers are experiencing pressure to introduce phonics instruction even before children begin school.

8. Instead, ALEA suggests an analysis of ‘what’s working’ when capable teachers appear to ‘beat the odds’, enabling their students to attain high achievement in contexts of high disadvantage.

There is a general and important gap in the research on literacy interventions of any sort in the early years, that is, a lack of longitudinal studies that can validly make claims about the impact of particular types of literacy instruction in the early years, and on literacy success later in schooling.

References


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Author Biographies

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Jenni Connor has been an early childhood teacher and superintendent and a primary school principal. She contributed to the development of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum: English. Jenni lectured at the University of Tasmania and presents seminars and key notes on literacy education nationally and internationally. Jenni is Past President of ALEA and has served ALEA as a Publications Director. She continues to actively support the work of ALEA Tasmania.

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