

Submission
to
**The National Inquiry into
the Teaching of Literacy**

Submission by the Australian Council
of State School Organisations
(ACSSO)

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“School based teaching of literacy is of critical importance but a national campaign to encourage home reading would be the single most effective contribution governments and educators could make to the literacy levels of this nation”

(Quote from ACSSO’S submission to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy)

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Submission
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1. This Submission in Brief

ACSSO represents the parents, students and school communities in 7000 of Australia's public schools. We are therefore uniquely placed to provide parent and community input into an inquiry which might otherwise focus primarily on the pedagogical issues.

Central to our submission is the proposition that the greatest priority for creating a literate society is to promote the practice of parents and care-givers reading with their children, especially from the earliest possible age. School based teaching of literacy is of critical importance but a national campaign to encourage home reading would be the single most effective contribution governments and educators could make to the literacy levels of this nation.

ACSSO does not pretend to be expert in what sometimes appears to be a battle between competing ideologies or methodologies relating to the teaching of reading. However, we do know from the experience of our parent members and from available literature and research evidence that one of the most telling periods in a child's development occurs prior to any contact with formal education.

Our submission therefore calls for;

- a significant change in the strategies employed by authorities and educators regarding the teaching of literacy
- public campaigns and government assistance for programs which encourage and enable parents to read with their children at home, especially in the pre-schooling period of their lives
- rewriting of teacher training courses to promote and develop teacher understanding about the role of parents in and the benefits of home reading
- the building of social welfare and health programs to encourage closer parent child relationships centred around reading activities
- the funding of more research into key aspects of education, especially early childhood and head-start programs

2. A Significant Change in Strategies

2.1 *The focus of the current debate*

Although the terms of reference for the inquiry do concentrate on the question of finding the appropriate pedagogies for teaching literacy, it is essential that the committee does not lose sight of the critical importance of parents reading with children both before their schooling starts and during their schooling years.

As important as teaching methodology is to this inquiry, ACSSO wishes to ensure that there is also adequate focus on other ways in which children learn to read. Put simply, teaching literacy in schools is a key activity that benefits young people, if the process is successful. However, expert after expert in child learning and development has highlighted the language and social attainments of children in the first five years of their lives, well before attendance at school.

Similarly, there is a rich body of research which has chartered the wide variations in social and skills development between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds up to the age of five.

In terms of both social equity and learning effectiveness, ACSSO wants governments both at a Federal and State level to research and develop programs that encourage reading in the home, especially in the first five years of a child's life. To wait until a child enters the school is to be "behind the eight ball", a situation which, in some cases, may never be remedied even by the most effective teaching at school.

Heckman, 2000 winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, succinctly described the benefits of early intervention;

"The role of the family is crucial to the formation of learning skills, and government interventions at an early age that mend the harm done by dysfunctional families have proven to be highly effective".

Even where questions of disadvantage are not relevant, ACSSO believes that literacy should not be simply defined as a capacity to read and write in functional terms. It is more than that. Universal literacy as a goal goes beyond the capacity to read and fill in a basic form; ACSSO's goals are to have young people and adults;

- love reading for its own sake
- communicate in written form with a good sense of audience
- appreciate good writing for its capacity to deal with emotion and stimulate the imagination
- feel comfortable with the written word
- share the reading experience with others, including their own children

- experience communication with each other in a caring environment

2.2 Involving More Agencies

At both a Federal and State level there is a wide spectrum of agencies dealing with young people. With the exception of schools, most of that contact between young people and authorities tends to be a remedial relationship; that is, a young person has been delinquent in some way or another, needs health assistance or some other curative service.

At an infant level, the relationship between government agencies and parents may well be either a monitoring or caring one. For example, child health clinics monitor babies and provide mothers with advice about diet and physical and mental development. Similarly, pre-natal classes often provide young couples with parenting information.

Child health nurses pre-natal advisors and other paramedics are currently able to provide advice about children's development and would be a useful conduit to encourage parents to read to children. ACSSO therefore suggests that all available avenues to encourage early home reading should be utilized; this would, of course require a proactive commitment of a number of government agencies and leadership at a national level

There would be many pragmatists who would argue that persuading state, territory and federal governments to co-operate across agencies is too difficult and that current segmented delivery programs, although less effective, are at least deliverable. ACSSO's response is that unacceptable levels of literacy difficulties across Australia's student population require a focussed and national effort that would pay greater social and education dividends. This is especially the case with home reading which is not based on some radical social engineering theory but on a traditional, observable practice such as parents reading whilst cuddling their children.

2.3 Involving Business

To organize a national campaign to promote and enable more home reading will require more than cross-government and agency co-operation; it will also require the commitment and resources of the private sector. Key areas of the economy where there would be commercial vested interests should be found in the print media and the book publishing industry. It is obvious that those sectors should see that they have a commercial interest in promoting and maintaining a higher level of literacy and reading in their future market places.

Although some critics of this sector have pointed out the short term thinking of this sector it should be remembered that there have been historically a number of eras where forward commercial thinking has paid dividends socially and commercially. For example, anyone familiar with the history of the British print industry would know that the press barons recognized an enormous potential market that could be created through the development

of universal literacy. To that end, they were powerful drivers of successive Education Acts that helped to bring about one of the world's first universally literate societies.

Any campaign for home reading in Australia should also recognize the powerful commercial incentives that could potentially benefit such a campaign

3. A Public Campaign to Promote Home reading

3.1 Benefits of reading with children

Reading with a child is more than an exercise in skilling; it is also part of the essential social, neurological, emotional and educational development of humans in our society.

For more than forty years there has been a body of clinical evidence that points to a strong connection between a children's development and the degree to which they are cuddled, spoken to in a secure caring and protective manner by parents or those close to them. Attachment theory and trials with both young humans and higher level primates point to the critical role played by parental touch, voice and responsiveness on the development of progeny. The work of Harlow, Bowlby, Trevarthen and Mustard has created the theoretical and clinical background for conclusions already arrived at by many observant parents or grand-parents. That is, the act of reading with a child from a very early age is beneficial for at least the following reasons.

- it provides an opportunity to make the child feel that he or she is the centre of caring attention
- it creates a feeling of being protected
- it helps parents to physically and emotionally bond with their children
- it helps to create an association between books and people who love and care for the child
- it is a quiet time that helps to calm and comfort most children
- it is time out from the stimulation of television or electronic games
- it stimulates the imagination and helps language development
- it is an occasion for bonding through touch, voice and gesture
- it creates an opportunity to informally increase reading and perception skills without the same pressures of fear of failure that can accompany formal tuition in schools, especially for those children who come from households where reading with children is not practised.

The above benefits do rely on parenting skills that may not be universal, which helps to explain why some children start school with a distinct advantage over others. This is not to imply that socio-economic status is the major determinant of literacy skills since there are also ambitious, educated or wealthy parents who pressurize their children to advance their reading skills at a premature pace. There are also others from higher socio-economic levels that can spare little time from their busy careers to relax with their children by regularly reading with them.

However, the principle of good parenting remains the key principle behind ACSSO's promotion of home reading. This is why ACSSO strongly suggests that, while pedagogy is important, the single most valuable contribution government and educators can make to national literacy standards is to promote and implement the concept of home reading amongst Australia's parents and care-givers. This would extend to providing pre-reading materials and a guide for parents to help their children read in every language. An example of this good practice is occurring in the Broadmeadows area in Victoria. A joint initiative between the Health Dept and Education Department is providing pre-reading kits in every language and encouraging parents to involve themselves in their child's literacy development despite the fact that many of the parents don't speak any English. They are also encouraging these parents to become involved in the school.

Some of the schools in the Broadmeadows area are looking at **school readiness** and providing an extra year for those students who present at school but clearly won't be ready to satisfactorily embark on Grade 1 after only one year in the prep/kindergarten grade at school. (Thus avoiding setting students on a miserable course of failure) Similarly, in Tasmania, an award winning parent reading kit is available through the State Library system

Heckman again:

“We cannot afford to postpone investing in children.....nor can we wait until they reach school age; a time when it may be too late to intervene.”

ACSSO wishes to ensure that parents and educators understand that both intervention and flexibility must go hand in hand. For example, there will be occasions when some young people of both pre-school and school age will not want to read books but may be induced to read by parents and teachers providing reading matter that comes in magazine or comic book format. The key is to unblock the resistance at whatever point it occurs in a young person's life.

4. Rewriting of teacher education courses

4.1 Family-School Partnerships as an Education Subject

This issue goes beyond the inclusion of literacy teaching skills modules designed for teachers in training; it is also an attitudinal and awareness issue that goes to the heart of the parent-school relationship. If teacher training courses contain no dedicated modules which examine and promote the value of parent-school partnerships in educating the whole child, the notion that parents have a special role to play in children's literacy and introducing children to books, is likely to fall on the deaf ears of busy teachers.

Researchers such as Hargreaves have pointed out the complexity and sensitivities of parent-school relationships. Platitudes about the value of these relationships often tend to overlook such difficult issues as pushy or over-anxious parents, domineering teachers, jargonistic and excluding language, the clash of individual self-interest and community good and other natural but hopefully uncommon problems that can affect a school community and require teacher professionalism.

ACSSO asks the question, what is being done to ensure that teachers in training ultimately emerge with a professional understanding of parent-school relationships? Creating that professional understanding should be a major goal of teacher training institutions. One of the next goals has to be the introduction of programs designed to encourage parents to read to their children at home.

4.2 Literacy Teaching Skills

ACSSO does not intend to make a professional judgement about the most effective pedagogy related to the teaching of literacy at school. As an organisation established in 1947 covering all states and territories, our members have seen teaching trends come and go. Some trends are modified and absorbed into received practice, others disappear without trace. We have seen Cuisenaire maths, selective and comprehensive high schools, core curriculum based on traditional disciplines supplanted by social science, the Great Literature Tradition give way to social science based readings, the New Math, end of year exams replaced wholly or partly by continual assessments and the replacement of foreign language teaching as a core qualifier for matriculation.

We suspect that the current debate about the primacy or otherwise of phonics in literacy teaching may be an arbitrary divide on which it may be unwise to base a whole system of pedagogy. It may be that a hybrid methodology works best and that other factors such as resources, across-the-curriculum teaching of literacy and one-on-one or mini-class learning are just as important as the technical language methodology ultimately selected.

ACSSO raises some questions about the Inquiry's literature review and suggest that the Inquiry members should ask themselves at least the following questions.

- Why should funding and national policies about literacy be based primarily upon remedial methodologies for struggling students rather than for the whole student population?
- Is there a risk that methodologies which are primarily remedial in scope and technique could have a deadening effect on young peoples' love of reading and their interaction with books?
- If packaged, replicable methods are imposed on the teaching of literacy will there be room for flexible engagement between teachers and students, so that the imagination of students is liberated not packaged and constricted?
- Will literacy be taught in a context that has meaning for each student (i.e. is the teacher also encouraged to take cues from the students)?

What we do know is;

- that home reading both at a before school level and later can be the most vital factor in reading skills and needs to be included in all teacher training courses.
- successful learning begets successful learning and occurs with most people if they are not self-conscious, pressurized or overcome by fear of failure
- without teacher awareness of that fundamental part of the parent school relationship, the room for national literacy improvement is limited.
- That all teachers in every discipline need basic training in literacy teaching so that they are at least able to recognize and refer students who may be experiencing literacy problems

4.3 Education Research Funding

A key issue is the percentage of research funding that is currently dedicated to education research relative to other research funding. In 2004, a prescient paper by the Australian Council of Deans of Education indicated that only two percent of funding allocated by the Australian Research Council that year was allocated to education research. It maybe that education research is subsumed in other research but this is unlikely.

If that level of funding is the norm for private sector research funding (which is already low by OECD standards) there are two major concerns. Is that funding the result of omission, which would be bad enough or, worse still, is it the result of deliberate policy making?

One of ACSSO's key policies is the need for societies to respect the power and liberating influence of universal, free education. A miserly two percent of research funds to education added to the perennial problems caused by under funding of education faculties in universities is not acceptable to our organisation.

If governments are attracted to evidence based research as a driving notion for funding, the current low level of investment in education research appears to be a major problem that needs to be remedied.

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7. Appendix

A. About ACSSO

ACSSO is the national organisation representing the interests of parents, citizens and students associated with government schools throughout Australia. ACSSO is non-party political and non-sectarian.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence and participatory democracy.

The principle of access means a public education system available to all, irrespective of their age, capacity to pay, class, culture, gender, level of ability, location, religion/belief, or sexual orientation.

Equality is dependent on recognition that all children have a capacity to learn. Learning is the construction of meaning from experience. School practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school. Children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.

Equity in educational outcomes means all social groups should, as a result of schooling, have comparable distributions of educational outcomes.

Excellence means that the public school system must provide the highest quality education for all.

Participatory democracy means a partnership of students, parents and teachers in school and system decision making. It also means that students should, as a result of schooling, have the knowledge, skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to participate effectively in shaping society. This will enable students to learn how to learn throughout their lives for the benefit of themselves and others. Public education must develop among all students a sense of justice as well as respect and concern for others.

ACSSO believes that public education must remain secular and be fully funded by government.