

# **The Teaching of Literacy and Numeracy in ACT Public Schools**

## **Response of the Board of the Institute of Special Educators to the Literacy and Numeracy Education Expert Panel Consultation Paper**

### **1. What supports are required to ensure the literacy and numeracy outcomes within the Australian Curriculum are met? Are there examples of system-wide or school-based supports that have been found to be particularly effective?**

A tiered approach to instruction (Response to Intervention [RtI]/Multi-tiered System of Supports [MTSS]) has been demonstrated to have some success as a school-based intervention (Arias-Gundín, & Llamazaras, 2021). The success of these models is predicated on the inclusion of evidence-based instruction (both content and pedagogy) included for the 80% of students in Tier 1 and specific evidence-based strategies and supports included in Tier 2 (approximately 15% of students) and Tier 3 (approximately 5% of students). A school based qualified specialist teacher would be needed to assist with data collection (initial and ongoing assessment) and the implementation of specific strategies for the top tiers. RtI/MTSS is explained in some detail in the recently released Grattan Institute Report (Hunter, Stobart & Haywood, 2024).

### **2. What teaching practices have been found to consistently improve literacy and numeracy outcomes?**

Effective early literacy and numeracy instruction has been found to predict later achievement in these two very important skill areas (e.g., Jordon, et al., 2009; National Reading Panel, 2000). For both literacy and numeracy, components of effective practice include both content that is predictive of longer-term achievement and the pedagogy required to teach the content.

#### ***Content***

##### *Literacy*

The early literacy skills that have been demonstrated to be predictive of later literacy achievement are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000). Instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics has been found to be critical for initial instruction in decoding (McGeown & Medford, 2014), with these skills referred to as the enabling skills for reading by Adams (1990). Students who have limited phonemic awareness skills will struggle to learn to read (Spear-Swerling, 2015; Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014).

##### *Numeracy*

Research has identified early number skills as good predictors of later mathematical skills (e.g., Davis-Keen et al., 2022; Jordan, et al., 2009; Kiss, et al., 2019; Koponen, et al., 2019). These skills include counting, cardinality, numeral identification, magnitude or set comparisons, number sequencing, composing and simple arithmetic (Kiss et al., 2019).

#### ***Pedagogy***

Decades of research have highlighted the need for the explicit and systematic teaching of content (e.g., Ko, & Sammons, 2013). Indeed, a recent report from the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO, 2023) suggests that, in order to learn effectively and efficiently, students should “experience well-structured, sequenced and supportive approaches to acquiring new knowledge and skills, referred to as explicit teaching or explicit instruction” (p.7).

There are different models of explicit instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986) designed to provide a framework for teaching key knowledge and skills. Many teachers claim that they teach explicitly, believing that the term simply means

providing clear directions and explanations, but true models of explicit instruction, while using slightly different terminology, include the following core components:

### 1. *Review of previous knowledge*

In most cases, this should be a brief review of the major content of the last lesson. This does *not* mean the teacher summarising the major points, but rather the teacher asking randomly selected students specific questions that cover key content. If beginning a new unit, the teacher could link the new learning to something familiar to the students, or explain the importance or relevance of the new topic for them.

### 2. *Clear statement of lesson goal/lesson intention*

This statement should clearly articulate what students will learn: what they will actually do during the independent practice part of the lesson. This statement should not include terms like *appreciate*, *know*, or *understand*, but rather “visible” terms such as *calculate*, *solve*, *evaluate*, or *describe*, so that the teacher can easily assess at the end of the lesson whether or not the lesson goal has been achieved. Note: There is no evidence that having the students write the learning objective down helps them understand or remember it. Checking student understanding of the lesson goal through questioning two or three students chosen at random is far more effective.

### 3. *Demonstrate/explain/model*

This is the core of explicit teaching. Both demonstration and modeling should incorporate small, sequential steps, with the teacher clearly articulating the steps, processes, or procedures using a “Think Aloud” strategy. Examples and, if relevant, non-examples, are included. Explanations can be used alone, or accompany demonstrations and modeling.

### 4. *Guided practice*

This component is often neglected as many teachers move directly from a demonstration to directing students to complete an associated task. Guided practice involves supporting the students while they attempt the task, and is best done if all students are participating (through, for example, the use of individual mini white boards). If one student is asked to work through an example, or demonstrate at the front of the class while other students observe, engagement for that one student is very high; however, the engagement of all the other students drops off immediately, as a student can rarely hold the group’s attention as well as a teacher can. A critical part of guided practice is the role of teacher feedback so students do not practise an incorrect procedure or get basic facts wrong.

### 5. *Application/Independent Practice*

During this phase of an explicitly taught lesson, the students practise the skill or use their new knowledge independently in a set task while the teacher monitors. This activity should be the one referred to in the learning objective, and resemble as much as possible a real-life use of the skills. For example, when teaching early grapheme-phoneme correspondences (phonics) such as the sound relating to the letter p, rather than having the students simply write a line of ‘p’ s, the independent practice component of the lesson should involve (as soon as possible) the writing of actual words using p combined with previously learnt graphemes such as a, i, t, n, thus writing the real words *pin*, *pat*, *pit*, *pan*.

Independent practice can be differentiated for children of different abilities, and rotation activities can be used once the classroom is settled and at least some students can work independently.

### 6. *Review of new knowledge*

This step is important in grounding new knowledge and helping students remember the core learning from the lesson. If in different groups, the students are drawn back together and the teacher asks randomly selected students what they learnt. The final part of the lesson is a succinct statement that summarises the main point of their learning.

NB: The next explicit teaching lesson in this sequence would begin by a review of this knowledge before introducing new knowledge, and thus the cycle continues. This cumulative review is one reason for the effectiveness of this model.

Each of the phases of explicit teaching should include regular checking for student understanding. One useful method of doing this is included in Hollingsworth and Ybarra's *Explicit Direct Instruction* (EDI) (2009) model, and abbreviated to CFU. Further information can be provided about how Hollingsworth and Ybarra recommend doing this, as the technique can add an important component to the explicit teaching model.

### **3. Are there curriculum and teaching practices, approaches or supports in ACT public schools that are working well or are not having the desired impact? Are there any lessons the Education Directorate can take away from what is/is not working, and what should they stop, start or expand upon to improve outcomes?**

According to the data provided in the consultation paper, there is still an unacceptable number of students not meeting proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy, despite (a) funding public education to the Schooling Resource Standard, including prioritising the funding of equity initiatives, and (b) the relative advantage of the ACT population. This demonstrates that quality teaching practice has a much greater impact on student outcomes than funding schools to implement practices that may not be effective. The value in providing educators with autonomy, in the hope that effective innovations might ensue, would depend on the educators' knowledge of, and skills in, effective instruction. Unfortunately, we know from research into initial teacher education courses in Australia that many teachers will not have these skills following the completion of teacher education courses (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Meeks & Stephenson, 2020). We also know that it is highly unlikely that teachers will continue to access research literature following the completion of their initial training (Rudland & Kemp, 2004).

Given the importance of the early years to the development of literacy and numeracy skills, it is useful to consider the approach to instruction taken in primary school. It is here that the failure to include evidence-based instruction will have the greatest impact. We note that it is stated that "High quality literacy in high schools should involve an approach comprising direct teaching, guided practice and independent skill application". This approach is definitely supported by research (AERO, 2023). However, the approach to literacy instruction at the primary school level (i.e., a balance between teacher-led instruction, targeted group work and individual exploration) does not have scientific evidence to support it. The constructivist, exploratory, approach lacks research support and would be particularly damaging for students with learning difficulties (i.e., students not achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy).

The foundations for numeracy should be established in the primary school years. Unfortunately many students reach high school, indeed graduate from high school, without basic skills in mathematics.

The description of the use of whole class, small group and individual instruction is promising. However, although mention is made of strengthening conceptual skills, there is no mention of procedural skills, and automaticity, which have also been demonstrated to be important instructional targets (Gilmore et al., 2017; Stickney et al., 2012). Mention of learning styles (p.16 of the consultation paper) is of concern as there is no research evidence that students need to be taught according to their learning style. Of course, there are individual differences among students and we do know that we need to individualise instruction. However those decisions should be based on data and not so called learning styles.

#### **4. Does the Education Directorate’s approach of suggesting but not mandating teaching approaches support improved learning outcomes or would a greater degree of evidence- based prescription be more effective?**

There is ample research evidence supporting (a) the efficacy of explicit instruction based on an assessment of student skills, (b) student goals selected using curriculum-based assessment and the capacity of student to master those goals; and (c) ongoing assessment of student progress (AERO, 2023; Hunter, Stobart & Haywood, 2024). Evidence-based teaching approaches should most definitely be mandated. Unfortunately we know that not all initial teacher education programs include evidence-based content (e.g., Meeks & Stephenson, 2020), and that teachers freely admit that they are not prepared to teach early literacy (Meeks, Madelaine & Stephenson, 2020).

The key teaching strategies that are included in the consultation paper, while potentially including some of the evidence-based strategies already alluded to, appear to be a wish list of principles rather than a list of what would be generally understood as strategies, and are very much open to interpretation. For example, what is meant by a “deep understanding of the students, their prior knowledge, abilities, interests, culture and background”. In order to provide an evidence-based program, we would want to have an objective measure of the knowledge/skills that the students have in the context of the skills that are required to achieve proficiency in literacy and numeracy. Other statements under planning are equally vague. We are also concerned about the statement that “all teachers are competent facilitators of learning”. Teachers should teach knowledge and skills explicitly and systematically (see AERO, 2023; Hunter, Stobart & Haywood, 2024). They are not facilitators of learning. Teaching, not learning, is informed by student performance data. If this is the approach taken, we are not surprised that the number of students failing to demonstrate proficiency in literacy and numeracy are as high as they are.

There are many references to the level of flexibility and the individual discretion afforded teachers and leaders in the consultation paper. The degree of flexibility lends itself to a wide variation in outcomes.

#### **5. Are there examples of system-wide approaches to literacy and numeracy teaching in other jurisdictions that the Panel should examine?**

True system-wide approaches are rare. Nevertheless, models such as the RtI/MTSS framework and explicit, direct instruction, which are explained in some detail in this submission, are proven, evidence-based approaches that the ACT should consider.

#### **6. How can school leaders and the Education Directorate be confident of what is being taught and the effectiveness of how it is being taught?**

This can only be achieved by ensuring that both evidence-based content and pedagogy in the teaching of early literacy and numeracy skills is implemented in schools. This will require ongoing professional development of the teaching staff. We would also support the appointment of qualified

special education teachers to coach teachers in the implementation of evidence-based practice. The challenges associated with this are acknowledged. Postgraduate qualifications in literacy development, learning difficulties and related areas vary enormously in the breadth and depth of content covered, and the efficacy of the strategies recommended (Stephenson et al., 2023).

### **7. What approaches to assessment and screening would provide the most useful data to support educators and school leaders in understanding student progress, identifying need and ensuring consistent improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes?**

It was noted (page 18 of the consultation paper) that some ACT schools use Progressive Achievement Testing (PAT) to “identify starting points for learning, target teaching and monitor learning growth”. These are norm-referenced tests designed to compare students to their same age/grade peers. They can be useful for tracking student performance across the school years, and for identifying students achieving below or above grade level. They are definitely not useful for programming or for formative assessment given the type and number of items selected to test skills in norm reference tests. Curriculum-based assessment of the content that has been identified as necessary for the development of literacy and numeracy skills is essential to effective programming in these areas.

The importance of universal screening, endorsed by the recently released Grattan Institute Report (Hunter, Stobart, & Haywood, 2024), cannot be overestimated. We would, therefore, support the use of the Year 1 Phonics Check and an assessment of phonemic awareness (phoneme blending and segmentation) and number sense in the first year of school. These assessments would identify the students who are at risk of falling behind in literacy and numeracy. An extensive list of recommended screening, monitoring and diagnostic assessments for the different stages of reading is available in Appendix 1 of the Primary Reading Pledge (available on the *Five from Five* website), all of which are grounded in evidence-based research. These have been endorsed by *SPELD* and *Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA)*. This is an invaluable resource, but choices would need to be made by someone who has a deep understanding of the stages of reading and the research behind the reading process.

### **8. How do educators and school leaders currently understand and use student data to improve student learning outcomes and are any additional supports needed?**

Our experience would suggest that teachers are more likely to teach to the grade syllabus than to use individual student data to plan their instruction, even if these data are collected.

### **9. What is the most effective way for schools to communicate student learning progress to students and their families to ensure a shared understanding of outcomes in relation to literacy and numeracy? Are there any effective approaches that are efficient and minimise impacts on teacher workload?**

Progress is most likely to be communicated to students and their families during teacher/parent interviews or through half yearly and yearly reports. These reports communicate general information but rarely provide information relating to the specific skills that the student has, and the skills that the student needs to master. If data on student progress are collected while teaching, reporting these data should not be too arduous.

### **10. Are there any examples of effective system-wide and school-based assessment, data informed teaching, and reporting for literacy and numeracy that the Panel should examine?**

These should be incorporated in a RtI/MTSS model. A contemporary example of a system approach within the ACT education system is the Catalyst Program that has been undertaken by the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese of the Catholic Church in Australia. Details of this work, and other system

approaches and solutions are reported in two reports published by Equity Economics (Del Rio & Jones, 2023; Del Rio et al. 2023).

**11. What evidence-based supports and interventions are most effective for supporting students who have not yet reached expected proficiency in literacy and numeracy? Are there any particularly supports that are more effective for students from specific equity cohorts (e.g. EALD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students)?**

Teaching practices that are evidence-based include curriculum-based assessment of skills, an instructional plan that includes careful sequencing of skills (task analysis), selection of goals and objectives that can be measured and are achievable, explicit instruction (demonstration, guided practice and independent practice), and corrective feedback. Changes to objectives will take into consideration cognitive load and the learning rate of the student (trials to mastery). The RtI model, discussed earlier in this response, is designed to meet the needs of all mainstream students. Tier 1 constitutes high quality, explicit whole class teaching and addresses the needs of 80% of students: those who learn relatively easily. If students do not progress at the same rate as their peers, small group (4-6 students) instruction would be implemented. This would be designed to lift student performance within a term or two, at which point they would re-join whole class instruction. If students still fall behind within Tier 2 instruction, Tier 3 instruction in smaller groups (1-3 students) would be required for literacy and numeracy instruction. These students are likely to require long-term support in small groups for core learning, but should be part of the regular class for as many other lessons as possible.

These practices will be successful for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. Of course, cultural sensitivity is important when teachers are working in collaboration with families.

**12. What specific supports would be most contextually appropriate for ACT public school students who have not yet reached expected proficiency in literacy or numeracy in the following learning phases: P-2, 3-6, 7-10 and 11-12?**

An RtI model would still require support beyond the regular class teacher in order for the small groups to be operational. For all students (P-6) who have not demonstrated proficiency in literacy and/or numeracy, school-based specialist support is essential, especially given that classroom teachers are not prepared with the necessary evidence-based knowledge and skills during their pre-service courses. School-based professional learning courses for teachers P-6, provided by specialists in combination with coaching and mentoring, should mean that there will be fewer students with difficulties achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy by the time they reach secondary school. For those still experiencing difficulties in years 7-12, support from a specialist teacher in combination with peer tutoring or tutoring by a teacher assistant supervised by the specialist teacher will be needed.

**13. Should the Education Directorate consider targeted small group or individual tutoring to support students to improve literacy and numeracy? If so, what models should be adopted?**

Small group or individual instruction is only useful if the person implementing the instruction has knowledge of evidence-based instruction in literacy and numeracy and skills in implementing such instruction, or is trained, mentored and supervised by someone who does have this knowledge and these skills. We would advise having a qualified specialist teacher in this support role. Unfortunately, teaching assistants or volunteers are often used to implement small group or individual instruction with students with special education needs. This approach is not supported in the research literature (Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010) and can lead to the least qualified person

instructing the students with the most complex learning needs. Teaching assistants can be a valuable resource but only if trained and adequately supervised.

**14. What current targeted supports and intervention policies and approaches are working well/not having the desired impact and how can the Education Directorate expand upon or leverage successful approaches to improve outcomes?**

We are not aware of any in the ACT public system but the Grattan Report includes a case study (reporting improvement in literacy in NAPLAN scores Year 1 Phonics checks) in the Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn as previously mentioned.

**15. What system-wide and school-based professional learning and coaching best support educators with literacy and numeracy instruction and improvement? Are there any that best support early career teachers as they commence, or middle leaders with literacy and numeracy instructional leadership?**

Given the paucity of initial teacher training in the areas of literacy and numeracy, professional learning and coaching is best provided by specialist staff at the school level. Training and coaching that focuses on diagnoses (e.g., autism, dyslexia, speech and language needs, ADHD etc) as suggested (p.21) is not helpful. It would be far better to include strategies for addressing specific difficulties in literacy and numeracy.

**16. What are the most effective ways for the Education Directorate and principals to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness/impact of professional learning and coaching support for educators and school leaders, particularly early career teachers and middle leaders?**

The effectiveness /impact of professional learning and coaching can be evaluated initially through feedback provided by teachers and measures of evidence-based instruction by specialist staff. Ultimately the best measure will be a reduction in the number of students failing to reach proficiency on assessments of literacy and numeracy.

**17. What current professional learning and coaching policies and approaches are working well/not having the desired impact? How do we know? How can the Education Directorate expand upon or leverage successful approaches to improve outcomes?**

See our overview of the Grattan Institute report below.

**18. How can the ACT use evidence-based school improvement planning cycles to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes?**

See our overview of the Grattan Institute report below.

**19. What are the best approaches to evaluation and monitoring of schools to ensure appropriate support and accountability in relation to literacy and numeracy outcomes?**

See our overview of the Grattan Institute report below.

**20. What current school improvement policies and approaches are supporting improved literacy and numeracy outcomes and how can the Education Directorate expand upon or leverage successful approaches to improve outcomes?**

See our overview of the Grattan Institute report below.

## **Overview of the 2024 Grattan Report on the Teaching of Reading and its implications for Literacy and Numeracy Reforms in the ACT**

The Grattan Institute Report (Hunter, Stobart, & Haywood, 2024): (a) highlights landmark studies and significant research into reading conducted over the past three decades; (b) describes contexts similar to those facing the ACT (and many other jurisdictions); and (c) outlines the economic, social and personal costs of the achievement gap in reading. It emphasises the complexity of the reading process, and the need for a whole-school approach to instruction, with multiple levels of support (RtI/MTSS) to ensure all students learn to read. It stresses the need for the explicit and systematic (carefully sequenced) teaching of the sub-skills of reading, including phonics, and provides information to assist school leaders to select evidence-based phonics programs from the vast array of beginning reading programs available.

Despite an established research-based consensus about how children learn to read that has existed for five decades, the “reading wars” have persisted, and held back the implementation of an evidence-based approach in many schools. The Report explains how a “whole language” or “balanced literacy” approach fails to meet the needs of many students, whereas an explicit and systematic approach leaves no students behind.

Useful case studies featuring schools that have significantly increased the reading achievement of all their students are included. The rapid improvement in Year 1 Phonics Check and NAPLAN results of the Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn is one of these case studies. Teaching reading to students who have entered secondary school struggling to read independently is also addressed, again with relevant case studies included.

The Response to Intervention/Multi-tiered System of Support (RtI/MTSS), that we have mentioned in our response to the questions posed, is explained in some detail, along with the importance of universal screening. Other points we mentioned, such as the poor pre-service preparation of our teachers, and the paucity of evidence-based knowledge of how to teach reading included in preservice courses, is also discussed.

The report states the need for a “more deliberate, hands-on, system-wide approach” and a “suite of co-ordinated policy reforms underpinned by sufficient investment and a strong implementation strategy” p.42), but acknowledges the challenges and potential barriers at the system, school and classroom level. It does, however, provide a six-step strategy and specific guidelines that provide a roadmap for schools and systems.

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