



**INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION OF AUSTRALIA**

**NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY**

**April 2005**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1. The IEU believes that the dichotomy evident in much of the public debate between the ‘whole of language’ and ‘phonics’ approach to the teaching of literacy is artificial. The teaching of literacy to students across primary and secondary levels in a range of settings and policy environments is a more complex process than what has been argued in the media as a result of this recent debate. The review needs to acknowledge the importance of teacher judgement and the complexity of teachers’ task in providing appropriate learning strategies taking into account the age of students, the influence of socio economic factors, gender, LOTE background and Indigeneity.**
  
- 2. The Union believes that teachers of literacy use a range of approaches depending on the individuals and groups of students they are teaching, the available resources, the experience of teachers, the collaborative, supportive and reflective culture in the workplace and teachers’ access to relevant and appropriate professional learning experiences. For example, the research from the Boys Education Inquiry and the National Literacy and PISA surveys indicate that extensive use of the school library and classroom computers are associated with higher literacy achievement as is daily homework.**
  
- 3. The IEU believes that previous Inquiries such as that related to the Education of Boys and the 1996 National Survey and the OECD 2000 and 2003 PISA Surveys provide important evidence for the objectives of this Inquiry and notes the following:**
  - In relation to the objective concerned with the effectiveness of assessment methods to monitor the progress of students’ early reading learning, the IEU urges the Inquiry to examine the findings of the 1996 National Survey as set out in the Report “Mapping Literacy Achievement.”**

**The IEU believes the underpinning principles and methodology represent best practice in literacy assessment processes. In particular, integrating normal classroom activity and practice with the assessment process is the best context for the valid assessment of student achievement and the collection of data – at a school, state or national level – in that it provides teachers with immediate and relevant feedback.**

- There are also lessons to be learned from the Survey findings in relation to effective teaching practice and approaches that support teacher professional learning. Pre service training and well-resourced ongoing professional learning are fundamental in supporting teachers in literacy teaching practice/renewal, assessment approaches etc**

- **The IEU believes there is value in the recommendation which urges the establishment of base-line data of student literacy achievement. This would enable the collection of longitudinal data to monitor the direction of any changes in student achievement that may occur over time and to isolate the factors or groups of factors that may contribute to that change. The IEU recommends the Government, through the MCEETYA process, commit to the collection of such longitudinal data.**
  - **The IEU notes the importance given to the need to redressing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on literacy learning in both the PISA and 1996 National Surveys. The IEU recommends this be a priority in the recommendations to the government from this Inquiry.**
- 4. The IEU believes that this Inquiry should look to the work of the STELLA Project particularly in relation to the Inquiry objective related to best practice in effective approaches to literacy teaching and learning both at classroom level and in the training of teachers.**

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEU) is the federally registered union which represents teachers and support staff in non-government education institutions including early childhood centres, schools and post secondary training institutions, across all the states and territories of Australia. The union currently has a membership over 60,000.
- 1.2 The IEU has always taken an active role in the various debates and government funded projects and forums concerned with issues of teacher professionalism, standards and the quality of teaching and learning.

For example, the union has been engaged in various educational inquiries and endeavours, including the government's Inquiry into the Education of Boys; the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education - Young People, Schools and Innovation; the Commonwealth sponsored work coordinated by the Australian College of Educators on Teacher Quality, Professionalism and Standards; the work advanced by the MCEETYA Taskforce on A National Framework for Standards For Teaching; the establishment in most State and Territory jurisdictions, of Institutes/Colleges of Teaching; and the establishment of the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership.

The IEU also participated on the Management Committee of the first major national survey of years 3 and 5 students – the National School English Literacy Survey (1996) - which produced the report "*Mapping Literacy Achievement: Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey*". It provided for the first time, a national map of literacy achievement in key aspects of literacy: Reading, Writing (including spelling), Speaking, Listening and Viewing.

- 1.3 The IEU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy and was pleased to nominate one of our members, a Principal/practicing teacher of a Victorian Catholic Primary school, as its representative to the Reference Group of the Inquiry.

## **2. THE LITERACY DEBATE**

- 2.1 The IEU believes that public debate, public policy, public confidence, teachers and students would all be served much better if those with the responsibility and the power to properly inform and lead the community discussion, did so without using alarmist language about the failure of schools. Literacy proficiency is fundamentally important for an individual's personal, social and cultural development and for their capacity to participate in the workforce and in the civic life of the community. It is important that commentary is measured and accurate.
- 2.2 The debate about approaches to literacy teaching is a decades-long one and it provides fertile ground for fear and disquiet about teaching and learning to be generated within the community. There was an element of déjà vu in Minister Nelson's claims in late 2004 when he announced that 30% of students in year 5

fail to reach the literacy benchmarks, saying “*whatever the reading methods that are being used to teach our children in Australian schools, it is failing far too many children*”(7.30 Report). In 1997, Federal Minister Dr David Kemp announced that 33% of year 5 students were failing to meet a benchmark level of literacy achievement – this at a time that the process for the establishment of benchmark standards was not complete.

- 2.3 It is important to note that the teaching profession and in particular, English teachers, have a history of strong and vigorous debate about what characterises good English teaching. This is happening at both a national and international level and has been evident in the professional journals and policy statements of the two national subject associations and also in the work undertaken in the STELLA project (Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy). It is fair to say that the nature of Australia’s education system – across eight jurisdictions with differing disciplinary, curricular and assessment requirements with national consistency being sought through national curriculum profiling and national benchmarks – shapes the culture of English teaching. But local diversity in approach and perspective should not be used to invoke uncertainty about the soundness of English teaching.
- 2.4 Dr Nelson announced the need for a national inquiry into the teaching of literacy and whether the “phonics” approach to reading should take precedence over the supposedly more popular “whole of language” approach. It is not surprising that this had the predictable response of polarising both the argument and the community and to providing the opportunity for commentators to denigrate teachers and teacher educators.
- 2.5 Nevertheless, the IEU believes that such an Inquiry will provide the opportunity for the teaching profession to demonstrate that this dichotomy is artificial and that the teaching of literacy to students across primary and secondary levels in a range of settings and policy environments is a more complex process than what has been argued in the media as a result of this recent debate. The Union believes that teachers of literacy use a range of approaches depending on the individuals and groups of students they are teaching, the available resources, the experience of teachers, the collaborative, supportive and reflective culture in the workplace and teachers’ access to relevant and appropriate professional learning experiences.
- 2.6 It is worth noting that when asked in Parliament whether ‘any consideration had been given within the New South Wales system to teaching by phonics as distinct from the whole language method currently favoured in the training of teachers’, the NSW Minister of Education and Training responded as follows:  
*“In New South Wales we use both the phonics and the whole language methods to teach our students to read, and that is appropriate. Students sound out words, memorise unfamiliar words and learn how to recognise words by their position in a sentence and what they look like.*

*The teaching of phonics in New South Wales has been compulsory since 1998. It*

*is part of the mandatory content of the kindergarten to year 6 syllabus. It is a balanced approach to teaching reading based on international research and best practice.*<sup>1</sup>

### **3. THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

- 3.1 Given some of the negative claims made in relation to the Minister's statement about literacy achievement in Australia, it is important to consider whether the picture is actually so bleak. The results from Australia's participation in the major international PISA surveys give some insight into this issue.
- 3.2 The Executive Summary from the 2000 OECD's Program of International Student Achievement (PISA) shows that Australia's result was above the OECD average in the three domains of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy and also in the three reading processes. The main domain of the year 2000 survey was Reading Literacy. Only one country outperformed Australia in reading literacy overall (Finland), one was better than Australia in mathematical literacy (Japan) and two were better than Australia in scientific literacy (Korea and Japan). The top 5% of Australian students achieved at the same level in all domains as the top 5% of students in any country. 18% of Australian students achieved the highest reading proficiency level (level 5) compared to the OECD average of 10%; 12% of Australian students did not reach at least level 2 compared with the OECD average of 18%.
- 3.3 Similarly, the results from the 2003 OECD's PISA survey showed that Australian students again ranked second to Finland in reading literacy. The Executive Summary notes that *"between 2000 and 2003 for those domains in which comparisons can be made – mathematical literacy, scientific literacy and reading literacy, Australia's performance did not change significantly."*
- 3.4 These reports provide very extensive information in terms of males' and females' results, Indigenous students' results, the influence of socio economic background, and students' attitudes and beliefs. They reflect the complexity of the teaching process and context. There were key findings consistent across both Surveys which have important public policy implications. These included:
- The continuing low achievement of Indigenous students with the 2003 report noting that Indigenous students score around one proficiency level lower than non Indigenous students and that it was important for Indigenous students to continue to receive additional support to raise their performance levels.
  - Similarly in relation to students from a language background other than English, the reports indicate lower English literacy levels than those achieved by students from English-speaking backgrounds. The IEU urges attention be given to this cohort of students with appropriate levels of resourcing for ESL

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<sup>1</sup> NSW Legislative Council Hansard, 2 March 2005, Pages 18 - (article 17)

and TESOL programs on the basis that this will help improve literacy outcomes for many disadvantaged groups.

- Socio economic disadvantage continues to impact detrimentally on student achievement. The 2000 report notes “*Australia has a long way to go compared with some other countries in compensating for socio economic disadvantage*” (p. xv Executive Summary 2000 PISA report) and the 2004 report notes “*....there still exists a distinct advantage for those students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds ....there is work to be done because the differences observed are greater than would be considered desirable in relation to our national aspirations*” (p. xv Executive Summary 2003 PISA report)
- In relation to reading proficiency, there continues to be significant difference between boys and girls. “*The PISA results reinforced current concerns in Australia, as elsewhere, that boys are being left behind by girls in some academic areas. Boys are substantially over-represented at the lowest proficiency levels in reading literacy and under-represented at the highest level in Australia.* (p.xiv Executive Summary 2000 PISA report). The 2004 report notes “*As in PISA 2000, the gender difference in favour of females in reading literacy was large, about 0.4 of a standard deviation (40 scale points) and this was larger than the OECD average.*” (p. xii Executive Summary 2003 PISA report). The Report also notes that males performed substantially better than females in some aspects of mathematics.

3.5 The above is not to say that there should be complacency with the results from the OECD surveys – while the scores indicate that Australian students performed at levels at or above the OECD average with 42% of students achieving in the top two levels of literacy, there were 12% of students achieving at below level 2. Lifting the literacy levels of these students is fundamentally important, and examining teacher training, teaching practice, ongoing professional learning and the response of public policy to the identified problems from the PISA analysis - in particular, the evident weight of social and economic disadvantage - is strongly supported by the IEU.

3.6 The importance of redressing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on literacy learning cannot be overstated and given the findings of both the PISA and 1996 National Survey, should be a major priority in the recommendations to the government from this Inquiry. Proficiency in literacy is of major importance for each individual’s personal, social and cultural development. Furthermore the societal costs of low literacy levels are very considerable. Even in the early 1990s, published Commonwealth reports on the cost to industry of low literacy levels in lost productivity were estimated at \$3.2 billion annually and would be much higher if factors such as industrial safety, poor product quality and low job mobility were taken into account.<sup>2</sup> The impact is likely to be higher in 2005.

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<sup>2</sup> The International Literacy Year Report 1990, Putting Literacy on the Agenda, Commonwealth of Australia 1992 pp7-8

#### 4. PREVIOUS NATIONAL INITIATIVES IN ASSESSING STUDENT LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

- 4.1 In 1996, the Federal Government instituted the National School English Literacy Survey which had the imprimatur of MCEETYA and was planned and managed by a Management Committee involving all the key stakeholders involved in schooling. This was the first time since 1980 that such an attempt had been made to collect national data on the levels of English attainment of Australian students.<sup>3</sup>
- 4.2 The Survey Report notes that the *“overall purpose of the Survey was to produce a consistent factual analysis of the existing situation to be used as baseline data to monitor national performance over time and to inform strategies to improve literacy in Australian schools.”*<sup>4</sup>
- 4.3 An important aspect of this work was its broader definition of literacy to include reading and writing (and Spelling) together with speaking, listening and viewing, as reflected in the English Profiles. The Survey Management Committee adopted the definition in the Australian Language and Literacy Policy which referred to the concept of *effective* literacy as follows:

Literacy is the ability to read and use written information appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text.

Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. *Effective* literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop throughout an individual's lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

- 4.4 The IEU supports this broader definition of literacy. In this context of *effective* literacy, it is worthwhile noting that the demands of the modern workplace require workers to have more highly developed skills of communication than ever before. From the early 1990s, micro economic and workplace reform emphasised concepts of lifelong learning and effective communication, working in teams rather than on mass production lines, progression to higher level skills through recognised and accredited vocational training and implementation of workforce consultative mechanisms in the workplace. The message was that for an organisation to be competitive in the modern economy, it had to be a continuous learning organisation, with more highly skilled and better-paid workers. Business became more interventionist in the education debate and pressed the government about the need for schools to better meet the demands of globalisation and the highly competitive international economy. This drive for more highly skilled workers in the context of workplace reform and international globalisation continues.

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<sup>3</sup> Mapping Literacy Achievement – Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey. G. N. Masters and M. Forster (ACER) 1997 p1

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p5

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p51

- 4.5 Of course such major economic shifts impacted upon the educational institutions across the country and also on other organisations which saw the need to support improved literacy levels for their constituents. For instance, the Construction, Forestry Mining Energy Union developed a National Strategy for the implementation of an English Language Literacy and Numeracy Policy, understanding that their members required such support in a rapidly changing economic environment. The approach taken by this union also emphasises the need for programs to be in place to support literacy teaching and learning across all age groups.
- 4.6 The covering letter to Federal Minister Dr Kemp from the Management Committee of the National Survey provides an overview of the Survey approach and purpose and a brief sketch of the findings of the Survey. The IEU believes that this project represented best practice in terms of the principles underpinning the methodology for the survey and as the Report states “*produced the richest picture of the literacy achievements of school students to date in this country*”<sup>6</sup>

## 5. THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER POLICY INITIATIVES

### Standards Setting

- 5.1 The policy debates and work undertaken by the professional associations and other educational bodies over the last decade on the ‘standards agenda’ also provide insight into issues relevant to this inquiry. It is not possible to separate a standards setting exercise from teaching practice and professional learning – teachers understand that it is important to identify and define the principles of good practice and the derived standards, to talk about them and to clarify what is understood by them and to validate them.
- 5.2 However, it is the case that the development of the standards for English Literacy teaching has meant different things in different forums and has caused contention for the profession. Is it about a teacher’s performance being individually negotiated and overseen by a principal in accord with externally determined criteria? Or is it a collaborative exercise where teachers share their experience and talk about what they do and have a critical perspective on their work – teachers as professionals assessing their progress through setting standards, identifying shared values and using them as benchmarks.<sup>7</sup> This approach underpins the work undertaken in the STELLA project and its outcomes – ***Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literature in Australia.***
- 5.3 **The IEU believes that this Inquiry should look to the work of this project particularly in relation to the Inquiry objective related to best practice in effective approaches to literacy teaching and learning both at classroom level and in the training of teachers.**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p5

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## 6. CONCLUSION

The national and international research referred to above indicates that literacy acquisition is a particularly complex process “because of the interplay of individual learning with the myriad of factors arising from home and school culture”<sup>8</sup> – and also that the teaching profession is meeting the challenges as indicated in the research. The IEU hopes that this Inquiry will move the debate from where it began so that the community can continue to have confidence in its teachers and that teachers themselves believe the complexity of their work is recognised, acknowledged and valued.

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<sup>8</sup> Mapping Literacy Achievement – Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey. G. N. Masters and M. Forster (ACER) 1997 p.viii