

Noble intent but misguided ideas: Reading and literacy in the NSW Curriculum Review

The Interim Report of the NSW Curriculum Review by Professor Geoff Masters AO was released on 22 October 2019. The K-12 school curriculum review was intended to “ensure that the NSW education system is properly preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century” (p. v). The report contains wide ranging proposals with significant implications for teachers and students, including for teaching reading and literacy.



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Reading and literacy in the Interim Report of the NSW Curriculum Review

The acknowledgement that literacy is a fundamental and essential skill is welcome. The report notes that “a large and growing proportion of NSW students are leaving school with unacceptably low levels of attainment, including in basic skills such as reading and numeracy” (p. 102).

Rates of low literacy in NSW are inarguably unacceptable, a fact that has been reinforced by the most recent PISA results, which found that 44% of 15-year-olds in NSW schools did not achieve the National Proficient Standard in reading literacy and 48% did not achieve the National Proficient Standard in mathematical literacy.

The report’s statement that literacy should be a “common entitlement” and that there should be explicit and clear standards set for a level of attainment every student should reach by the end of their schooling (p. 88) is worthy of support by all levels of government. All schools and systems should be working to achieve this goal without exception.

However, the specific proposals in the report to achieve this goal need to be examined closely. In some cases, they misconstrue research-based approaches to teaching reading and therefore will be counterproductive. There are also inconsistencies and contradictions in the proposals.

- 1 The report proposes that children who are not making adequate progress in literacy and numeracy should have instruction in only these areas until they meet a designated standard.

Ensuring that every student is on track to meet minimally acceptable levels of literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional development should be the top priority in the first few years of school. This should take precedence over providing exposure to a broader curriculum in these early years, especially for children who begin school with developmental delays and low levels of language and other foundational skills. There should be a strong focus on ensuring that every student masters essential enabling skills in reading. Many children begin school behind

most of their age peers and not performing at the levels currently assumed by the school curriculum. Teachers sometimes believe they are required to teach the Kindergarten curriculum to all children whether or not they are ready for it. A future curriculum should be designed on the expectation that, for children who require it, the focus will remain on ensuring at least minimally adequate levels of foundational skills before they are exposed to all mandated Key Learning Areas. (p. 80).

The intent of this proposal is good but the proposed means are misguided. Literacy and numeracy should certainly be the priority in the early years of school as they provide the foundation for all learning, but this should not be exclusively skills-focused and there should be room in the school week for other important aspects of education, including social studies, art and music. Some children will require intensive literacy support that may require withdrawal from other lessons but this does not necessitate teaching literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of all other content. That approach would be counterproductive.

Such a proposal misconstrues the process of reading development. The highly predictive model of reading comprehension called [the Simple View of Reading](#) states that reading comprehension has two essential components – decoding/ word recognition and language comprehension. A deficit in either component will cause problems with reading comprehension. It is essential to establish accurate and fluent decoding through systematic and explicit phonics instruction in the first few years of school, as [this skill is a prerequisite](#) to accurate and fluent reading.

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an explicit instructional focus, and that it develops only within literacy lessons. Language comprehension includes vocabulary and general knowledge, [both of which are developed and extended](#) through the other Key Learning Areas. Denying children the benefit of exposure to learning about their social and natural world, and its history, customs and cultures, will impede their acquisition of the language and knowledge [they need to be proficient readers](#). As the Interim Report states, “Literacy is the ability to put knowledge to work” (p. 63).

Rather than narrowing instruction for children who are making low progress in reading, it is preferable to adopt a [three-tier Response to Intervention framework](#) to ensure that all children receive the level of instruction they need to achieve literacy and numeracy, early and successfully.

In a Response to Intervention model of instruction and intervention, all children receive high quality, evidence-based whole class reading instruction. This will be sufficient for around 75-80% of students to learn to read. Regular curriculum-based assessments monitor each child’s progress. Children who are struggling to keep up with their peers may need extra support in a small group setting, with more intensive instruction in the aspects of reading that are presenting difficulties. Most of these children will make accelerated progress and catch up with their peers. The small proportion of children (around 3-5%) with more serious learning difficulties or disabilities will need specialist, one-to-one intervention, sometimes for a limited time, but sometimes for their entire school life.

In this way, the Response to Intervention model caters for all children while still preserving whole class teaching as the primary mode of instruction. High quality, explicit whole class teaching along with appropriately targeted interventions can be differentiated to accommodate a wide range of abilities and is the best way to ensure that all children make good progress toward literacy goals.

- 2 The report recommends against the use of a defined scope and sequence.



Rather than a preconstructed scope and sequence chart that specifies what will be taught, when it will be taught and for how long it will be taught in the coming school year, teachers need support in establishing where individual students are in their learning at any given time and in deciding what to do next to promote further learning. This is likely to be different for different students. (p. 85)

In the case of early reading, a carefully developed scope and sequence is vital. Defining the content to be covered, and the order in which it is to be taught, is a key element of explicit and systematic teaching. There is a [large amount of research evidence](#) showing that explicit, systematic instruction in the essential components of early reading instruction is more effective than other approaches.

An evidence-based scope and sequence for phonics instruction will begin with teaching a set of simple single letter-sound correspondences that can be used to make decodable vowel-consonant and consonant-vowel-consonant words. Children learn to blend the letters together to read words. As new sets of letters and sounds are taught, moving to more complex letter-sound representations such as digraphs and trigraphs, children cumulatively learn the entire alphabetic code. This methodical presentation of phonic knowledge enables them to read and spell familiar and unfamiliar words and ensures that all children [learn the necessary content](#). The [National](#)

[Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions](#) have been developed to provide this detailed guidance to teachers.

While some students will learn more quickly than others, this is accommodated within the Response to Intervention model. The scope and sequence provides teachers with a guide to what needs to be taught and in which order, while curriculum-based assessments determine whether it has been learned, and which students may need further teaching.

It is not explained in the report how teachers can establish “where students are in their learning” without a scope and sequence showing what should ideally have been taught and learned and what remains to be taught and learned.

- 3 The report recommends an exit standard for every Key Learning Area to be met by the time they finish the compulsory school years.

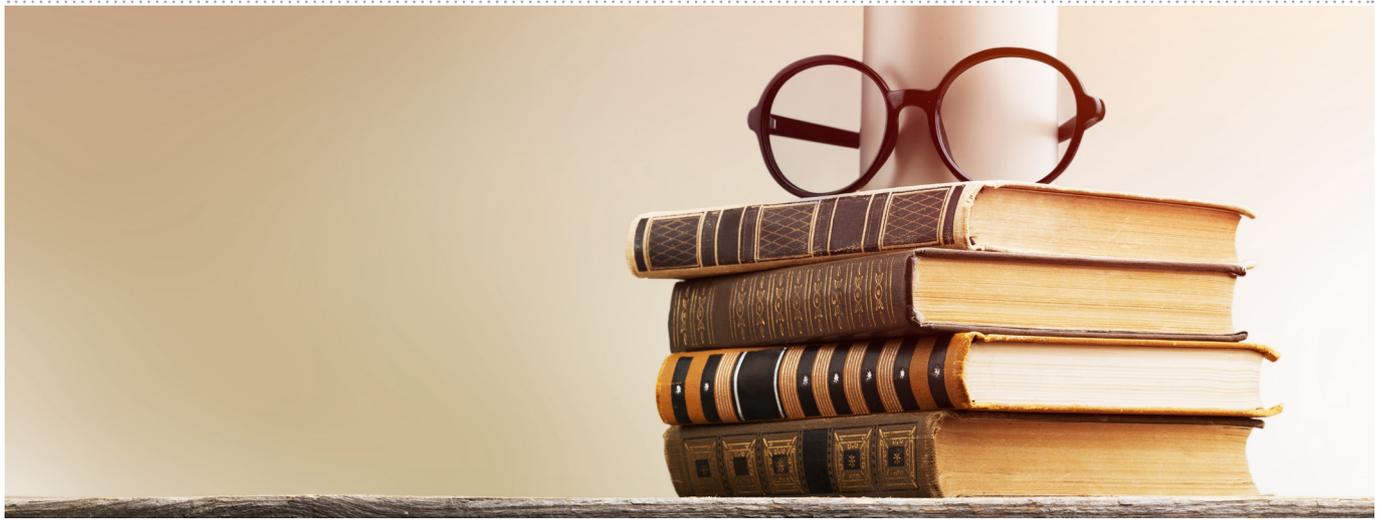
In each Key Learning Area, establish a standard that every student should meet by the completion of their schooling. This standard should be set at a level of knowledge, understanding and skill necessary to function effectively in adult life and usually should be met before commencing advanced study of that subject in the final years of school. (p. 89)

An expectation that every student has achieved a good educational standard – at the very least they should be literate and numerate – by the

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time they complete school is entirely reasonable. Yet it is not evident how the proposals in the report will achieve this goal. The report also recommends abandoning year or stage-based syllabi and achievement expectations, which will arguably make it more difficult to ensure that students are making a sufficient rate of progress in each year to be on track to achieve the goal.

To address this need, the report proposes “a number of ‘Progression



Steps” which would together “provide a road map for each individual child and young person’s progress in learning”, which would “correspond broadly to expectations at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16” (p. 50).

The problems with this idea should be obvious. How much children have learned is more strongly determined by the quality and quantity of the teaching they have received than their chronological age. No evidence is provided in the report to support age-based achievement standards, which is what the progression steps actually represent.

Overall, the report does not provide any evidence or explain how its proposed structure of ‘learning progressions’ and ‘progression steps’ is educationally superior to the current year or stage-based syllabus structure.

- 4 The report proposes that students who have not met the exit standard would have to continue studying until they do.

In some learning areas, students who have not met the standard by the end of Year 10 might be required to continue their study in that learning area until they do. For example, in mathematics, students who have not met the standard might be required to continue their study of mathematics until they do. (p.89).

Again, there is no explanation of what this might entail. Will students who do not meet the designated standard be “required to” repeat Year 10 at school indefinitely, or to continue studying at

TAFE or another educational institution until they meet the literacy standard? What might be the consequences for students who do not continue to study? And who is to be held accountable for students’ failure to meet the standard? What might be the penalty for them? These questions are not acknowledged in the report, let alone answered.

The report’s proposals lack a strong evidence base and leave too many questions unresolved

This response to the Interim Report of the NSW Curriculum Review is not an unqualified defence of the current curriculum and syllabi, aspects of which would benefit from revision. There is little doubt that teachers are struggling to teach all of the content required and that many children are not learning it well, if at all. Yet there is no demonstrated need for a fundamental and radical restructuring of the curriculum and no clear evidence that the particular reforms proposed in the Interim Report are necessary or appropriate. No successful precedent or example of such reforms is provided.

The various unexplained and apparently contradictory aspects of the proposals in the Interim Report are not just details to be determined later. They suggest that the rationale and evidence base for the proposals lack the coherence and rigor that should underpin reforms of the magnitude suggested. The ambiguity and lack of detail about implementation in schools is a critical deficiency. The NSW government should be extremely cautious in considering these reforms.

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