

The Proposed Phonic Reading Screening What is it, Why do we need it and will it be helpful?

From the 1970s, the general view in Australia was that children learned to read naturally so we adopted a whole language approach; immerse the children in literature and they would learn to read, let them see the word over and over again and eventually they would remember it. If they came across a word they didn't know they could look at the picture to guess, guess the word in context, or look at the first letter and the shape and guess. There was much guesswork involved!

From 2000 onwards, there were three major reviews into the teaching of reading; US National Reading Panel (2000), Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2005) and UK Rose Report (2005). They looked at the results of hundreds of studies and all came to the same conclusions which include:

- Teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words; is highly effective, across a range of grades, abilities and age levels
- Phonics instruction; makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading and spelling than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction
- Phonics instruction is significantly more effective than non-phonics instruction in helping to prevent reading difficulties among at risk students and in remediating reading difficulties in disabled readers.

In Australia "The Inquiry found strong evidence that a whole-language approach to the teaching of reading on its own is not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties. Moreover, where there is unsystematic or no phonics instruction, children's literacy progress is significantly impeded, inhibiting their initial and subsequent growth in reading accuracy, fluency, writing, spelling and comprehension".

One of their key recommendations was that:

‘ teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. (Rowe, 2005b, p. 14).

I run workshops for teachers throughout Victoria and interstate about learning difficulties, screening and assessment, inclusion and how to teach reading and spelling and despite these recommendations, made over ten years ago, many schools still aren't teaching phonics or don't have a systematic structured synthetic phonics scheme in place. Whole language is still alive and well and sadly is still being advocated by some education advisors. As a result of this, many children, teenagers and adults I work with, when they come across a new word, have no skills to read it because they have had to learn all the words by sight. It's their only strategy.

The lack of phonemic awareness is the most powerful determinant of the likelihood of failure to learn to read. So, we must screen straight away and if there is a deficit then teachers must intervene immediately and not wait for the child to fail, because there is an excellent chance that they will.

Simon Birmingham and the Federal Government are keen to introduce a Phonics Screening check for all Grade 1 students. To this end much information has been gathered and an advisory panel, comprised of experts in reading have advised the Government about the phonics screening. The panel members looked at a range of reading assessments being used in early years settings around Australia and noted there was a deficit in phonics assessments.

It appears that the Australian screening check is based on the phonics screening check used in the UK since 2012 which involves a five-minute exercise in which students are asked to read a series of

simple words, followed by a series of nonsense words to demonstrate their understanding of sounds and letters.

I welcome the screening check and believe it is crucial that we include nonsense words as many assessments of real words can lead teachers to believe that a child has mastered a rule when, in fact they have learned the word by sight. For example, a child could read the words; 'time, hope and take' leading the teacher to believe that the child has mastered the split digraph rule. Give the same child the nonsense words 'pave, bine, fove' and they may read them as 'pav, binny, fov' indicating that they don't know and cannot apply the rule at all, they just recognise the real words by sight. Using nonsense words measures a student's ability to decode individual phonemes and then blend the sounds together to read words. An inability to decode nonwords highlights the grapheme-phoneme translation difficulties which may lie at the heart of an individual's specific learning difficulties.

There has been opposition by some academics and teaching unions to the introduction of the test. I know as an ex class teacher and from running workshops, that there can be so many assessments taking place, it sometimes seems that there is not much time left to teach. In addition, there are many tests being currently used that are purely summative in that they tell us that a student is 'Average', 'Below Average' or has a reading age of X. Those types of tests are time consuming and largely unhelpful as they don't tell us exactly why the student is 'Below Average' or what we need to teach. Teachers need formative assessments that are diagnostic therefore, as an ex-school principal and a teacher my greatest concern is that the Australian screening check should not be modelled totally on the UK check, which is mainly summative. The Australian check needs to be developed further so that the errors made can be analysed and inform planning and teaching similar to the nonsense word reading and spelling tests provided by Macquarie Online Test Interface developed at Macquarie University. Schools I have advised have found that by including these tests and introducing a systematic, evidence based synthetic phonics program, their students' reading ability and confidence has improved considerably no matter what the starting point and/or socio-economic background.

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