

Why Australia should trial the new phonics screening check

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In the face of unacceptably low literacy standards in Australian schools, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) recently advocated a trial of the UK Phonics Screening Check (PSC) as one part of the solution.

A national PSC, similar to the program launched in the UK in 2012, is a worthwhile endeavour to boost not just literacy standards for students, but the ability of teachers to implement them effectively.

Phonics is a teaching method that focuses on the sounds within words – creating explicit links between these sounds and the letters that represent them.

It allows children to decode written words independently, without having to guess or be told what they are.

When taught well, phonics confers an essential skill set that helps all readers to decode text. It can be taught using off-the-shelf programs, but these are not necessary if teacher knowledge is strong.

Research from 2005 found that decoding “*is helpful for all children, harmful for none, and crucial for some*”.

This teaching is particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students who often sit in a “long tail of under-achievement”.

Despite these findings, no Australian state or territory has formally adopted the recommendations of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL).

These 20 recommendations strongly featured the explicit teaching of phonics as a starting point in reading instruction – not as an incidental component of the so-called ‘Three Cueing’ strategy popular in Australian primary schools.

What is effective phonics teaching?

Claims that “phonics is already in the Australian Curriculum” are not good enough, as they offer no assurance about what students will actually experience in classrooms across the country.

Evidence from Australia and overseas indicates teachers have unacceptably low levels of linguistic knowledge. This in turn means they could not reasonably be expected to teach to the NITL recommendations.

More worrying is research that shows that those teachers who know the least about the linguistic concepts that apply to phonics are the most confident in their ability to impart knowledge and teach these areas.

Imagine this disturbing knowledge-confidence mismatch in airline pilots, engineers and doctors.

The failure to demonstrate meaningful progress on reading skills warrants serious consideration of data emerging from other, similar countries that have also faced falling literacy standards in recent decades.

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UK pilot

The UK is one such country. In 2011, the UK piloted a National Phonics Screening Check given to students at the end of Year 1. It has since been administered nationally each year since 2012.

In the absence of any other systematic changes, the reading skills – actual reading, not just phonics decoding – of UK children have begun to improve.

Most notably, the attainment gap between low socioeconomic status students and their more advantaged peers has begun to close.

Not a magic bullet, but an evidence-based option

No one is claiming “magic bullet” status for the Phonics Screening Check, but its introduction in the UK in 2012 has been a natural experiment and we should not dismiss the results lightly.

Inevitably, as has been borne out in media reactions in recent days, some opposition to the check comes from teacher representatives, who claim that it is “anti-teacher”.

But the needs of struggling learners are such that we need to place students, not teachers, at the heart of this important debate.

An approach that improves learner outcomes would surely be pleasing and beneficial to teachers as well as to students.

Importantly, the PSC is not a test. As the name indicates, it is a brief (and inexpensive) screen.

It simply indicates which and how many children reach the level they should be at. In doing so, it provides uniform feedback to teachers about their instructional approaches.

All that is being proposed in Australia at this stage is a pilot of the PSC.

If a robust pilot indicates that the decoding skills of Australian students in Year 1 are at or above expected levels, then there is probably no need for further investment in the PSC.

We have an opportunity to work together on lifting the “long tail of under-achievement” in our beginning readers. Underachievement is costly to us all because of the exclusion from the economic mainstream it cements. It is also not going to fix itself.

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