

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Australian Literacy Educators' Association

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Dear Committee Members,

I write on behalf of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association in response to your invitation to read and respond to the Inquiry into the NSW School Curriculum. We appreciate the opportunity to provide insights into this important work and its implications for NSW teachers and learners.

ALEA's submission collates responses from members whose expertise extends across literacy research and teaching in prior to school, school and tertiary settings. These members' names and professional details are listed at the end of our submission.

ALEA is pleased to respond to further discussion and consultation in person.

Yours sincerely

Jessica Mantei

ALEA NSW State Director

Response from ALEA to the New South Wales School Curriculum Review

The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) welcomes the opportunity and extends thanks to the Honourable Mark Latham for his invitation to respond to the NSW Curriculum Review led by Professor Geoff Masters. ALEA is an independent professional association dedicated to literacy and English language learning from early childhood through all stages of schooling and tertiary education contexts. ALEA recognises the critical role literacy plays in learning and communicating in all curriculum areas, and for effective participation in society. ALEA takes the position that literacy is a powerful, wide-ranging life skill beyond traditional notions of talking, listening, reading and writing.

As such, this response takes a close focus on English and literacy learning as it is described and positioned in the NSW Curriculum Review. While ALEA refrains from comment about specific disciplines noted in the review (e.g. Mathematics and History), it is important to note that ALEA considers literacy to be a cross disciplinary concept that empowers learners for achieving different purposes using the literacies of different disciplines.

ALEA's response is framed by findings in the review from teacher data, key features of the new syllabuses, and a focus on teacher professional learning with a specific attention on the ways these points relate to English and literacy learning in the early years of school.

- An initial, general response
- Responding to findings from teacher data
- Key design features
 - o Learning with understanding
 - o Builds skills in applying knowledge
 - o Makes excellent ongoing progress
- Teacher professional learning

An initial, general response

The review begins by outlining the process for engaging in urgent renewal of the NSW Curriculum. It includes an overview of the extensive consultation with stakeholders at all levels in NSW education. And it identifies key concerns related to the crowded nature of the curriculum, and its constraints related to time and sequencing of content. ALEA agrees that the curriculum has become cumbersome for teachers and learners alike and that a review is appropriate. There are many exciting proposals within this review that are clearly aimed at developing independent and critical thinkers and doers in the world. ALEA also agrees that the interesting concept of syllabus documents being unshackled from the constraints of time and progress through the grades in preference for a scale would allow teachers to measure mastery and therefore move the learner to the next syllabus outcomes. And the focus on connecting better with the experiences and approaches in early years education demonstrates a strong commitment to these important foundational years.

ALEA encourages further reflection on some underlying assumptions and positions taken within the document:

- The review remains unclear about the philosophy underlying the decision in NSW to write and implement a curriculum that is different from the otherwise nationally implemented Australian Curriculum.
- The review advocates for a system that maps individual progress through the syllabus, a similar concept to the national curriculum literacy and numeracy progressions. How might the national progressions be part of the process of measuring this mapping?
- Given that many children come to school from early years educational settings such as preschool, the nationally implemented Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) is an important document for this Committee to consider in terms of play based pedagogies and creativity. What is the place of play and creativity in this review for all children, **especially** those who have had marginalising experiences in their home and communities?

Responding to findings from teacher data

ALEA acknowledges the extensive experience and expertise of classroom practitioners at all levels of education. While the views of external professionals are, of course, important, it is ALEA's view that those who work daily with their learners, who know their learners, their lives and abilities are the best placed to make decisions about the pedagogies and resources that are appropriate for learners.

ALEA concurs with the teacher data that curriculum is increasingly overcrowded across primary, secondary and tertiary settings. While it is the 'dot points' in the syllabus that impact secondary teachers' time, it is the minutiae of assessing and reporting increasingly long and complicated lists of individual "reading and writing" skills that primary teachers report takes away time for deep learning. A further complication in primary schools is the tension between "foundational" and "21st century" skills and the insistence that print based

skills should be learned prior to the use of technology and teaching of these new skills. While, of course, there are new skills and ways of being literate generated by advancements in technology, it should also be noted that these skills identified as being “21st century literacy skills” - critical and creative thinking, problem solving, working with others, and communicating – have always been important literacy skills, and therefore part of literacy teaching.

- ALEA recommends that teachers are encouraged and professionally supported to examine and reflect on what needs to be brought forward and what can be left behind in contemporary teaching.

Research literature increasingly calls for print and screen based literacies to be taught side by side right from the beginning of school (e.g. Burnett & Merchant, 2013; Cartner & Hallas, 2020; Kervin, Comber, & Woods, 2017; Kervin, Mantei, & Leu, 2018; Kucirkova, 2017). Learners’ use of technology for both the consumption and production of texts right from the early years does not appear to be a priority in this curriculum review. Instead, reading and writing appear to be strongly print based, with a particular emphasis on reading development as a priority in the early years.

- ALEA recommends the Committee will review their position on the relationships between print and screen based literacies and the ways they are taught.

ALEA is also strongly aligned with the teachers’ call for a more flexible curriculum that allows specific response to individual students’ needs. Is it the curriculum itself that creates this constraint? Or is it the interpretation of same at system and school level? An example is the recent focus on the teaching of phonics. Commercial programs related to synthetic phonics are increasingly promoted in schools. But a commercial phonics program cannot differentiate for ability, culture, socioeconomic status, geography, language or any other personal characteristic. The same content is taught to all children at the same time in the same way. A teacher who is required to use a resource such as a purchased program is prevented from being flexible. They are prevented from using formative assessment to understand what each learner in their class knows and is yet to know. And therefore, they are prevented from designing literacy learning experiences that can ensure progress for each learner (Ewing, 2018, Exley, 2018).

- ALEA recommends the Committee consider ways that a pedagogical approach, a resource that isolate skills from their application, and an over reliance on external assessments can prevent teachers from drawing on their own content and pedagogical content knowledge to develop individual learners’ literacies.

The review calls throughout for a flexible curriculum that enable teachers to support children at their point of need. Yet on p.99 the review recommends a prescriptive progression in learning to read using a single source of evidence (Castles, Rastles & Nation, 2008) about children’s reading development. This section appears to contradict the overall aims of the new curriculum. Further, it has taken a sudden and close focus on one part of one discipline that is not replicated in mathematics, history, science etcetera.

- ALEA observes that early reading appears to have been targeted as a different entity in the curriculum and recommends the Committee reviews this prescriptive focus by broadening the research base on which it appears to sit. Examples of literature focused on early reading and literacy development include (Baştuğ, 2016; Hill, & Diamond, 2013; Mantei & Kervin, 2018; Merga & Ledger, 2018; Nichols, & Hill, 2020; Rowsell, 2014).

Learning with understanding

ALEA offers strong support to the Committee's careful distinction between learning with understanding and "...the superficial memorisation of facts and procedures" (p. 67). The problem of tasks requiring memorisation of facts is identified across the primary and secondary teacher data sets and literature cited in the review in relation to early learning of "foundational skills" all the way to HSC preparation.

In terms of literacy learning, the Review asserts the need for the teaching of oral language and reading as a priority over activities such as "physical activity, play, music and art" (p. 84), particularly for children who attend school having experienced disadvantage or disability. A concern here relates to the body of research that identifies the important role of text production (drawing, writing, "marks on the page") in the development of writing (Cameron, Pinto, Stella, & Hunt, 2020; Clay, 2010; Friedrich, Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2020; Mackenzie, 2020; Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013; Rowe & Wilson, 2015). Drawing is well established as a powerful means through which young children express their understandings of the world, develop new understandings, and reach out to new ideas (Adoniou, 2014; Mackenzie, 2020). Drawing develops the physical skills for writing as well as early concepts about print (Clay, 1989; Mackenzie, 2020). Drawing affords opportunities for creativity, for critical thinking, and for imagining new possibilities. So does play.

- ALEA recommends an urgent review by the committee of the need for a focus on writing and creativity right from the early years of school. All learners come to school with some form of text production experience and certainly with opportunities to be creative in their play and thinking. It is unproductive for development in writing and creativity to be delayed when these skills sit alongside reading and oral language and can easily be combined.

Play is the underpinning theory of the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). It is hard to see that the NSW Review Committee can claim the new syllabus "builds on the Early Years Learning Framework" (p. 81) when play is clearly a secondary pedagogical consideration. Young children use play to make sense of the world (Cameron, et al., 2020), to solve problems (Danby, Evaldsson, Melander & Aarsand, 2018), and to develop schemas that lay foundations for future learning. Comber (2019), Dyson (2019) and Wohlwend (2017) argue that all children, but particularly those with lives of marginalisation, need time for rich and relevant literacy learning experiences embedded in the contexts of their own lives.

- ALEA recommends the Committee to review this planned isolation of reading from text creation, from play, from creativity and critical thinking in order to align early years approaches with the stated intentions of the "New Syllabuses" and to allow

teachers to build on the existing skills and ways of being literate that their learners bring to the classroom.

Builds skills in applying knowledge

The prospect of shifting the focus from skill development to the integration and application of those skills, while exciting, is still challenging. The cultures, systems and processes of schools are well embedded and contextualised by their histories (as laid out early in the NSW Review). In one example, Paatsch and colleagues found that, despite well established understanding that IRE and QAE models of oral language interactions were inferior for developing classroom talk, they prevail (Paatsch, Scull & Nolan, 2019). Further, recent traction gained by promoters of commercial packages designed to teach individual skills has seen “One in three [NSW public primary] schools agree to phonics reading check as critics sound alarm” (Baker, 2020). There is a clear tension between those who would see a return to the skill and drill style of teaching of “foundational skills” such as phonics (e.g. Castles et al., 2018) and the desire of the NSW Government to adopt future focused pedagogies that promote the *application* of skills.

- ALEA applauds the Committee’s insight that the NAPLAN tests skill levels rather than progress, and, as such, is poorly aligned with the new curriculum plan. And we strongly encourage a similar examination of other similarly designed standardised tests that simply achieve the same (e.g. the proposed Phonics Screener assessment)

Makes excellent ongoing progress

The concept of a curriculum that responds to the learner is timely. There will be several challenges in adopting this approach. For example:

- What is the impact on teachers’ work? Is this something they’ve “always done anyway”? Probably not, but there is a risk of it being seen that way and so change will be hard.
- How will “attainment” be measured? Given that the focus is on the development of the application of skills (e.g. critical thinking), how much critical thinking do I need to do to move from Syllabus 1?
- How does Figure 14 match with there being no time frame?
- How long is too long on a syllabus?
- How is diversity catered for in this plan? Social and cultural diversity will impact school literacies throughout the entirety of school. How will different ways of being literate be valued? How are they celebrated and built on? For example, the review states on p. 101 that every child will “learn a second language”. This assumes that each learner only has one. Does this cater for diversity? Some of our learners speak two languages and a local dialect before ever coming to school to learn Standard Australian English. Should they be mandated to learn another language? Of course, the concept of multilingualism in Australia is desperately required, but it needs some more thought before it can be part of this document.
- ALEA recommends there be considerable further investigation of these questions with educational practitioners and educational researchers.

Teacher professional learning

These closing views from ALEA relate to teacher education and ongoing professional learning. The review recommends that teachers engage in certain activities in their undergraduate study and henceforth in their “professional learning”. Like the primary and secondary curriculum, the Initial Teacher Education landscape continues to be filled with more and more content (most recently Footnote 14 from AITSL). Is there a plan to recommend the reduction of content in the tertiary sector in favour of critical and creative thinking?

There are many outcomes recommended for learners in this review, for example, deep understanding, motivation, and metacognition. Is it assumed that teachers have these and can teach them? It seems the knowledge that teachers will need is considerable – changing their beliefs *and* their actions, something Opfer and Pedder observe (2011) is difficult to achieve. What processes will the NSW Committee adopt to ensure teachers are offered effective professional opportunities that are sustained in duration with a focus on content, that offer active learning strategies and collaboration, that utilise models, use coaching and expert support, and include feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond., Hyler, Gardner, 2017)? Is there a place for short courses and post graduate study that activates the teacher as researcher who can transform practice – their own and others?

- ALEA also encourages professional learning that supports teachers’ understanding of the philosophical and practical nature of the Early Years Learning Framework as well as the nature of syllabus documents in primary and secondary sectors if they are to achieve greater alignment for learners across the sectors.
- ALEA encourages the Committee to review their approach to professional learning for educators and to recognise the capacity of leaders within schools and systems to build knowledge.

ALEA thanks the Committee for the invitation to provide feedback to this review. We are pleased to discuss its contents further.

On behalf of the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association,

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