

A RESPONSE TO 'FOCUS ON PHONICS: WHY AUSTRALIA SHOULD ADOPT THE YEAR 1 PHONICS SCREENING CHECK'

John Dungan¹

The report, 'Focus on phonics: Why Australia should adopt the Year 1 phonics screening check' by Dr Jennifer Buckingham (The Centre for Independent Studies) proposes a universal or near universal phonics test for all Australian school children in Year 1, ostensibly to identify those children with poor phonics skills and ultimately to improve their reading proficiency. The report is comprehensive and well argued, but in my view, the imposition of yet another systemic testing regime on Australian children and teachers is unnecessary and undesirable for several reasons.

Firstly, the proposal is reductionist in nature. It further reduces, limits and values the essence of education to that which can be 'tested' or 'measured' in yet another single point-in-time assessment. Rather than encouraging broad notions of what constitutes a sound education for young people in the 21st century, it further constricts and shrinks these conceptions to a set of narrow, technical skills and competencies, notwithstanding the importance of word attack skills in reading proficiency.

Secondly, in my view, most teachers would already be undertaking such phonic 'checks' on a regular basis - in many instances, at least weekly and often daily - as they observe and work closely with the children in their care. Such formative observations and resultant interventions would be more useful, authentic, powerful and timely than a one-off 'system-level check'.

Thirdly, the imposition of yet another system-level requirement on teachers would obviously add to their workload unnecessarily at a time when education systems are recognising the need to streamline and de-clutter the curriculum for teachers and students, and minimise additional workloads on teachers. A significant systemic testing and reporting regime already exists in our primary schools and under no circumstance should this be augmented at this time.

Finally, any funding set aside for such a system-level phonics check should be redirected instead to support the ongoing professional development of teachers in the teaching of reading. Teaching reading to children with poor reading skills is an extremely difficult and complex pedagogical task. All teachers need access to regular professional development in this area, including updates on the most recent research and successful interventions.

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