

Research Brief

Language, Learning and Literacy (L3)

The L3 program is a whole class literacy program developed by the NSW government. It is the central literacy program in the Early Action for Success strategy (EAfS). It is described as a ‘research-based classroom intervention’¹ Instructional leaders appointed under the strategy participate in L3 training.² L3 was used in several hundred socioeconomically disadvantaged schools across NSW in 2015, involving more than 16,000 students in Kindergarten to Year 2.³

The research base for L3

L3 was developed within the NSW Department for Education. It is based on the findings of a New Zealand project called Picking Up The Pace.⁴ The Picking Up The Pace project—involving 12 low SES, high Maori population schools over twelve months—was published in 2002 and was guided by research that is now around 20 years old, and draws heavily on research that influenced the development of the Reading Recovery program.⁵

The literacy learning approach in Picking Up the Pace is described as a ‘socio-cultural, co-constructivist view’.⁶ This theory perceives literacy as a ‘social practice’:

Language and meaning are a way of thinking, feeling, and acting in a social practice. From this perspective literacy is not a process of going from print to sound to language, nor is it a two-part process of decoding and comprehending.

Instruction in phonics is not explicit or systematic:

Effective literacy instruction incorporates instruction for decoding using a wide variety of procedures, overwhelmingly in the context of real reading.⁷

According to this definition, the conceptual model of literacy on which L3 is based is directly at odds with the model most strongly supported by recent research – the ‘Simple View of Reading’, which frames reading as the product of word identification (most efficiently achieved through decoding) and language comprehension.

Does L3 program content and pedagogy reflect the evidence-base for effective early reading instruction?

A critique of the L3 program by Dr Roslyn Neilson and Dr Sally Howell found that the L3 program does not teach the five key components of early literacy explicitly and systematically.

Strong and consistent evidence has found that phonics in particular should be taught explicitly, sequentially, and systematically.⁸ However, L3 teaches phonics incidentally, for example:

The words, letters and sounds chosen for explicit lessons in Word Work are drawn from the language of the text. There is not a predetermined sequence to follow. The text itself creates the gradient of complexity and determines the content for instruction. (L3 Kindergarten training materials, p.62)

The teaching method specified in the L3 manual does not meet the usual criteria for explicit teaching – an ‘I do, we do, you do’ approach. In guidance provided in the manual, the first two steps are absent (Eg. Use these letters to make the word ‘am’).

This is consistent with the approach to phonics instruction taken in the Reading Recovery program. A ‘masterclass’ in phonics for L3 trainers was run by Dr Susan Duncan, a former Reading Recovery trainer who has no research or publication record on phonics instruction.⁹

The L3 training materials state that it is a comprehensive program, and no additional literacy programs are required.

L3 incorporates all aspects of the Department of Education and Training documents related to literacy learning in Early Stage 1. L3 does not require additional programs. (L3 Training Materials, p.2)

However, an online survey conducted by FIVE from FIVE (247 L3 teacher respondents) found that 56% of L3 teachers supplemented it with other literacy programs. Of these, almost three quarters of teachers supplemented L3 with phonics programs.

L3 has not been evaluated for effectiveness but existing data is not positive

There has been no evaluation of L3's effectiveness either before or after its implementation in NSW schools.

Documents supplied to The Centre for Independent Studies under a Government Information (Public Access) request to the NSW Department for Education and Communities (DECS) in 2014 showed that no methodologically sound evaluation that meets even minimal standards of evidence had been conducted to that date. Data provided in the documents is in the form of pie charts showing the proportions of children achieving at 'expected standard' (a teacher-rated, non-standardised measure) before and after L3 instruction and there was no control or comparison group.

The EAfS annual reports measure the progress of students in EAfS schools (not L3 exclusively) against 'mid-year standards' and 'end of year standards' on a department-devised literacy continuum. Student attainment of these standards is teacher-rated and the standards and continuum themselves have not been tested for reliability or external validity to determine their accuracy in predicting reading progress. NAPLAN data for EAfS schools indicates that attainment of the expected standards on the literacy continuum is not predictive of Year 3 NAPLAN performance.

The reported data suggests that the EAfS strategy, which includes L3, has not been successful in raising literacy levels. The 2015 report shows continuous improvement in children attaining the 'expected standards' for reading in K-2. However, this was not reflected in NAPLAN performance in Year 3, when

- 64% of schools that joined EAfS in 2012 had either negligible or negative change in Year 3 NAPLAN reading scores
- 77% of schools that joined EAfS in 2013 had either negligible or negative change in Year 3 NAPLAN reading scores¹⁰

There is also wide variation between schools in the proportion of children achieving the expected standards on the literacy continuum — from as low as 5% to close to 100%

Less than half of respondents to a FIVE from FIVE survey thought that L3 was effective for all children. One in four teachers said that L3 was NOT effective for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics, and a further one in four said it was effective for only some children.

A report on the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan published by Erebus International and NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) in 2017 did not evaluate the effect of L3 on reading achievement¹¹.

Lack of transparency

L3 materials were developed by NSW DECS using taxpayer funds. Researchers who have formally requested access to the L3 training manuals and teaching materials have been denied, with the response that "The resource is not available for commercial or research purposes."

The FIVE from FIVE survey found that 30% of teachers felt they could not express criticism about L3 in their school. Teacher comments on the survey express strong dissatisfaction with the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of the L3 program compared to a matched control group of schools using standardised, quantitative reading measures administered according to appropriate protocols to ensure data integrity
2. An audit and revision of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in the L3 program
3. No further expansion of the L3 program until its effectiveness is established
4. Assist schools that want to opt out of the L3 program to transition into an evidence-based literacy instruction program



Endnotes

- 1 <https://schoolsequella.det.nsw.edu.au/file/20bc98dd-8667-4714-9ea4-22e297641fba/1/L3%20Kindergarten%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/our-reforms/early-action-for-success/implementation-plan-2016.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/our-reforms/early-action-for-success/Early-Action-for-Success-Report-2015.pdf>
- 4 http://www.scottle.edu.au/ec/viewing/S7070/pdf/tls56_language_learning_and.pdf
- 5 <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika/4971>
- 6 https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/word_doc/0005/8780/Chapter-3-Picking-up-the-Pace.doc (p 42)
- 7 https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/7017/Picking-up-the-Pace-Summary-Report.pdf
- 8 M Seidenberg. 2017. Language at the Speed of Sight. New York: Basic Books.
- 9 <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/our-reforms/early-action-for-success/Early-Action-for-Success-Report-2015.pdf> (p.47)
- 10 M Seidenberg. 2017. Language at the Speed of Sight. New York: Basic Books.
- 11 <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/our-reforms/early-action-for-success/Early-Action-for-Success-Report-2015.pdf>