



TRANSCRIPT

**Association of Heads of Independent Schools in Australia/
Independent Schools Council of Australia
National Education Forum**

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**Speaker: Dr Jennifer Buckingham, Education Research Fellow at The Centre for
Independent Studies and Head of the FIVE from FIVE Literacy Project**

Panel session: What constitutes a 'quality education' for Australia's young people today and into the future; what are the obstacles preventing that being achieved and what are the most important steps we should be taking right now to ensure this goal is achieved?

JB: 'Quality' education is a variable concept. Putting a qualifier in front of the word quality changes the question entirely. What is a *low* quality education? What is an *adequate* quality education? What is a *high* quality education? These questions each have different answers.

The first two are simpler to answer than the third.

A *low* quality education does not provide children with the essential skills and knowledge for them to live independently and safely when they become adults. A low quality education does not give children access to the ideas and knowledge that can enrich their life and give them the freedom to make informed choices.

An *adequate* quality education is the exact opposite.

I am going to assume though, that what we are actually interested in at an independent schools conference in Australia, is what constitutes a *high* quality education.

The definition of a high quality education is subjective to some extent. Some people have a utilitarian view and think that a high quality education is one that gives students bankable, technical skills that will lead them into stable employment. Others have a more postmodern view – that a high quality education is one that generates curiosity, a critical mind, and a desire for knowledge and understanding. Then there is also the classical definition of a high

quality education, one in which students are taught, and expected to learn, the best that has been thought and said in the key academic disciplines.

Most likely, for most people, the ideal is some combination of all three.

So, that's the aspiration. What are the obstacles preventing it from being achieved? There will be a range of responses across the panel today, and each of you here will have some strong ideas of your own.

I am going to start by talking about one obstacle in particular – low levels of literacy among Australian children. I'll run through some of statistics that show literacy is a serious obstacle to achieving a high quality of education for many children, and then I will touch on some of the steps that need to be taken to overcome it.

The foundation skill for all school achievement is literacy. A child's literacy level underpins their success and enjoyment of all other aspects of school.

Any child's access to a quality education, however it might be defined, is dependent on their literacy levels.

Literacy can also be defined in various ways. My focus is on reading literacy – the ability to comprehend written text. I have heard this definition described as a 'reductionist' approach— that it is just about phonics. This is either misguided or mischievous.

High quality literacy teaching in the early years must include explicit phonics instruction *within* a content-rich, comprehensive program that develops vocabulary and metalinguistic knowledge, general knowledge and comprehension.

Literacy is clearly not the only thing that primary schools teach. However, I would argue if we had to choose one single skill for a child to have when they complete primary school, if there is nothing else they can do, they should at the very least have a proficient level of reading ability, and preferably much better.

It has always been the case that children have started school with a wide range of language and literacy skills. Some can already read. Some don't know the alphabet or even how to hold a book up the right way.

The 2015 results of the Australian Early Development Census were released last week. On the language and cognitive skills measure, there is some good news to report. The proportion of children assessed as being developmentally vulnerable or at risk was significantly lower in 2015 than in 2009.

It is difficult to know what precisely has led to this decrease but hopefully it is a trend that will continue.

Even so, this still means that in 2015, around 15% of children started school unready to tackle the curriculum demands of Foundation Year. These do not include children with diagnosed special needs and disabilities.

For these vulnerable and at-risk children to make progress, and to ensure those children who start school developmentally on track to continue to make gains, early years teaching must exemplary.

Thousands of studies over the last forty years have established what exemplary early reading instruction and intervention looks like.

Numerous studies have shown that with effective instruction and intervention, literacy gaps narrow.

This is true for teaching generally. Professor Eric Hanushek's research on teacher quality found that if students had highly effective teachers for a number of years in a row, the achievement gap between children from low income and middle income backgrounds closed.

While family background often determines the starting point for children, schools present the greatest opportunity to change the learning trajectory.

If you want to know more about research on reading, please visit the Five from Five website.

Sadly, the reality is that these initial differences in language ability too often not only continue into the school years but worsen.

Here are some of the statistics.

The 2015 NAPLAN results show that the proportion of students whose scores were below the national minimum standard for their year of schooling was 5.5% in Year 3 and 7.7% in Year 9. Not a huge difference. However, the percentage of children who achieved only *at* the minimum standard for their year, which as I will explain shortly, is not a high benchmark, was much higher in Year 9. 7.4% of Year 3 students were at the national minimum standard, and it was 17.1% in Year 9. These statistics suggest that the longer a child is at school, the less likely it becomes that they will achieve a reading literacy level that is considered proficient.

International assessments are more damning.

I don't want to overplay the importance of international assessments like PISA. For example, looking at country rankings according to mean performance is a fool's errand – much of the change in rankings is due to new countries joining the assessment program and there are some countries that it is invalid to compare ourselves to.

But there are countries to which it is legitimate to compare Australia.

The Progress in Reading Literacy Study, known as PIRLS, found that literacy levels of Australian Year 4 students were close to, if not the worst among English-speaking countries.

Twenty four percent of Australian students did not reach the international benchmark for literacy, which the PIRLS study defines as the 'minimum proficient standard'. Only New Zealand had more students below the benchmark – and only marginally so with 25%.

Not only that, Australia had the lowest proportion of students at the highest literacy standard – only 10% compared with 19% in Northern Ireland and 18% in England, for example.

Often when I write or talk about these statistics, someone will try to blame it on the Northern Territory. Setting aside the ethical arguments against carving off a section of the country and putting it in the too hard basket, the Northern Territory cannot take the blame. The proportions of children in each of the categories in NSW were not far off the national averages – 22% below the minimum proficient benchmark and 12% at the advanced benchmark.

Last year the Mitchell Institute compared the international benchmarks to NAPLAN scores and found that the NAPLAN minimum standard was much lower than the PIRLS benchmark.

Using this comparison, the Mitchell Institute estimated that one in four students in Year 7 has low literacy levels by international standards.

How can any of these students expect a quality education if they are struggling to read at a level sufficient for them to learn history, science and geography, let alone study English literature or a second language?

I will never forget the Year 6 student I worked with who could only read at a Year 1 level and even then only for sight words. He didn't know letter sounds and could not decode.

In the process of assessing his reading level, I asked him to read a short passage of around 5 sentences. He read me a wonderful story about a shark and a surfer, fluently and expressively. Unfortunately, he was not reading at all. He made the entire story up. There was nothing wrong with his speech, his oral vocabulary, or his creativity. He had just never learnt to read.

Low literacy levels among Australian children have been tolerated and excused for far too long.

Reading literacy is not a very exciting topic and yet it is critical. Despite what some software developers and neuroplasticity pseudoscience purveyors might have you believe, there is no miracle app or computer program that will have all children reading at a proficient level.

Some programs try to bolster their credibility by putting 'Neuro' or Brain in the title, when they rarely have solid research underpinning their big claims. Students with special needs are especially vulnerable to these sorts of programs, which I suspect is why cognitive scientists have coined the phrase 'Neurobollocks'.

Getting all children to be able to read comes back to highly planned, methodical, energy-sapping classroom teaching. There are no shortcuts. For many children, learning to read well is hard work and needs great teaching. No more and no less.

Reading is the key to a high quality education.

What are the steps to achieve it?

The first one is obviously to have effective, evidence-based reading instruction in the early years of school, with early intervention for struggling readers. It's not difficult to find examples of where this is not happening.

The way to change this is through improvements to teacher education, which are coming, and through school authorities, heads of schools, and teachers being well-informed about the research on effective reading instruction and being relentless in their efforts to ensure that all children learn to read.

The foundations for literacy are laid in the early years but it does not stop there, it just broadens and deepens in scope. As NSW Minister Adrian Piccoli said at the Five from Five launch last week, every teacher is a teacher of literacy. Science teachers need to ensure that their students have the ability to express themselves in the academic language of their discipline, and so on.

Second, there has been and continues to be insufficient rigorous evaluation of programs used in schools as well as widespread adoption of unproven or ineffective programs. I was pleased to see an announcement on Friday of a Productivity Commission inquiry into the evidence-base for programs and policies in early education and schools.

Many schools need to be less ready to embrace teaching methods that are based on little more than inspirational language and sociological theory, usually ones that involve discovery learning using technology.

Good research evidence shows that inquiry learning is not the most effective way to acquire new knowledge. Sometimes students even learn and remember the wrong information. Inquiry learning can be useful for students who already have a level of expertise and knowledge, but there has to be some actual teaching first.

Part of the inquiry learning mantra is that children don't need to learn facts and ideas and concepts, they only need to learn how to learn and how to solve problems. This is the 21st century skills mantra.

Cognitive scientist Dan Willingham's work shows that knowledge and skill development are inter-related. Problem solving and critical thinking are not generic and transferrable, they are more often subject or discipline specific, requiring an existing level of knowledge and conceptual understanding, and that's right, reading literacy.

A high quality education should be the aspiration for all children and literacy is the key.

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