

The GERM is Spreading: a report from Australia

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The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) emerged in the 1980s and has influenced the education systems of the USA, England and, increasingly, Australia (Sahlberg 2012). Perhaps the GERM juggernaut has been a little slower to arrive in Australia, but it is now coming down the road at breakneck speed and it looks remarkably like the one witnessed in England, following the Rose Report (2006). Needless to say, the ‘primacy’ of synthetic phonics is emblazoned in large capital letters down the side of the vehicle. At the steering wheel are drivers who look remarkably like those driving the English counterpart: a Minister of Education of a newly elected neo-liberal government and appointed ‘reading experts’, some of whom have pecuniary interests in commercial synthetic phonic programmes.

After several years of high profile media advocacy of phonics and the alleged “failure” of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers to “skill” graduate teachers in the “science of reading” (sic), the “reading experts” have been given license to write the rules for ITE providers in Australia.

In his press release of 15th October 2019, the Federal Education Minister, Dan Tehan, announced the formation of a panel of “experts” to inform the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) on the accreditation of teachers, in relation to reading. In fact, the “expert” panel had already been formed and actually had its first meeting on the same day as the press release. AITSL, devises baseline standards for teachers, which function in the same way as the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) standards in England. In 2010, the QTS standards were revised to include a clause making mandatory the teaching of synthetic phonics integral to ITE courses. The Secretary of State for Education of the day, Michael Gove, and the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, members of a newly elected neo-liberal government, anointed Ruth Miskin as their literacy “expert”. As readers in England will be aware, Ruth Miskin was the sole shareholder of the commercial synthetic phonic programme, Read Write Inc. The possibility there might be a conflict of interest in this appointment, especially when the government then identified Read Write Inc. as one of several preferred programmes for schools, seemed to slip beneath the radar. The parallel between England nine years ago and Australia today is not hard to discern.

The panel of “experts”, announced by the Australian Minister of Education, consists of three people: Jennifer Buckingham, Lorraine Hammond and Robyn Cox. At this point it would be pertinent to interrogate the credentials of the members of the “expert panel”. Like Miskin, Jennifer Buckingham has a vested interest, as the Strategy Director, of a commercial phonics programmes: MiniLit, MultiLit and InitialLit. Until very recently she was also employed by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), a neo-liberal think-tank, which states its mission is to have its members infiltrate every institution in Australia. She is also a member of the AITSL board. Lorraine Hammond is an Associate Professor at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Her background is in special educational needs and she is President of Learning Difficulties Australia. She is also an ardent advocate of Direct Instruction (DI). Robyn Cox is the current President of The Primary English Teaching Association of Australia (PETAA). She is also an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at the Australian Catholic University and has been an executive member of the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). Of the three members of the panel then, Robyn Cox is, perhaps, the only member that can be justly referred to as a literacy expert. However, as the “minority” member of the panel her expertise is likely to be overshadowed by the vested interests of the other two panel members. This point is reinforced by the transparency of the Minister’s intentions for the panel of “experts”.

The press release was titled. ‘Bringing Phonics into Australian Schools’, which implies phonics is not being taught in Australian schools. Not only is phonics being taught, as an essential component of reading, it is also firmly embedded in the Australian National Curriculum. The question that arises is: is the Minister being disingenuous, or is he being misadvised about the pedagogy of reading in Australian schools? Both

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Buckingham and Hammond have used the media to claim ITE providers are not preparing teacher graduates to teach reading. Buckingham has been the stronger critic of ITE courses, by publishing a ‘research’ paper on the issue. The paper was actually published by MultiLit, the company of which she is a director. It was not peer-reviewed and is deeply methodologically flawed. Despite its poor scholarly pedigree, the paper received widespread media coverage, particularly in the Murdoch press. The dissemination of erroneous information is a hallmark of neo-liberal strategists, aided by the main stream media. The formula is plain to see: incite a crisis by widely imparting false information; demoralise and disempower those who are being criticised by constraining their right of reply; create a climate that makes change an imperative and then get appointed to bodies that have the power to implement the desired change

Australia is a federated nation of six States and two Territories; each has its own constitution and legislature. So, desired educational policy, at a national level, has to be agreed by all the State Ministers of Education, before it can be enacted across the country. AITSL is the one body that gives advocates of synthetic phonics a direct route, through all ITE providers, to all schools in Australia. By changing the AITSL teaching standards, the “expert panel” can change the pedagogic culture in Australia. Alongside this change, it is possible to envisage the “expert” panel recommending the use of specified synthetic phonic programmes, as was the case in England. Like Mislin, it is equally possible that Buckingham could be the beneficiary of such a recommendation, given her interest in MultiLit. In England, it has been observed that commercial synthetic phonics programs are dictating pedagogical choices, thereby restricting the professional decision making of teachers (Bradbury 2018). So, these advocates of synthetic phonics have the potential to “take” Australian literacy education in a pincer movement, consisting of official directives, through AITSL, and the capitalisation of a burgeoning market place. It is a neo-liberal’s dream scenario. Australian educators need to be aware that when researchers inspected 100 phonics programmes they found that many were linguistically inaccurate, because they did not reflect English orthography or correct grapho-phonetic correspondences (Beard, Brooks & Ampaw-Farr 2019).

Another aspect of the Minister’s announcement was that “a free phonics health check” (PHC) would be implemented. The phonics “health” check referred to is actually the Phonics Screening Check (PSC), which has been in use in England since 2012. Buckingham has been campaigning for the PSC to be adopted in Australia for at least the last two and a half years. In April 2017, the neoliberal CIS hosted Nick Gibb in Australia and Buckingham escorted him on his promotion of the PSC. The proposed adoption of the PSC in Australia ignores findings from England, which suggest that 98% of teachers stated the PSC did not provide them with information they did not already know about their students’ reading abilities (Clark & Glazzard 2018), and that students’ knowledge of vocabulary, as well as knowledge of grapho-phonetic correspondences, is used when decoding words in the PSC, which implies the sole use of phonics is inadequate (Darnell, Solity & Wall 2017). This finding challenges the argument that fluent decoding can only be acquired by means of a strict fidelity to synthetic phonics. A further flaw in the PSC is the narrow range of grapho-phonetic correspondences (GPCs) used in the 40 words that comprise the test. Darnell, Solity & Wall (2017) found that only 15 of the 85 GPCs made up 67% of the test and that 31.8% of GPCs were not being tested at all.

Synthetic phonics

These findings deflate the claim that synthetic phonics is the exclusive, evidence based, method of decoding. Perhaps even more concerning, however, is the Minister’s use of the term “health” when referring to the test, which “frames” the discourse around the medicalisation of early literacy in the Australian context. Given that speech pathologists and experts in health have been in the vanguard of the movement for synthetic phonics in Australia, the Minister’s use of the term is unsurprising, but it demonstrates the extent to which early reading has become subsumed under a medical paradigm.

Two members of the task force privilege the “Simple View of Reading” (SVR) as the exemplary model of reading pedagogy. Whilst the SVR correctly differentiates decoding and comprehension, the model, as discussed by these members of the AITSL task force, seems misconceived. For example, the attention given to the function of linguistic comprehension, as a symbiotic element of the model, is left wanting whilst the

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tendency is to privilege decoding, based on phonics. This is reminiscent of how, in England, synthetic phonics was made statutory leaving linguistic comprehension to fend for itself. The original advocates of the SVR were clear that a “bottom-up” approach to early reading was not the intention of their model (Hoover and Gough 1990). The discourse of the Minister’s announcement reinforced the bias towards synthetic phonics. In total, the press-release mentioned phonics six times, reading twice (once in relation to the PHC) and comprehension once. The press release also referred to the “fundamentals of reading”, which were identified as: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Whilst it would be agreed these elements are essential components (referred to as the ‘Big Five’), they do not constitute the whole of reading pedagogy. For example, no reference is made to oral language and linguistic comprehension; prior knowledge of the reader; morphology, syntactic knowledge etc. If the Minister’s announcement is indicative of the “expert” panel’s terms of reference, the model of reading being advocated is as reductionist as the prescriptive model adopted in England.

Since the Minister’s announcement of 15 October, there has been a further development that indicates the shape of things to come. By the end of November, universities are required to provide AITSL with information about their “current approaches to reading instruction”. ITE providers have been given a template to complete, stating how they teach and assess the “Big Five”; the proportion of time devoted to the teaching of phonics and the proportion of this time that is spent on the teaching of synthetic phonics. In December the “expert” panel will advise on amendments to the Standards and Procedures for the accreditation of ITE programs. December marks the culmination of phase one of planned changes. In phase two, ITE providers will be given, “additional guidance and resources to include in reading instruction”. This work will be concluded by June 2020. However, it is already becoming apparent the “expert” panel is likely to “recommend” that ITE providers allocate 50% of their Primary English units to the teaching of reading. If this “recommendation” comes to pass, it will make it impossible to deliver the breadth and depth of the Australian English Curriculum. Furthermore, depending on the recommended time allocation for the teaching of synthetic phonics, it may make it difficult to teach a broad pedagogy of reading. A corollary of this will be less time allocated to the teaching of writing, despite strong evidence that standards in writing have deteriorated in Australia since 2011 (Gardner 2018).

Intellectually indefensible

It is intellectually indefensible to advocate a single approach to the teaching of early reading. A reductionist view is premised upon a unitary conceptualisation of the learner (i.e. that all learners are the same and they all learn in the same way). Furthermore, the imposition of a single approach by an outside body contravenes academic freedom and the legitimate scope of academics to critique models and approaches. However, this argument did not hold in England, where the political will behind synthetic phonics “strait-jacketed” academic freedom (Gardner 2017). The extent to which Australia may follow exactly the same course as England is contestable, to a degree. What is clear is that the advocates of synthetic phonics have constructed an argument that fits the educational paradigm of a neo-liberal government early in its term of office. As in England, the national standards for teachers are being used as the lever to dictate the teaching of reading in initial teacher education (ITE). In England, the Minister for Education had the unilateral power to make the teaching of synthetic phonics a statutory requirement. His Australian counterpart does not have that capacity. In Australia, national strategies must be agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which consists of the First Ministers of the six States and two Territories. Although, South Australia has already implemented the PSC and New South Wales has proposed a trial, it is unlikely all states will agree to its use. That said, the Federal Government holds a trump card: money. The usual means of persuading States and Territories to implement national priorities is by means of additional funding. The Federal Minister has already stated the proposed “Phonics Health Check” will be “free”, which implies it will be funded centrally, and not from the coffers of the States and Territories.

So far, it is possible to identify the strategies the Australian Government has borrowed from England, but it may also be possible to predict the next steps. The Newly Qualified Teacher’s Survey was used by Gove to monitor the impact of the teaching of synthetic phonics by ITE providers. A similar survey exists in

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Australia. In England the government recommended that schools purchase specifically named phonic programmes and match funded purchases. We might expect the Australian Government to do likewise.

English “synphonpreneurs” (proprietors of synthetic phonic programmes) have already made incursions into the Australian educational marketplace. In addition to Jolly Phonics, recent “players” include, Read Write Inc. and Sounds Right, which is promoted by the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation. We can add to this list InitialLit, a product from the company of which Jennifer Buckingham is the Strategic Director. These programmes are likely to feature on any recommended list the Australian Government might produce in the near future. The English government also gave a contract to its literacy “expert”, Ruth Miskin, (Ruth Miskin Phonics Training) to run phonics roadshows. Miskin’s counterpart in Australia, Jennifer Buckingham, has already toured her phonics roadshow to several capital cities. The web page advertising these events is revealing. Although the blurb refers to presenters from the Five from Five Literacy Project and The Macquarie Centre for Reading, The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), is also named. It is possible, the CIS is pump-priming a project the Federal Government will fund later. If so, like Miskin, Buckingham is well placed to win the contract.

Jennifer Buckingham is the fulcrum connected to all the parts: Five from Five, MultiLit, The Macquarie Centre for Reading, the Minister for Education, Nick Gibb, AITSL and the CIS. Her current job title of Strategic Director is transparently apt. She has fulfilled the CIS mission of getting its people into positions of influence. One of the functions of GERM and neo-liberal think-tanks around the world has been to hijack public discourses about education in order to reshape thinking; to de-professionalise teachers and ITE for “political gain” (Mullen, C.A. et al 2013) and to filtrate education with “free market ideas” (McDonald 2013).

However, the federated nature of the Australian political system may frustrate a process that was more streamlined in England. Australian educators also have hindsight by proxy (the English experience) to guide their response. The tactics of neo-liberal think-tanks in educational discourse is more transparent now than in the past, and their manipulation of “evidence” to construct an argument is obvious. Ultimately, the argument is not about reading; it is about ideology. However, literacy experts will succeed by “calling-out” the fake “evidence” used by think-tanks through a systematic interrogation of evidence, which includes re-visiting the texts of the researchers they so often cite. The Simple View of Reading, for example, is far more complex than the synphonpreneurs claim it to be.

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