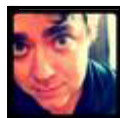


THE CONVERSATION

2 July 2014, 5.12am AEST

'Biggest Loser' policy on literacy will not deliver long-term gains

AUTHOR



Stewart Riddle

Lecturer in Literacies Education at University of Southern Queensland



While the Direct Instruction approach is useful, it shouldn't be used in isolation, and it won't "fix" anything. AAP

Yesterday's announcement of a \$22 million grant for a Direct Instruction program - a direct method of teaching using lectures and demonstrations - to improve literacy outcomes for remote Indigenous children should be regarded with caution.

It seems like a bizarre kind of double-think that the government can abandon the Gonski funding model, which would have most helped disadvantaged students; cut \$534 million in funding for Indigenous community health and education programs; and then turn around and claim that a sparkly new program will somehow "fix" Indigenous literacy.

This program simply takes a "Biggest Loser" approach to literacy teaching, by skilling and drilling students to the point of exhaustion, in order to get the most visible results possible (i.e. increased NAPLAN scores) in the shortest time. Just like the reality television weight-loss show, very little attention is given to long-term improvements and what happens beyond the immediacy of the program itself.

Does Indigenous literacy need fixing?

The OECD's latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that there is about a two-and-a-half-year gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous literacy rates in Australia. There is also a persistent gap in NAPLAN results.

There are some concerns about the normalising effect of policies that claim to work towards “Closing the Gap”. One example might be the assumption that raising Indigenous literacy levels across Australia is inherently a good thing, in and of itself.

It might be argued that such attempts are no better than historic attempts to make Aboriginal kids more “white” by sending them off to missions to be properly educated. In his seminal book, *The Stolen Generations*, Peter Read writes:

Missionaries, teachers, government officials have believed that the best way to make black people behave like whites was to get hold of the children who had not yet learned Aboriginal life ways.

There are some resonances with teaching Aboriginal children in remote communities a version of literacy that is more about success in NAPLAN tests than success in life.

Perhaps we should be asking questions about the underlying assumptions that are made about what it actually means to be literate, how this changes over time and how it differs across cultures. Who gets to decide? Are there different literacy demands for students in our major cities and those who live in remote communities? What cultural literacies are valued?

What relevance does sitting for the NAPLAN tests have for a young child, living in a largely oral-language culture in remote communities, where English may be their third or fourth language?

Each time that we reduce the discussion to a simple metric of whether students are meeting a benchmark that is determined by a narrowly devised literacy test, we are missing the opportunity to ask some of these tougher questions.



Perhaps testing and benchmarking isn't what Indigenous communities need. AAP
Click to enlarge

What are direct and explicit instruction?

The \$22 million funding package will go the Good to Great Schools Direct Instruction-Explicit Instruction literacy program, expanding a Cape York trial across the country.

So what exactly are direct instruction and explicit instruction, as defined by this program? These definitions are provided:

Direct Instruction provides step-by-step lessons that focus on skill mastery and grouping students by ability rather than age.

With Explicit Instruction teachers focus on explanations, demonstrations, feedback and practice until the skill is mastered.

As a literacies education lecturer, I work closely with pre-service teachers on exactly these kinds of teaching strategies. They are an important part of the basic pedagogical arsenal that all teachers have, and it's really nothing new.

An article in *The Australian* heralded the announcement as a triumph of "back-to-basics" schooling. This is **troubling**, as it is out of step with the lived realities of young people and ignores the importance of thinking about the impacts of **new literacies** in favour of outdated understandings of reading and writing.

While a large body of evidence supports the use of direct instruction within a **balanced** approach to literacy teaching and learning, it can be concerning when a narrow concept of "what works" is applied in literacy teaching and learning to the exclusion of all else. We have seen this in the **obsession with phonics**.

Direct and explicit instruction work best when combined with techniques based on experience and observation, giving students opportunities to use and play with language, helping them through the reading and writing process, as well as modelling targeted reading and writing strategies, guiding students through their own writing and co-constructing texts with students.

Delivering long-term improvements in Indigenous literacy

The Greens' spokesperson for schools, Senator Penny Wright, argued:

Mr Pyne's Direct Instruction plan only looks at one part of the problem and ignores the broader evidence about what makes a difference in schools.

As with Tony Abbott's call for **increased school attendance**, this latest strategy is another attempt to use simple solutions for complex problems.

Anything that is imposed from above simply won't work in the long term. This was seen clearly in the **failure** of the previous Coalition government's Northern Territory intervention.

When families and communities are not only involved, but also deeply committed and in control, then there is a real chance for lasting change.

While direct instruction itself is not a bad thing, declaring that a narrow-focused top-down literacy intervention is going to "fix" anything is a pipe-dream. Especially when we are simultaneously removing all other hope for equitable educational opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.