

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES CAST DOUBT ON RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY

In the context of the recent federal election campaign, with both sides of Australian politics having promised a relentless pursuit of 'higher standards' in school education, it is interesting to note reports indicating the failure of British and United States literacy initiatives to secure improved learning outcomes for students. These initiatives have promoted high-stakes testing and mandated approaches to teaching - most notably a renewed emphasis on intensive phonics in the teaching of reading - as the means to secure 'higher standards'.

The Guardian newspaper in England reported in early November that, as part of the biggest inquiry into primary education for decades, the Primary Review published three reports from academics at the universities of Bristol and Durham and the National Foundation for Educational Research. According to *The Guardian* report, 'The Durham University study, led by Professor Peter Tymms, warned the Government's "massive efforts" had brought little reward.' The National Literacy Strategy, which includes the literacy hour daily English lesson in schools, is said to have made 'a "barely noticeable" impression on reading standards.'

The Guardian highlighted the incredible cost of this 'back to basics' initiative. A key finding of the review was that 'Five hundred million pounds was spent on the National Literacy Strategy with almost no impact on reading levels.' Of great concern to Australian teachers of English will be the finding that 'pupils feel increasingly stressed about school tests and are losing their love of books in the drive to improve literacy levels.'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uklatest/story/0,-7043411.00.html>

In a recent address to teachers in Queensland about what research reveals about the lessons of the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation and its policy effects, Allan Luke and Annette Woods concluded that 'the US agenda - with high levels of centralised prescription of curriculum and pedagogy, and increased high stakes testing - is not working.' Furthermore, in addition to being a failure in educational terms, 'No Child Left Behind' has eroded teacher professionalism in the US. Tellingly, Luke and Woods note that the OECD has identified high levels of teacher professionalism as a common factor in the success of top tier nations - including Australia - in the PISA literacy testing.

The paper by Luke and Woods is available to the Australian Curriculum Studies Association website:

http://www.acsainc.com.au/content/lessons_from_no_child_left_behind.doc

Clearly, on the basis of the research evidence now available, the lesson for Australian parents, teachers and educational authorities is that the 'higher standards' imperative promises to be an educational 'dead end', if improved standards are simplistically equated with increased testing of students, centralised control over what is taught and how it is taught, and the erosion of teachers' professional autonomy. It will not escape notice that the findings of the recent national inquiry into the teaching of literacy in Australia, which are spelt out in *Teaching Reading* (2005), colloquially known as the 'Rowe report', have, in fact, recommended these very things. The 'evidence base' of this report is becoming increasingly questionable.