Extreme(s) Makeover: Countering False Dichotomies of Literacy Education in the Australian Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights some of the enduring dichotomies that prevail in Australia regarding the most effective way to teach literacy. These contrastive positions are often used by policymakers and the media to construct the view that teachers are failing to teach literacy well. In uncovering some of the polemical positions taken on literacy education, the authors argue that rather than an either/or approach, effective literacy teaching for diverse learners involves teachers in crafting a pedagogy that embraces multiple forms of literate practice for complex texts and times.

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INTRODUCTION

It seems axiomatic that the one great constant of literacy education is change. Whereas few educators would argue against the beneficial outcomes for students that arise from ongoing development in theoretical understandings about literacy and research-led practice, it is nevertheless extremely challenging for teachers to balance the sometimes competing framings of literacy that they encounter through this change process. In Australia, for example, innovation is highly prized, yet it is uncommon to find clear acknowledgement to teachers of how new iterations of policy build upon and extend previous ones. In this regard, all curriculum policy can appear as new, and teaching approaches can appear to be superceded (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001). Further, political and public debate about literacy often promulgates the view that teachers choose between disparate and competing sets of pedagogic approaches, or are seduced by the tantalizing and the new, and these choices come at the expense of their students (Slattery, 2005). Calls for "back to basics" are consequently enduring, if not accurate.

In December 2005, the then federal minister for education and training in Australia, The Honorable Brendan Nelson, released the findings of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2004, 2005a). This inquiry was prompted by a letter to the minister from 26 signatories, arguing that teachers in Australia did not teach phonics and did not adequately address the needs of students with reading difficulties. Subsequent to this, the seemingly moribund polemic between phonics and whole language re-emerged in the media and featured in the terms of reference for this inquiry. Once more it appeared that literacy educators were placed in the position of defending the wide range of literacy practices (that included phonics) in evidence in Australian schools and that the government was turning the study of reading and writing into a political pursuit (Freebody & Welch, 1993). Not surprisingly, the findings of the report recommend the systematic teaching of phonics in Australian schools.

In responding to this inquiry, we, along with many educators in Australia, found ourselves trying to point out how unhelpful false dichotomies were in explaining the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian students, and how classrooms required differentiated and multifaceted teaching emphases and interventions to address specific student learning needs.

In this paper, we aim to discuss a number of the divisions that appear to characterize "literacy debates" in the Australian context (Mills, 2005) and provide a snapshot of some of our thinking about these debates, particularly as they relate to reading outcomes in the state of Victoria, where we currently work in teacher education. In so doing we hope that literacy educators in other countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand, might consider the contested debates that occur in their own educational set-

tings at this present time and reflect upon productive ways for teachers to negotiate their way through polemics to develop cohesive and coherent approaches to literacy education.

BASICS VERSUS "NEW BASICS"

One of the most powerful polemical positions of current literacy debates relates to the notion of basic literacy skills. The recursive call in Australia for the reinstitution of the "basics" (Cope, 1988) constitutes literacy in the singular; as a set of skills required to read, usually print-based texts, and to write letters, words, sentences to produce sequentially longer tracts of writing.

This lingering sense of the 'basics' (Lankshear, 1997) is at odds with the view that the 'basics', conceived as a discrete set of reading and writing skills, are not basic enough for the 21st century. In 2001, the Australian Council of Deans of Education wrote that given the dynamic and complex global and local contexts within which students are now situated, an amalgamation of "new basics" in education is required (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). These new basics aim to develop students' capacities to engage with, comprehend, create, and use a multiplicity of texts: visual, print, aural, multimodal, electronic (Kalantzis & Cope; see also, Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001; Luke & Carpenter, 2003; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Within this view, effective readers engage in rich and authentic reading events that require them to move between decoding, semantic and critical reading practices for diverse texts and purposes (Luke & Freebody). Thus, readers utilize a range of strategies to read—and write—and to reflect and act upon the range of texts that they encounter in the technologically sophisticated world they inhabit.

This sophisticated world, according to Freebody (2000), is what makes literacy teaching complex and irreducible to a single method or approach. Freebody suggests that literacy teaching is affected dramatically by growing social complexities and because of the strong connection between literacy learning and students' lifeworlds. Literacy teaching, then, will not get simpler (Freebody) and should not be simplistic (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). Consequently, new basics in current times include those skills and practices required to read and write at the level of decoding print *and* the more complex understandings of texts and meanings (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001). Teachers of new basics must therefore acknowledge and work with the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian students.

This particular argument on what constitutes basic literacy in the 21st century could be mediated through what Freebody (2000) refers to as "crafting a mix." Freebody argues that teachers should not adopt an either/or method of teaching, but rather construct a mix of approaches and strategies that most meet the needs of the learners in their classroom (see Czilslowski-McKenna,

Cumming, Wyatt-Smith, & Elkins, 2006). In this regard, teachers can more clearly see how multiple literacy practices support their learners and therefore discard a "massified" or ever-expanding concept of literacy (Freebody & Welch, 1993, p. 6). Achieving a workable, pragmatic, and current definition of literacies and basics is therefore possible if teachers understand that there are many practices in learning and in life which require particular reading and writing skills and repertoires.

STANDARDS VERSUS DIFFERENTIATION

Prolonged discussion also centers on the best and most-effective ways of assessing students' literacy attainment. Following a period of rapid shifts in educational policy and programming during the 1990s, state systems of education in Australia have widely implemented standardized tests of some form or another, through which students' achievements in literacy are measured against predetermined, or benchmarked, outcomes. In addition to state-mandated testing, the National Literacy Benchmarks introduced by the federal government in 1999 (Curriculum Corporation, 2000) have been designed to locate "at-risk" students and students in need of systematic interventions linked to funding initiatives. Concomitantly, there has been a significant impetus in developing literacy in the first 4 years of primary schooling and a huge investment of financial and human capital (Department of Employment, Education Training and Youth Affairs, 1998).

However, many experienced literacy educators argue that those groups most at risk of not achieving literacy benchmarks are already known to teachers and education systems: Indigenous students, (Frigo, et al., 2004; Luke & Elkins, 2003; Malcolm, et al., 1999; Wignell, 1999), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon, & Pitt, 2002; Teese, 2000), many students from language backgrounds other than English, (McKay, et al., 1997) and a substantial proportion of boys (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002). Measuring at-risk students against standards and benchmarks that are difficult for these students to achieve thus becomes an important issue of equity and access, particularly as at-risk students need make up opportunities and additional time to attain the levels of proficiency that empowers them as learners (Clay, 2005; Cummins, 1996). This is especially the case when data from testing and benchmarking are used by governments to rate those schools perceived to be performing more successfully than others. The uneven outcomes of benchmarking will also have profound effects on teachers if the recent proposal by the current federal government to link teachers' payment to performance becomes legislated (Bishop, 2007).

There is, thus, an inherent danger that the differentiated learning needs of students can be subsumed by a strong adherence to standardized results. To illustrate this, benchmarked results for at-risk students collected from

teachers in government schools in the state of Victoria for the period of 2003 (Department of Education and Training, 2003) have been juxtaposed below with findings from current research and practice relating to at-risk learners. The table below presents selected elements of data collected from a corpus of teacher judgments about student performance in relation to specified literacy outcomes. It highlights proportional differentiation across cohorts in relation to Level 4 (Years 5–6) of the primary school.

Indigenous Students

The results here resonate with data collected from other areas of Australia that show that Indigenous students are the most at-risk group of students in terms of literacy attainment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Masters & Forster, 1997). This is in spite of considerable financial commitment to supporting

Table 1. Teaching Judgments Against the Curriculum and Standards Framework 11 — Proportional Benchmarks for the State of Victoria, 2003, for Students in Their Final Year of Primary School

Achievement At Expected Level (Percent)	All	Koorie	LBOTE	EMA	Boys
Reading					
Above Estimate	23.28	9.97	20.84	15.79	19.38
Established	46.03	31.20	45.22	42.46	43.62
Consolidating	21.69	33.50	22.87	27.67	25.34
Beginning or Below	9.00	25.32	11.07	14.09	11.66
Writing					
Above Estimate	17.92	7.93	16.63	11.59	13.22
Established	44.75	25.06	43.08	39.07	40.80
Consolidating	26.60	38.11	27.75	32.54	31.34
Beginning or Below	10.72	28.90	12.54	16.80	14.65
Speaking and Listening					
Above Estimate	17.42	7.95	15.52	11.22	13.93
Established	53.69	33.85	49.99	48.47	50.75
Consolidating	21.79	37.18	25.08	29.17	26.12
Beginning or Below	7.10	21.03	9.41	11.14	9.20

Koorie = Indigenous
LBOTE = Language background other than English
EMA = Low socioeconomic background

Indigenous students and numerous government reports and policies (see Clancy & Simpson, 2002; DEST, 2000; Gray, 1998; Rose, Gray, & Cowey, 1999).

One of the dangers in measuring the literacy outcomes for Indigenous students in terms of standards is that a deficit view of Indigenous students prevails, which, in turn, can lead to low-level and decontextualized literacy instruction and low expectations of students (Rose, Gray, & Cowey, 1999). Many Indigenous students move between their Indigenous languages, Aboriginal English—variously constructed as a dialect of English or a language in its own right—and the standard form of Australian English. Further to this, much communication in Indigenous families is conveyed through the oral mode, and so Indigenous students need what Rose, Gray and Cowey (1999, p. 30; Gray, 1998) describe as "concentrated language encounters" over long periods of time to develop proficiency in English.

Language Backgrounds Other Than English

The data above indicate reasonably good results for the broad category of students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), although this is potentially misleading. In 2004, approximately 25% of students in government schools in Victoria came from language backgrounds other than English. Of this broad group, 33.9% were deemed students of English as a second language (ESL), with some students as new arrivals in Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2004). However, as there are no disaggregated data for ESL students, the category of LBOTE potentially masks the at-risk students.

This is particularly concerning because it has been well established through research and practice that ESL students have special needs in relation to English literacy (Hammond & Derewianka, 1999) and take up to 7 years to develop academic English proficiency, including both the higher order cognitive and linguistic demands of texts and tasks that are only minimally supported by contextual clues (Cummins, 1996). In light of these factors, many ESL learners require extended time, explicit teaching, and language-rich learning encounters in order to speak, read, and write in English, especially as they move into more academic spoken and written registers.

Socioeconomic Background

The data above echo results from other statewide research conducted in Victoria which have revealed that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be academic under-achievers than students from middle-class families whose linguistic and cultural knowledge is normally more highly prized by schools (Teese, 2000; see also Masters & Forster, 1997).

Notwithstanding, other studies of students in school settings in socio-economically disadvantaged communities around Australia (e.g., Comber et al., 2002) identify several at-school factors that make a difference in these children's literacy learning. This body of research has discovered that students' literacy skills are enhanced through greater levels of financial, material, and human resources (Comber et al.; Luke & Elkins, 2003) and the quality of teacher instruction that allows students to appropriate and use literate practices and school-authorized discourses in new situations (Comber, et al.; Luke & Elkins).

Boys

In addition to the results for boys in the data shown above, national data collected for the English National Literacy Survey (Masters & Forster, 1997) indicate that gender is a key predictor of literacy attainment. Boys as a group, at Years 3 and 5, achieved significantly lower scores against both reading and writing benchmarks than girls. When conflated with other key variables such as low socioeconomic background, Indigenous status, and language backgrounds other than English, the relationship between gender and literacy becomes more pronounced.

Research across Australia, as in the United Kingdom and North America, suggests that as boys move into adolescence, they are less likely than their female peers to be engaged in recreational and academic reading which does not have a clearly pragmatic function (see the national Australian research data of Bunbury, 1995; also Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Love & Hamston, 2003, 2004; Martino, 2001). Of specific interest to Australian researchers has been the role played by significant males in the formation of adolescent boys' identities as particular types of readers, the relationship between reading and masculine identities and, given the proliferation of multimodal and electronic forms of text, the complex nature of reading in the 21st century.

Therefore, in light of the diverse learning needs of various cohorts of students as identified above, the standards and benchmarked outcomes established at state and national levels pose considerable challenges for teachers and education systems (Rohl & Rivalland, 2002). In their comprehensive national report of at-risk students in the middle years of schooling (Years 5–9), Luke and Elkins (2003) assert that standardized tests affect at-risk students and their teachers in profound ways. They talk of students being unable to deal with the structure and content of tests and the effects this has on self-esteem. They argue that teachers become caught between meeting the targets of the tests and their awareness of the particular learning needs of their students. In response, teachers often develop fragmented interventions to assist at-risk students as the shift towards narrow definitions of literacy occurs through systemswide benchmarking, and this places a far too heavy focus on decoding at the expense of comprehension. Students become trapped in "lower streams and lower levels of

instruction" (p. 102) and so students' pathways through school can be seriously impaired through the interpretation of a single set of data.

Other educators agree with Luke and Elkins (2003) that teachers need to design differentiated curriculum, rather than teach to a standardized set of tests and outcomes. From their longitudinal, ethnographic studies of teachers in primary classrooms, Comber and Kamler (2005) talk about the need for "turn around pedagogies" that meet the specific and individualised needs of at-risk students. These pedagogies are aimed at engaging disenchanted and disenfranchised students in literacy learning: for teachers to work with and from those literacy practices, interests, and experiences that students have developed; to value their own knowledge and expertise in noticing what a student can do in terms of speaking, reading, and writing; and to design different learning pathways accordingly.

LANGUAGE VERSUS LITERACY

Another false dichotomy exists in Australia between the time afforded to the teaching of language and that afforded to literacy. In theory, benchmarks apply to the four modes of language—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. However, because systemic data collection has been used as an accountability measure for schools, much attention in the early years of schooling is given to the achievement of students in respect to reading and writing (Curriculum Corporation, 2000). Key recommendations from the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005a) reinforce the strong focus on reading, for example:

> Recommendation 11
>
> The Committee recommends that the key objective of primary teacher education should be to prepare student teachers to teach reading… (p. 52)

This priority, however, results in a potential narrowing of the curriculum, whereby language teaching is subsumed by the teaching of reading and writing per se. Therefore, little time in classrooms is often made for explicit language teaching, despite recent policy advice to teachers that acknowledges the continual importance of "conscious and deliberate teaching of language in the variety of texts it is written and spoken" (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005, p. 4).

This emphasis on reading and writing at the apparent expense of oral language seems perplexing for a number of reasons. First, research has established that the quality of language development in early years impacts on later literacy achievement (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001; see also, Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Hutchinson,

Whiteley, Smith, & Connors, 2003; Nation & Snowling, 2004). In this regard, the leverage that oral language gives to literacy learning has been well established (Clay, 1991; Leu, 1982; McKeown & Beck, 2004; McNaughton, 2002; Neuman, 2001; Richgels, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Second, exposure to more-complex language supports students in acquiring increased syntactic competence (Richgels, 2004; see also Christie, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004) and content knowledge (Christie; Neuman; Rivalland, 2004), both of which are necessary for the processes of comprehension, construction, and critique. As students develop a heightened awareness of language, they are more able to use language with precision and flexibility, transferring knowledge from known contexts to new as they build and extend understandings (Raban, 1999). Third, language supports the complex and abstract thinking and learning that takes place as students move through the primary school and beyond (Christie). This focus is particularly critical given the different language registers that students use in home and school contexts (Hasan & Williams, 1996).

Notwithstanding, a relative absence of strong debate over the value of oral language in the classroom prevails, despite the fact that researchers—within and outside of Australia—have long advocated for a culture of classroom teaching that continues to build on and expand children's language competency and capitalize on the reciprocity of language and literacy teaching that informs and supports children's learning (Clay, 1991; Christie, 2002; Raban 1999; Wells, 1986). It is timely in the current context of review and community debate to reiterate the value of oral language teaching as not only having value in itself but in enhancing literacy learning outcomes for all students.

DECODING VERSUS COMPREHENSION

The distinct pressure placed on teachers to achieve standards and benchmarks in literacy can perpetuate a divide between reading as "decoding" and reading as "comprehension." This division is evident in Victorian schools at present where teachers are urged to achieve ever higher levels of text reading in the first 3 years of schooling.

The accountability measure for reading, known as *The Assessment of Reading P–2* (Department of Education and Training, 2003), stipulates that teachers in the early years of schooling are required to report students' reading levels against statewide minimum benchmark texts and school-based targets at the end of each school year. Table 2 below shows the reading achievement of students in primary schools in 2003 as measured against texts equivalent in difficulty to *PM Reading Benchmark Texts* (Smith & Randell, 2000) levels 1, 5, 15, and 20. The vast majority of students are achieving high levels of reading accuracy on set texts after 3 years of schooling. By the end of this period, 94.53% of students are able to read a level 20 text with 90–100% accuracy.

Table 2. Assessment of Reading Prep Year 2 (2003) All Schools

End of Prep (First Year of School)	Level 1	Level 5
90–100%	93.87	77.94
51–89%	4.36	10.75
<=50%	1.77	11.31
End of Year 1 (Second Year of School)	**Level 5**	**Level 15**
90–100%	98.22	85.68
51–89%	0.93	10.34
<=50%	0.85	3.98
End of Year 2 (Third Year of School)	**Level 15**	**Level 20**
90–100%	96.11	94.53
51–89%	2.66	3.50
<=50%	1.23	1.97

In many ways these data show a positive outcome of the teaching of reading in the first 3 years of schooling, and suggest that reading at such levels provides the potential for students to engage with texts and topics of interest, building independent reading skills as a basis for participation in further learning and lifelong reading. However, notably absent from the data is any specific measure of reading comprehension and while this may be seen as implicit in the data, subsequent statewide testing of students in Year 3 and beyond shows that on broader measures of reading (that is, accuracy and comprehension), children's reading levels fail to maintain the rosy picture of achievement established by measures of reading accuracy alone (Department of Education and Training, 2003). In Victoria, teacher judgments against curriculum standards show the decline in achievement at Year 4 in 2003, with an increase of 10% of the total cohort failing to reach expected levels of achievement at this year level (see Table 3).

These results are significant in that they are similar to those results found elsewhere, described as "the fourth-grade slump" (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin,

Table 3. Teacher Judgments Against the Curriculum and Standards Framework 11 — Proportional Benchmarks for Reading for the State of Victoria, 2003

Achievement At Expected Level (Percent)	Prep	Year 2	Year 4	Year 6
Above Established	31.55	29.82	22.40	23.28
Established	44.43	52.48	49.54	46.03
Consolidating	17.41	15.12	21.92	21.69
Beginning or Below	6.61	2.59	6.14	9.00

1990; Gee, 2003, 2004; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The skill profile of such readers indicates they are able to read in the sense of decoding print and assigning literal meanings to text but fail in the sense of understanding, in any deep way, texts that contain more-complex language (Gee, 2004, p. 15). A range of explanations for this phenomenon have been proposed (Harrison, 2004; Snow et al.), with the decline in students' reading achievement largely attributed to the changing nature of reading tasks that Grade 4 students encounter. When reading across a range of curriculum areas, students are required to engage with information in texts, to extend existing knowledge, and to acquire new understandings. Many students experience difficulty making this transition (Harrison).

This issue of transition attests to the significant role that language should play in reading development. The language of more complex texts shifts beyond the everyday, and students' reading moves from a focus on "familiar texts where the task is one of recognising and decoding words to one of comprehension of harder texts that use more difficult, abstract, specialised and ethical words" (Chall et al., 1990, p. 46). More demanding texts also contain more complex concepts requiring the reader to draw upon prior knowledge and understanding to make sense of the meanings and ideas presented (Neuman, 2001). Effective readers therefore need to draw upon a rich language repertoire in order to comprehend more linguistically and conceptually challenging texts. Therefore it is necessary for teachers to think beyond print accuracy and to consider engagement, knowledge building, and comprehension—as realized through language—as fundamental aspects of effective reading practice.

PHONICS VERSUS WHOLE LANGUAGE

One of the most-enduring dichotomies that has dominated the discussion of early literacy teaching and learning in Australia relates to whole language and phonics teaching. While seemingly inexplicable to practitioners such as the teachers of early years students in Victorian schools, it appears advantageous to some in the political arena and popular press to polarise literacy teaching into "whole language" and "phonics first" camps. Doing so perpetuates the belief that the two approaches are not complementary, but mutually incompatible, and compete for space in Australian classrooms. Some argue that this polarization is dangerously misleading (Adams, 1990; Lankshear, 1997) and continues at the "cost of precious progress and of children's potential reading achievement" (Adams, p. 7).

The excerpts which follow, the first from a national newspaper and the second outlining the objectives of the recently published national inquiry into literacy teaching, exemplify the terminology used in this artificial division of literacy teaching.

> In a move that reunites the reading wars a group of researchers…condemn the 'whole language' philosophy used in many schools which requires only exposure to a rich language environment without any specific teaching of the alphabetic system and letter-sound relationships.
> (Danni Cooper, *The Australian,* April 21, 2004)

> Identify the extent to which prospective teachers are provided with reading teaching approaches and skills that are effective in the classroom, and have the opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to implement effective classroom reading programs. Training in both phonics and whole language approaches to reading will be examined.
> (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2004)

Despite such efforts to divide, Victorian teachers have in the main worked to support diverse student communities, again crafting a mix of practice (Freebody, 2000) to meet the learning needs of students. Rather than being theoretically void or disparate, the teaching of early years literacy is clearly informed by models of literacy processing (Clay, 1991, 2001) that includes whole text instruction and explicit attention to the teaching of specific elements of text, such as phonics.

Moreover, teachers working in schools in Victoria have been developed professionally to variously acknowledge the matrix of information that the reader brings to the task, the information contained within the text itself, and the overall purpose of the reading task (Clay, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997). As such, students are taught a repertoire of approaches, with phonics clearly being part of the mix. In this light, the division between phonics and whole language is both inaccurate and unproductive.

This mix of teaching methods is important as there is now evidence to indicate that phonological awareness and, in particular, knowledge of sound-letter relationships is necessary but insufficient for later text comprehension (Snow et al., 1998; Scarborough, 2001; Gee, 2004; DEST, 2005b). As the National Research Council report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children,* states:

> Studies indicate that training in phonological awareness particularly in association with instruction in letters and letter-sound relationships, makes a contribution to assisting at risk children in learning to read. The effects of training, although quite consistent, are only moderate in strength, and have so far not been shown to extend to comprehension.
> (Snow et al., 1998, p. 251)

The report acknowledges "that there is something else that is more significant than early phonological awareness in predicting early success and learning to read" (Gee, 2004, p. 15), referring to this as an "overall language ability" (Snow et al., 1998, p. 111). Significantly, this reports refers to children's expressive and receptive vocabulary, as discussed above, and the ability to engage in extended, connected verbal discourse as predictive of early reading ability (Gee, 2004; Snow et al.).

CONCLUSION

Through our discussion we have tried to identify those potential consequences to teachers and to students that can emerge from starkly polarized positions on literacy teaching. Although we acknowledge there is still much to find out about effective practice, it is crucial at this time of debate that research and teachers' experiences with diverse learners inform policymaking and public discussion in an effort to avoid the damaging simplifications often associated with extreme views and positions. Identifying and moving beyond artificial polemics allows for a clear, coherent positioning of literacy teaching, and the articulation of a well informed and crafted literacy pedagogy necessary for the complex nature of learning and life beyond the classroom.

As revealed above, there is a body of important research in Australia, as elsewhere, that strongly recommends a multifaceted pedagogical approach to meet the differentiated learning needs of students; the implementation of a mixed method of assessment and other data for profiling students' literacy attainment; and the significance of resourcing all students with the language, texts, and technologies that will assist them in their literacy learning.

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