

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Science and Technology Committee
EVIDENCE CHECK: LITERACY INTERVENTIONS
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
23 October 2009

1. ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.
2. We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

3. ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

ATL response

4. ATL is pleased to offer a perspective from teachers on the government's use of evidence in developing literacy interventions. In the limited time we have in which to write this submission, we highlight issues that we have previously raised with Government about its use of evidence. We focus on policy on literacy interventions for school children with reading difficulties. Copies of consultation responses are appended to this submission.
5. We believe that the Government's focus on identifying 'best practice' in teaching reading has led to an assumption that there is only one effective model. While there is evidence that particular methods work in particular cases, a focus on individual forms of intervention has meant that evidence showing that a range of different methods should

be considered has been ignored. For example, the Australian *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (2003) states that children learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension and that teachers require a range of strategies upon which they can draw, that meet the developmental and learning needs of individual children.

6. Thus, while there may be a role for government in pointing out methods that are effective, the tendency to require wholesale adoption of particular methods has an adverse effect. Where a single method is advocated, and inspected by Ofsted, teachers are expected to focus their own learning on the 'government method', and lose opportunities to learn about any other strategies. Any child who does not respond to this method is likely to be labelled as 'failing', when in fact the reliance on a single strategy itself should be held under scrutiny.
7. Unfortunately, even if it were the case that a single model of teaching reading is the most effective in all cases, advances in our understanding of the brain and the ways in which children learn are likely to lead to the identification of new strategies, or indeed the reinstatement of old ones. Governments often find it difficult to turn quickly in the face of new evidence.
8. Focus on single issues in teaching, such as the teaching of reading, can lead to a narrowing of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. The 1997 New Labour focus on developing a literacy strategy led both to a narrowing of the curriculum overall in primary schools, and to a narrowing of the English curriculum. It also led to a loss of focus on speaking and listening, and on sustained dialogue and shared thinking, all of which evidence shows are vital for improving literacy, for wider learning, and for effective citizenship.
9. We believe that questions of whether government policy is evidence-based should look not only at the evidence in support of individual educational policies but also at the impact of those policies elsewhere, including the impact on children and their learning, the development of curriculum, testing and accountability measures, and the professionalism of teachers.
10. We have concerns about the particular evidence that the government uses in developing its policies, how it comes across the evidence, and how critically it analyses that evidence. The recent Rose review of the teaching of literacy appeared to have come about because of a single research study in Clackmannanshire, results of which were disputed by many academics. Many others disputed whether the results could be adapted wholesale or translated into single teaching methods. Rose himself stated in his interim report that a systematic approach to teaching phonics was the best way forward. We would be interested to know how 'systematic' became 'synthetic' in the government's new literacy strategy.
11. We have concerns about the government's apparent desire to make teaching 'teacher-proof' by identifying effective strategies for teaching and then specifying them in step-by-step detail.