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## Different reading methods on trial

Justine Ferrari, Education writer | March 14, 2009

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**THE divisive debate over how best to teach children to read has prompted the first trial in Australia comparing phonics-based techniques with other methods.**

The NSW Government is planning a pilot study assessing a reading program that teaches children letter-sound combinations as the first step in reading.

Their progress will be compared with students taught by methods that place less emphasis on phonics and more on "whole language" techniques, such as pictures and sentence structure.

It is believed to be the first head-to-head comparison of phonics with other reading programs in the nation.

In an interview with The Weekend Australian, NSW Education Minister Verity Firth said the aim of the trial was to gather evidence of what worked.

"Surely all of us can agree we want the best for our kids, and stop arguing about what we believe and start talking about what we know," she said.

"As Education Minister, my job isn't to find myself in the middle of internecine debates, but to try to be able to look at how reading is taught with the primary motivation of what's best for our kids."

NSW will run the trial as one of the programs funded through the National Partnership with the commonwealth on literacy and numeracy that was agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments.

Ms Firth said the state's aims were in line with the federal Government's objectives, which had called for phonics trials.

The NSW study will use the MULTILIT (Making Up Lost Time in Literacy) reading program developed by education researchers at Macquarie University, which places letter-sound relationships or phonemic awareness as the foundation of learning to read. The details of the trial are still being finalised but it is envisaged it will run for at least a year, targeting students in Years 3 and 4 reading well below the level of their peers.

The debate in the reading wars is over the importance of teaching phonics to children learning to read, with "whole language" techniques supplanting the sounding out of words as the first step in learning.

The term whole language is no longer used, proponents now call for a "balanced" approach that teaches a range of methods, such as looking at the pictures on the page, the context of the word and the syntax of the sentence, rather than starting with sounding out the letters of the word.

As reported in The Weekend Australian last month, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English has criticised the emphasis on phonics in the draft national curriculum, saying it "comes at the expense of the focus on a balanced reading program".

In its submission to the National Curriculum Board, the AATE calls for explicit reference to be made to "all three cueing systems" used to make sense of the written word.

Under the three cueing systems model, the sounding of letters is the least important skill, with children first asked to use semantics and guess the word based on the context including using pictures, and then use the sentence syntax to work out the meaning. The third and least important cue is sounding out the letters.

Literacy associate professor Kerry Hempenstall said the three cueing system had been discredited as a method for teaching reading.

"It has never been validated that anyone can integrate these three methods," he said.

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