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Ideology-pushers stunt children's literacy growth

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THOSE critics of NSW Education Minister Verity Firth's trial of phonics-based instruction of reading need to get a life.

Indeed, they should go out to Sydney's Exodus Foundation and have a look at young lives being saved—literally.

Behind the Ashfield church, its Loaves and Fishes restaurant and queues of those whose destitution is too often rooted in illiteracy, is a miracle on Earth.

There, MULTILIT (Making Up Lost Time In Literature) is administered by professionals and volunteers under the supervision of Macquarie University.

In the space of six months, it takes kids who have spent five years in this nation's education system from not being able to read a word to being able to write and read a piece of poetry.

Educationally impoverished families, a lack of performance measures in schools, poorly trained teachers, belief-based teaching practices and dogma protected by anachronistic unions compound the disadvantage many kids bring with them to school.

For too long we have had to endure these educated, self-appointed drivers of the social justice truck condemning young Australians to a life of underachievement.

They deny kids a solid reading foundation and then bemoan under-representation of the poor in the (substandard) universities from which this pontification comes.

In affluent, educated, book-rich families, kids will learn to read irrespective of teaching practices. Not so in the real world.

Ambitions to fill the nation's universities with more students from a low-income background will be achieved only by lifting literacy levels in the first three years of education. It's not money that keeps kids out of uni, it's a lousy Year 12 result.

Brendan Nelson MP

Federal Education, Science and Training minister, 2001-2006
Lindfield, NSW

THE Australian is right to report on Professor Brian Cambourne and his email campaign to derail Ms Firth's MULTILIT program.

His argument to discredit the teaching of phonics lacks conviction: learning pictograms and other symbols in other languages is surely similar in process and intention to associating sound and symbol in the phonics of English.

We are all aware of the irregularities in structure in relationship to sounds in much of the vocabulary of English because of its origins in other languages.

For this reason, phonics alone is not the key to literacy. It is, however, the premise on which word recognition is based.

If a child does not know the range of sounds and the symbols they represent, there is no starting point for word recognition.

The key to setting anyone, child or adult, on the path to literacy is firstly recognising the relationship between sound and symbol.

Then combine other approaches: whole-word recognition and contextual clues.

Enid Duncan

The Gap, Qld

WHOLE language can work wonderfully well as a teaching method that accelerates learning to read and

promotes a love of reading. But only for some children.

They tend to be kids with an aptitude for language who like school and come from literate homes where they are read to and where books are valued and discussed.

That makes it perfect for the offspring of literacy academics, authors of picture books about possums and since I'm a novelist, my own daughters, too.

For many kids without these literacy advantages, it doesn't work at all.

Whole language deserves its place, but only as one among many.

James Moloney

Coorparoo, Qld

I RECENTLY ordered coffee at a cafe chain in Melbourne, where the young shop assistant was required to tap my order and first name into the computer, before I took a seat.

So I said my first name—slowly. He looked at me completely blankly; unable to enter even the first letter, and asked me to spell it out slowly, one letter at a time.

If he had learnt phonics in primary school as I did, this wouldn't have happened.

Elizabeth Matuschka

Ballarat, Vic

SURELY it is not a matter of either or.

Phonics should be just one tool in the word-attack toolkit every child deserves.

Denying phonics to some kids will deny them the capacity to reach their reading potential.

John Clapton

Greenwood, WA

LITERACY involves the integration of reading, writing, talking and listening, of which learning to read is but one part.

Your editorial ("Time to spell it out", 19/3) describes the whole-language technique as one "where children are expected to work out words by looking at pictures or understanding their context in a sentence".

This is only part of the process.

Using cues other than phonic decoding—sounding out—is encouraged for working out an unknown word.

Students will look at the initial sound or sound cluster, then consider all the information to hand to arrive at the correct word.

When a student hesitates over a word that can be sounded out, then the teacher will say first, "try to sound that out".

Teaching a program that is based on phonics alone offers no skills for working out the many words, such as "plough" and "enough" that don't follow the rules.

Alayna Sutcliffe

Empire Bay, NSW