

THE AUSTRALIAN

Reading Recovery a dud that shouldn't be used

KEVIN DONNELLY THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 09, 2013 12:00AM

THE recent New Zealand study carried out by Massey University's Institute of Education concluding that Reading Recovery, an early intervention program originating in NZ during the early 1980s, fails to teach at-risk primary school children how to read shouldn't surprise.

Forget the claim on the Victorian Department of Education and Early Child Development website that "Reading Recovery has a strong tradition of success with the lowest-achieving children".

The evidence that Reading Recovery doesn't work has been there for years: 31 US reading experts signed an open letter to congress in 2002 concluding "there is little evidence to show that Reading Recovery has proved successful with the lowest-performing students".

A 2007 evaluation by Australian researchers Meree Reynolds and Kevin Wheldall also questions the program's effectiveness, concluding: "Research, however, indicates that it has not delivered all that it promised to deliver."

The reason Reading Recovery is ineffective is because it embraces discredited new-age education fads such as whole language and constructivism.

Instead of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness, the relationship between letters and sounds in an explicit way, whole language is based on the premise that reading is as natural as learning to speak and that children can look and guess.

Constructivism argues children are active learners who construct their own knowledge and teachers facilitate as guides by the side.

As noted by Ken Rowe in the 2005 commonwealth report Teaching Reading, teacher education in Australia also embraces constructivism even though "there is a serious lack of supporting evidence for its effectiveness in teaching children to read".

No wonder there has been little, if any, statistically significant improvement in Australia's literacy results, as measured by NAPLAN during the past six years, and that Australian Year 4 children are outperformed by 21 other countries in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

Even worse, despite the \$540 million committed by the Rudd government in 2009 to the National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy, literacy standards in the targeted schools are no better than schools not in the program.

Given the evidence, it would be reasonable to expect that Australia's education establishment would accept that whole language and constructivism, and programs such as Reading Recovery, are ineffective.

Not so. For years, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and teacher academics such as Wayne Sawyer and Allan Luke have argued that concerns expressed by critics are a manufactured crisis.

The proposed Rudd-Gillard national English curriculum, compulsory for all schools across Australia, while nodding in the direction of phonics and more explicit teaching, champions whole language and constructivism.

Reading researcher Byron Harrison noted in his analyses of the new curriculum that "this is the old whole language writ large. There are virtually no phonic imperatives appropriate to these critical years that would guide a teacher. Specifically, there are no specific instructions on how to teach letter sounds, no talk of tracing or consolidation by practice."

Of equal concern is that many beginning teachers, even after four years of teacher training, lack the skills to teach literacy based on phonics and phonemic awareness. As to whether matters will improve, we will have to wait until after the election.

Kevin Rudd's approach, enshrined in the government's National Education Reform Agreement, while calling for an evaluation of teacher training and a more rigorous curriculum, gives control to the professional bodies

responsible for the present malaise.

Opposition education spokesman Christopher Pyne, on the other hand, has signalled that any review of teacher training would be by an independent body, that direct instruction is a more effective model of pedagogy and that a phonics and phonemic awareness approach to literacy is preferable.

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