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Teachers in 'subliminal' bid to bar phonics

Justine Ferrari, Education writer | March 19, 2009

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LITERACY teachers are planning a subliminal campaign to undermine phonics as an approach to teaching reading by subconsciously linking it with the idea of failure.

The target of their campaign is NSW Education Minister Verity Firth, who last week announced the nation's first direct comparison of phonics-based reading methods with other techniques.

In a group email sent to a network of literacy educators, associate professor in education at Wollongong University Brian Cambourne proposes flooding Ms Firth's office with emails that associate phonics based approaches with failure "at an almost subconscious level".

Professor Cambourne suggests messages, including linking phonics to "readicide", which he defines as a noun meaning "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools".

He points to "evolution theory" and non-Western forms of writing such as Chinese and hieroglyphic scripts as evidence that decoding sounds in the written word is not a prerequisite for being able to read alphabetically based scripts.

The campaign is prompted by the decision of the NSW Government, reported in The Weekend Australian last Saturday, to conduct a trial using a reading program called MULTILIT (Making Up Lost Time In Literacy), which was designed for struggling readers by researchers at Macquarie University and teaches letter-sound relationships.

As part of the national partnership with the commonwealth on literacy and numeracy, NSW will assess the progress of MULTILIT students with students taught by methods that place less emphasis on phonics and more on "whole language" techniques, such as pictures and sentence structure.

Ms Firth said the purpose of the trial was to provide evidence of what methods worked best, and to "stop arguing about what we believe, and start talking about what we know".

Professor Cambourne denied he was proposing a campaign and said he was "just using my right as a member of the community and my friends to inform the minister of things we think she should know" to counter bias propagated by MULTILIT and supporters of phonics.

Asked why he had to resort to a subliminal campaign instead of relying on evidence, Professor Cambourne first said: "You don't really believe we can influence the minister's subconscious?"

When the email was quoted back to him, Professor Cambourne said he and his colleagues had to rely on cognitive science's "framing theory". "It's a way of making ideas change based on new theories rather than just denying or trying to argue with people you can't argue with," Professor Cambourne said.

"When you rely on evidence, it's twisted. We can also present evidence but we never get a fair hearing. We rely on the cognitive science framing theory, to frame things the way you want the reader to understand them to be true - framing things that you're passionate about in ways that reveal your passion."

Professor Cambourne said the best example of the use of framing theory was former US president Richard Nixon, who was "framed a crook by newspapers ... It didn't matter how many times Richard Nixon said 'I'm not a crook' ... every time he denied it, he reinforced the connection between himself and being a crook," he said. "It didn't do him any good.

"It doesn't matter how many times we say all the evidence that's been presented about whole language. Because of the way whole language has been framed by people like MULTILIT, we don't get anywhere. We have to use the same kind of tactics that have been used to demean and demonise whole language."

Professor Cambourne then said that, if The Australian reported his comments: "I will deny I ever said this."

In the email, Professor Cambourne suggests using framing theory to link "Multi-link" (sic) to "failed theory, practice, programs and metaphors/analogies which can be linked to 'failure' in the minister's mind, at an almost subconscious level".

"A series of short email messages sent to the minister's office which makes these links but from different perspectives of reading and literacy is what I have in mind," he says.

As evidence that sounding out words is not the necessary first step in learning to read, Professor Cambourne cites evolution theory, deaf kids and the case of the deaf and blind Helen Keller, who learned to speak.

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