



 [Print this article](#) |  [Close this window](#)

The crazy politics of learning to read

Miranda Devine

March 21, 2009 - 12:00AM

Ideological promoters of the discredited "whole language", or osmosis method, of teaching children to read have been unmasked this week. The whole language lobby's devious and irrational opposition to evidence was exemplified in a bid to derail the State Government's trial of MULTILIT, a successful remedial reading program based on explicit phonics teaching.

Advertisement

In an email stream last week from Associate Professor Brian Cambourne, of Wollongong University, to literacy educators who subscribe to a university mailing list, unscrupulous strategies for winning the "reading wars" were laid bare. Cambourne, regarded as the "godfather" of whole language in Australia, urges his network to "flood Verity's [the Education Minister, Verity Firth's] office" with messages designed to denigrate MULTILIT and undermine the trial "at an almost subconscious level". He also suggests linking the program to "readicide", which he defines as "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools".

Confronted this week by *The Australian's* education writer, Justine Ferrari, Cambourne came up with this extraordinary quote: "When you rely on evidence, it's twisted ... We rely on the cognitive science framing theory, to frame things the way you want the reader to understand them to be true."

That sounds like a postmodern justification for lying.

To their great credit, it appears that both Firth and the federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard, are more interested in results than ideology. Gillard has tied literacy and numeracy funding to programs proven effective by evidence-based research. "This is about finding out what works," Gillard said in a press release last May. Similarly, Firth has said she is not interested in "internecine debates". She urged educators to "stop arguing about what we believe and start talking about what we know".

In other words, reading programs should be based on evidence of what works. Paying lip service to phonics under the rebadging of whole-word theory as "balanced" instruction isn't enough. Both Firth and Gillard are lawyers who understand the value of evidence. Interestingly, both are also members of the Labor Left, which will insulate them from the ideological ad hominem attacks usually employed by the leftists of the whole-language lobby, and may help to unhook the teaching of reading from its historic left-right baggage.

It has never made sense that the whole-word doctrine has been a hobbyhorse of left-wingers, when its results work

particularly to the detriment of the working class. Underprivileged children have suffered most from the marginalisation of phonics in schools, as their homes are generally not rich learning environments. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (of which I was a member) found as many as 30 per cent of year 5 students had literacy problems preventing them from "effectively participating" in further schooling. The National Curriculum Board reportedly puts the figure for struggling readers at between 20 per cent and 40 per cent.

How can anyone dismiss the miracles that go on every day in classrooms in Uniting Church centres in Ashfield and Redfern and in a Noel Pearson-led trial in Cape York, where the reading age of indigenous students is three to four years behind the national average.

You just have to see for yourself the joy in the faces of children as they learn the sounds of the alphabet and how to put them together in words, and they suddenly realise what the "black stuff" on the page means.

In the program trial in Coen, on Cape York, some children started learning so quickly a special accelerated program had to be devised for them. After two terms there were average gains of almost two years in reading accuracy.

How can anyone ignore Melbourne's Bellfield Primary, one of the most disadvantaged schools in Australia, which transformed itself by rejecting whole language theory and instituting a program of explicit phonics instruction. The results were stunning, with 91 per cent of grade 2 students reading with 100 per cent accuracy compared to the previous 31 per cent. How can anyone reject results of the seven-year study of underprivileged children in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, who were taught to read using an intensive form of phonics, and wound up more than three years ahead of their peers.

In his email stream, Cambourne gives a clue to the origins of his ideological blinkers when he dismisses the evidence on which the MULTILIT trial rests as a "neo-liberal" concern.

"I believe that the neoliberal views of 'evidence-based research' ... can be shown to be just as flawed as their economic theories". How the science of teaching children to read became an ideological battleground is a mystery to Professor Kevin Wheldall, the inspirational creator of MULTILIT. But there is no doubt it has been a tragedy, as the whole language movement has held sway for 40 years, with its Rousseauian notion that children learn to read naturally just by being exposed to books. When it became clear this was not the case for as many as two-thirds of children, whole-language proponents did not question their beliefs but turned to social justice for justification. Teacher education courses became infected with the revolutionary idea that only by eradicating poverty and underprivilege (by overthrowing the patriarchal, authoritarian, elitist capitalist system, of course) could students progress.

This has been as futile and damaging as the notion that we cannot prevent catastrophic bushfires unless we stop climate change. It is using the tragedy of illiterate children as the means to achieve an ideological end.

devinemiranda@hotmail.com

This story was found at:

<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/the-crazy-politics-of-learning-to-read-20090320-94dg.html>