

Why our kids still cannot read

JENNIFER BUCKINGHAM THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 10, 2012 12:00AM

THE damning findings of the NSW Auditor-General's report on indigenous literacy released this week should come as no surprise. The Centre for Independent Studies' Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes have been dissecting the enduring problem of poor English literacy among indigenous children for a number of years. They conclude that the problem is largely due to poor literacy teaching.

This is a sentiment echoed by reading researchers Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman, whose work with indigenous children has demonstrated that good instruction pushes through the language barrier.

While illiteracy is stark among indigenous children, they are not alone. According to NAPLAN, each year one in five children reach Year 3 with extremely basic levels of literacy. In socioeconomically disadvantaged families, it is one in three. Only a small minority of these children has a disability that prevents them learning to read. Most have just not been taught properly.

A few years ago it was tempting to believe that the reading wars between phonics and whole-language enthusiasts were over. Large-scale reviews of research in the US, Britain and Australia unambiguously declared that effective reading instruction must include teaching phonics, the connections between the discrete sounds in speech and the letters of the written alphabet. The report of the Australian inquiry, Teaching Reading, was released in 2005, with the finding that "direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read". In Britain the recommendation was blunt: "Phonics first and fast".

Reading scientists (as opposed to "literacy" academics) had finally been vindicated in their quest for mainstream acceptance of the empirical evidence on how children learn to read. Battle-scarred teachers who had insisted on using phonics were emboldened to speak up about their results. In 2009, the NSW government jumped on board, publishing three very good literacy teaching guides which explained the importance of high quality phonics instruction in the early years of school. Finally, the message was getting across: a truly balanced and comprehensive, high quality reading program epitomises the best of both worlds - a well-designed, rigorously implemented phonics program with a language-rich classroom environment with real books to develop vocabulary, comprehension and a love of reading. It's not either-or; both are necessary.

Yet here we are in 2012, and little has changed. Indeed, it is as if nothing ever happened. The Teaching Reading report has disappeared from the federal Education Department's website and the literacy teaching guides have been buried in the internal section of the NSW Education Department website, apparently casualties of changes in government.

The NSW state government has decided to reinvent the wheel, commissioning a new investigation into the best way to teach early literacy, as if this were a mystery. In the meantime, NSW public schools have been forced to adopt an untested kindergarten literacy program which seems, based on the small amount of information available, to directly contravene the research evidence on effective reading instruction.

To top it off, the new Australian curriculum fails to give phonics the emphasis it requires. The Foundation Year guidelines for language, literature and literacy comprise an ambitious list of 33 content descriptions. Of these, just four relate to alphabetic and phonic knowledge.

Students are expected to have a wide range of analytical text skills by the end of their first year at school, yet are only expected to know the sounds represented by "most" letters of the alphabet. It is difficult to see that as balanced.

The perennial struggle to provide all children with effective teaching in reading is becoming less like a war and more like a merry-go-round that stops only long enough to allow more children to get on.

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