

PHONICS & THE TEACHING OF READING: Justine Ferrari, “Schools still fail on reading”, *The Australian*, 30 April 2007.

“ A submission to the Senate inquiry into the academic standards of school education from three of Australia's leading literacy experts says most schools still fail to teach reading effectively, and accuses state and federal governments of being unwilling or unable to adopt evidence-based practice. The submission by Kevin Wheldall, Max Coltheart and Molly de Lemos, and obtained by *The Australian*, says there has been no serious attempt to implement recommendations made almost 18 months ago. ‘(There is) in fact disturbing evidence that some of the initiatives that have been undertaken subsequent to this report are directly contrary to (its) recommendations,’ it says.

‘What has been done has been paying little more than lip service to the report's recommendations’.

[The writers quoted then use this claim to push the case that phonics is not being taught and that this is the cause of reading failure in Australian schools.]

THE FACTS

Dates are crucial in this argument. In their letter to Brendan Nelson of March 2004 that was constructed as the cause of the Nelson Reading Inquiry, Wheldall, Coltheart and others argued that whole language – the cause of reading failure - had dominated teaching for “the past twenty years” – that is, back to the mid-1980s. Presumably, then, the generations educated in the 70s and before are the successful reading generations, protected from the ravages of whole language.

Yet alleged failures in reading have been blamed on the alleged neglect of phonics and on the alleged advocacy of "whole word" or "look-and-say" (often parodied as "look-and-guess") approaches since at least the 1970s in Australia and at least since the 1960s in the USA. Jeanne Chall's American classic *Learning to read: The great debate* was, after all, first published in 1967. Anyone following the commentary in *ACES Review* and in *The Australian* during the literacy crises of the 1970s will see *exactly the same* allegations being made then as are being made now in the same and/or similar organs. **And** oft-quoted research (by the phonics advocates – see next section) such as the ABS results of 1996 show that if we want to blame schools and teaching methods for the allegedly poor results of 1996, we have to blame the schooling and teaching methods used *prior to 1966*, because it was the cohort taught before 1966 that produced the lowest literacy scores (see below). Yet, as we have seen, Wheldall, Coltheart and others appear to argue that this was the age when phonics ruled.

Recently, the 2005 national benchmarking test results were used to yet again argue that whole language was rampant and that phonics was being neglected and there was wholesale reading failure as a result of whole language teaching methods. In fact, those very benchmark tests prove the opposite. The Year 7 benchmark results show that up until 2005 *every* target group improved in *every* test period from 2001. Thus, unless its opponents can prove that whole language *began* in 1998 *exactly* (the year the 2005 cohort started school) then whatever methods were being used from 1994 were clearly *working*. But, as we have seen, Wheldall, Coltheart and others have been arguing that whole language has been infecting us for at least 20 years. The *real* issue

for the 2005 results is why they ran against the previous upward trend. We need to know this, but we can be sure that it had *nothing* to do with teaching methods being used in Primary schools (or we await the evidence that whole language began exactly in 1998).

LITERACY LEVELS IN AUSTRALIA: One parent's view

In her submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee Inquiry Into the Standards of School Education Yvonne Meyer, who was a parent representative on the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, claims “the true level of literacy in Australia [is] frightening low, ...it continues to fall, and that the truth about literacy levels is kept secret from the general public.” She adds that “after more than 100 years of compulsory education, we now have for the first time, a generation of young people who complete school less educated than the generation before.” Ms Meyer attributes the blame for this dire state of affairs to “the discredited Whole Language/constructivist philosophy which places undue emphasis on gaining meaning from text.” She suggests that Phonics based instruction, the “direct, explicit and systematic instruction that has been proven by evidence-based research to be the most effective”, is the only way to counter “Australia's unacceptably high levels of illiteracy”.

As support for her submission, Ms Meyer argues that The Australian Bureau of Statistics study *Aspects of Literacy, Assessed Skill Level, Australia*, 1996 (Cat. no. 4228.0) showed that, “...50 percent of the Australian community have considerable difficulty reading, 35 percent can read but not possibly turn it into value or knowledge, leaving only 17 percent fully literate...”

THE FACTS

This 1996 ABS was a test administered to adults. It put reading results on a 5-point scale, and the results are actually almost a normal distribution bell curve, though with a long tail (more scores at Level 1 than level 5). Most people fall into Level 3, which represents “the ability to cope with a varied range of material found in daily life and at work. People at this level would not be able to use all printed material with a high level of proficiency, but they would demonstrate the ability to use longer, more complex printed material. They would be able to take conditional information into account, to make inferences, to compare and contrast information, and to extract numbers embedded in complex displays and perform more varied arithmetic operations”. What did the ABS see as the factors contributing to these results?

- Non-English Speaking Background - half of those on Level 1 were NESB
- age – the younger the respondents were, the higher was their score
- educational attainment – the longer respondents were at school, the higher was their score
- gender (this also related to age – older women scored worse than men / younger women scored better than men).

What do these results prove? They show whatever the standards in Australia were, contemporary schools were clearly contributing to *increasing* them, because:

- the *longer* one was at school, the more literate one was
- the more *recently* educated one was, the more literate one was.

If we want to blame schools and teaching methods for the results of 1996, we have to blame the schooling and teaching methods used prior to 1966, because it was the cohort taught before 1966 that produced the lowest literacy scores. Presumably, that was the age when phonics ruled.