

Dr Brendan Nelson  
Minister for Education, Science and Training  
Canberra

Dear Dr Nelson

## **READING INSTRUCTION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS**

As researchers, psychologists, linguists and educators who have studied the processes underlying the development of reading, and who are familiar with the scientific research literature relating to the acquisition of reading, we are writing to you to express our concerns with the way in which reading is typically being taught in Australian schools. We would like particularly to draw to your attention the continuing discrepancy between the model of reading development that forms the basis for most of our current school curricula and teaching methods, and the model of reading development that is emerging as a result of the research into reading that has been undertaken over the past twenty to thirty years.

Reading instruction in Australia is based largely on the whole language approach, which makes the assumption that learning to read is like learning to speak, and requires only exposure to a rich language environment without any specific teaching of the alphabetic system and letter sound relationships. However, the research on reading development has shown clearly that this is not the case, and that the ability to read is a complex learned skill which requires specific teaching.

In the United States there has been widespread public debate about different approaches to the teaching of reading, which has led to a series of government-funded reports designed to examine the scientific evidence relating to how children learn to read, and what strategies are most effective in teaching reading. All of these reports have come up with essentially the same conclusion; that mastery of the alphabetic code is essential to proficient reading, and that methods of instruction that teach this code directly are more effective than those that do not.

In Australia there has been little public debate about different approaches to the teaching of reading, and little change in teaching practices that over the past twenty years have been based predominantly on the beliefs and assumptions associated with whole language. The claim has been made that the dichotomy between different approaches to the teaching of reading is false, and that elements of both major approaches (whole language and phonics) are used to teach children how to read. The debate between the two approaches has therefore been dismissed as divisive and unproductive.

While there have been some initiatives in some states and in some individual schools to modify teaching methods to incorporate a greater emphasis on phonological awareness and phonics instruction, our view is that there is as yet little evidence of a major shift in the fundamental assumptions underlying the teaching of reading in Australia. The view that children learn to read by

being exposed to literacy activities from an early age persists, and systematic teaching of the alphabetic principle is therefore believed to be unnecessary, since most children will pick it up through exposure to reading. In cases where children do not learn to read, their failure is blamed on their parents or their background rather than on ineffective teaching methods, and calls are made for greater efforts to introduce reading to children at an earlier age, either through access to preschool programs or by providing their parents with free books to read to their children at home. Neither of these solutions addresses the fundamental problem that poor reading skills are in most cases associated with ineffective teaching practices, and that the children who are most disadvantaged by ineffective teaching are those from less advantaged backgrounds whose parents are unable to make up for the deficiencies of the school by teaching their children how to read.

One inevitable consequence of ineffective teaching is the need for remedial programs to assist children who are failing. In Australia and New Zealand the widespread adoption of whole language approaches to the teaching of reading was followed by the introduction of Reading Recovery, an expensive one-to-one remedial program designed to assist children who are falling behind in reading. In some Australian states, up to 20 per cent of children participate in Reading Recovery, despite the lack of any clear evidence as to the long-term benefits of this program. Effective initial teaching of reading would substantially reduce the need for costly remedial programs for failing students.

We believe that the time has come for a review of the approaches to reading instruction adopted in our schools, and a critical examination of the assumptions underlying these approaches.

Given the emphasis that is now being placed on evidence-based policy, we ask that consideration be given to setting up an independent review to examine the research evidence relating to the teaching of reading, and the extent to which current practices are based on this evidence. In view of the entrenched positions of many people within the education establishment, we believe that such a review should seek advice from a wide range of people including those with knowledge and expertise in the fields of language development, cognitive science and reading research.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Vicki Anderson  
Professor/Director  
Dept. Psychology  
Royal Children's Hospital/  
University of Melbourne

Associate Professor Judy Bowey  
Reader  
School of Psychology  
University of Queensland

Dr Lesley Bretherton  
Deputy Director and Clinical Co-ordinator  
Department of Psychology  
Royal Children's Hospital  
Parkville, Victoria, Australia, 3052

Ruth Brunsdon  
Clinical Neuropsychologist  
Rehabilitation Development and Developmental Cognitive Neuropsychology  
Research Unit  
The Children's Hospital at Westmead

Dr Anne Castles  
Senior Lecturer  
Department of Psychology  
University of Melbourne

Professor Max Coltheart DSc FASSA FAA FBA  
ARC Federation Fellow and Scientific Director  
Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science  
Macquarie University, Sydney

Associate Professor Veronika Coltheart  
Psychology Department and Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science  
Macquarie University, Sydney

Dr Linda Cupples  
Director, Speech Hearing and Language Research Centre  
Department of Linguistics  
Macquarie University

Dr Marion M. de Lemos  
Honorary Fellow  
Australian Council for Educational Research

Dr. Ruth Fielding-Barnsley  
Lecturer / Learning Support  
School of Learning and Professional Studies  
Queensland University of Technology

Dr Janet Fletcher  
Director, Child Study Centre  
School of Psychology  
The University of Western Australia

Dr Steve Heath  
Child Study Centre  
School of Psychology  
The University of Western Australia

Dr John Hogben  
Senior Lecturer  
Child Study Centre  
School of Psychology  
The University of Western Australia

Dr Teresa Iacono  
Senior Research Fellow  
Centre for Developmental Disability Health Victoria  
Monash University

Dr Pamela Joy  
Senior Clinical Neuropsychologist, Child Development Unit  
Head, Developmental Cognitive Neuropsychology Research Unit  
The Children's Hospital at Westmead

Dr Genevieve McArthur  
NHMRC Howard Florey Centenary Fellow  
Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science  
Macquarie University

Professor Philip Newall  
Audiology Section  
Speech, Hearing and Language Research Centre  
Macquarie University

Dr Lyndsey Nickels,  
QEII Research Fellow,  
Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science (MACCS),  
Macquarie University, Sydney

Dr Karen Smith-Lock  
Research Fellow  
Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science (MACCS)  
Macquarie University

Dr Geoffrey W. Stuart  
Senior Fellow  
Department of Psychology  
University of Melbourne

Professor Kevin Wheldall,  
Director, Macquarie University Special Education Centre  
Macquarie University  
Sydney