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Education

How back to basics reading can change young lives



Faye Berryman, of Fitzroy Community School in Melbourne, with students Esther Howden, 6, and Cooper Gillies, 7. Picture: David Geraghty.

REBECCA URBAN THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 11, 2017

It has been 40 years since educator Faye Berryman was unwittingly embroiled in a "political bunfight" over how children should be taught to read.

A proponent of the phonics approach to literacy, which had fallen out of favour, the co-founder of the Fitzroy Community School in Melbourne was forced to develop her own teaching resources after struggling to find simple books designed for children to read aloud.

Shortly after publishing the Fitzroy Readers, which includes titles such as A Fat Cat, A Big Pig and The Pet Hen, the flak started.

"Someone said to me once that phonics was right-wing. That is how ridiculous it had become; how could teaching children how to read and write be right-wing? Madness," she recalls.

So with more evidence now pointing to the effectiveness of the phonics approach - which involves teaching children to decipher words by sounding them out - Ms Berryman is finally feeling vindicated.

The school principal has thrown her support behind the Turnbull government's proposed phonics screening check for Year 1 students, on the condition that children have also been exposed to phonics. "Otherwise what are we screening them for?"

State and territory education ministers met on Friday to hear a pitch on the plan, which has been bolstered by news last week that England, having introduced its own phonics check in 2012, reported the best literacy results in a generation.

Australia's own global ranking has also improved, from 27 to 21, however almost one in five Year 4 students fail to read at what is considered a proficient level. The situation is even worse for indigenous children, with 43 per cent falling below an agreed minimum standard for their age.

Not all states are supportive of the federal plan, which would involve a teacher spending five to 10 minutes one-on-one with a student, to deliver an oral test. The Queensland Labor government outright rejected it and South Australia, also Labor, has pointed to its own phonics screening program trial under way. NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes last week came out in support of the federal screening program. The Education Council meeting was held amid growing animosity between Education Minister Simon Birmingham and his state counterparts over the schools' funding overhaul, known as Gonski 2.0.

South Australia in particular feels short-changed and last month refused to sign an interim funding agreement. The state's education minister Susan Close backed down a week later, however, saying although the new deal would see \$210 million stripped out of the state's public education system over the next two years, schools would close otherwise.

The Australian Education Union has been strongly against the proposed phonics screening program, arguing that teachers already assessed their students and knew what they needed.

Ahead of Friday's meeting, Senator Birmingham urged his state counterparts to be open-minded about the "evidence base supporting literacy and numeracy checks".

Ms Berryman believes every child can learn to read, and relatively quickly, if taught phonics. The Fitzroy method involves teaching children the 26 sounds of the alphabet, about 60 digraphs (the sounds two consonants make when combined, such as "ch" and "th") and 50 high-frequency words, which the school has dubbed "special" words. Before Ms Berryman started Fitzroy Community School in the mid-1970s, she was a secondary teacher with a background in philosophy, specialising in logic and linguistics.

The independent primary school has a unique philosophy of valuing happiness and viability among students ahead of academics. Despite this, it has topped the state in Year 5 reading and spelling in the NAPLAN tests.

The "reading wars" have been brewing since at least the 1950s and are typically portrayed as an academic debate over phonics versus the whole language approach, which encourages the development of higher order skills. However, advocates of phonics insist it's a false dichotomy, as phonics is but one essential part of a high-quality reading program.

Ms Berryman says she understands why alternative ways of teaching literacy were explored, but she believes the premise behind the whole language approach - that humans naturally learn language and if immersed in sounds, words and books, would also learn to read - was false.

"It failed to understand that throughout history only the elite learned to read and write," she says. "Sure, we learn naturally to speak, but we have to be taught to read and write."