

THE CONVERSATION

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My first ideology: teaching reading falls victim to the culture wars

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When teaching students how to read, teachers are ignoring the best, scientifically-proven approaches according to a report out this week from libertarian research institute the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS).

Why? It's all because of entrenched ideology and bias. And this, in turn, is leading to greater levels of illiteracy.



Does poor literacy come down to a matter of teaching bias?
Reading image from www.shutterstock.com

An accompanying opinion piece by one of the report's authors claimed this was in part because teacher-training programs were "weighted towards theories of literacy, especially whole-language philosophies, rather than proven, effective practice".

This debate around the best way to teach reading is nothing new; in fact, it's been going on in the media for decades. And often, it creates a false dichotomy between the two main approaches – "whole language" and "phonics".

But what do we really know about these different methods?

Is there a literacy crisis?

Despite the ongoing claims of a literacy crisis in Australia, we continue to perform well on international comparisons and are not becoming less literate as proponents of back-to-the-basics teaching, as the new education minister Christopher Pyne might argue.

Put simply, there is no literacy crisis.

The 2013 NAPLAN Summary Report shows that 95.3% of Year 3 students and 96.2% of Year 5 students are reading at or above the national minimum standard. These figures have improved on the 2012 NAPLAN results, where 93.6% of Year 3 students and 91.6% of Year 5 students were reading at or above the national minimum standard.

On the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Australia ranked well-above the OECD average for reading.

These results come at the same time as we invested well below the OECD average on education as a percentage of GDP, in particular funding for public schools and pre-primary education.

While the CIS essay claims that Australian literacy is “languishing” based on the results of the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), it does not consider the test is designed to compare trends and progress across five year cycles. The 2011 PIRLS was the first one Australia participated in, so there were no comparative data from the 2006 PIRLS to measure against.

The CIS essay also claims that the past 30 years have been dominated by whole language ideologies, and that these are to blame for a poor performance in literacy. Yet, if literacy levels have remained relatively stable over the past decade of international comparisons, how can this argument be true?

There is no doubt that we can continue to improve the literacy levels of all Australians. The continuing low Indigenous literacy levels, and reducing the gap between students from low to high socioeconomic backgrounds should clearly be priorities.

But to say we’re in a crisis, when we’re not, is far from helpful.

Whole language, phonics or a balanced approach?

The arguments in this debate rest on setting up two methods of teaching in opposition – the whole language approach vs phonics.

Whole language favours an experiential, social-based approach to reading that provides children with opportunities to draw on the expertise of teachers and other readers in learning how to crack the code of reading. It’s partly modelled on learning how to speak where children receive no systematic, explicit instruction; rather, they acquire their first language through immersion in social contexts.

Phonics deals more explicitly with understanding relationships between sounds and written language, including the alphabet and words. It is often assumed that there is one phonics approach, when in reality there are many. For example, what is commonly referred to as “systematic explicit phonics instruction” is often a combination of elements from various approaches to the teaching of phonics, which include synthetic, analytic, analogy-based, onset-rime, and spelling-based phonics approaches. You can read more about these approaches [here](#).

The USA National Reading Panel gave the following cautions regarding the prioritisation of phonics in the teaching of reading:

It is important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program.... Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached.

Effective literacy instruction takes a balanced, integrated approach to the teaching of reading and writing. Teachers make use of multiple and varied approaches that depend on the individual and collective learning needs of the children in their care.

A one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction, such as those provided in commercially available phonics programs like **Jolly Phonics**, do not cater to the diversity of student learning requirements in the reading classroom.

Phonics works best when it is done purposefully, within real reading contexts where making meaning is just as important as code-breaking. We need a **balanced** reading approach that **combines** explicit phonics instruction with modelled, guided, shared and independent reading activities using high-quality literature.

What makes for good reading research?

The CIS makes the further claim that “research funding in Australia should prioritise scientifically valid, replicable and reliable studies”. But this relies on an ideological assumption that only quantitative education research, particularly large scale statistical work, is worthwhile.

For education research, scientific methods are useful, but are **limited** by their experimental nature to produce one particular kind of evidence; that is, comparable and measurable data that produce findings that can be generalised. There is a danger in defining quality education research by **narrow scientism**, where “policy-led” research becomes the norm.

Numerous **theories and approaches** draw on a rich mixture of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It is important to go beyond simplistic binaries of research into the teaching of reading as being good or bad, scientific or not, or ideologically-motivated.

There is a wide body of quantitative and qualitative **literacy research** conducted over the past couple of decades that addresses the role of **new literacies** and **multiliteracies** in the **classroom**. These, and countless other, literacy studies have been well-documented in high-quality peer-reviewed journals, monographs and edited publications.

Of course, further research is needed, of all different methods and sizes, into the ways that young people learn to read. But we also need to acknowledge that learning to read, like learning to speak, is a complex and messy business.