

Sentences of guilt for parents



MIRANDA
DEVINE

The children's author Paul Jennings was on Radio National this week, declaring again how easy and natural it is for children to learn to read by osmosis. All that is needed, it seems, is for their parents to read them bedtime stories before they start school.

It is no coincidence that megabucks children's author Jennings has joined megabucks children's author Mem Fox in this misguided mission to offload responsibility from schools to already guilt-ridden parents.

Do you think they could have become megabucks children's authors without the enthusiastic endorsement of the education establishment? No way. They would be consigned to the dust-covered corner of the school library.

Jennings is an advocate of the discredited "whole language" theory of reading, which holds that reading, like talking, comes naturally to children, who will absorb the meanings of words if exposed to enough books.

But no matter how enthusiastic and diligent parents are with bedtime stories, at least one quarter of children will just not learn by osmosis - regardless of their intelligence, says a Macquarie University Reading researcher, Kevin Wheldall.

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will just not learn by osmosis – regardless of their intelligence, says a Macquarie University Reading researcher, Kevin Wheldall.

They need direct instruction in phonics – learning the connection between letters and sounds – a last resort strategy, Jennings says. And what about those children without diligent parents – are they to suffer the double punishment of illiteracy?

The research over two decades is conclusive; that phonics is crucial and “whole word” methods don’t work for a large proportion of children.

But outsourcing the responsibility for teaching reading is a great tactic, because guilt finds fertile ground with middle-class parents and it absolves the school system of responsibility for disadvantaged children who emerge from 13 years of education barely able to write their own name.

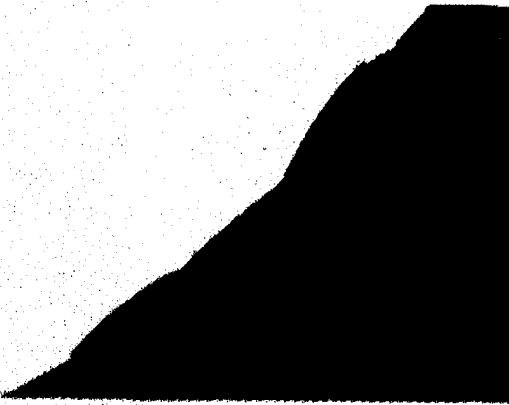
With their failure obvious, progressive educationists have moved the goal posts with breathtaking chutzpah – no longer is it the province of schools to teach reading, but of parents – and therefore the failure is theirs alone, not the schools and their flawed ideology.

Education has always been the way smart but disadvantaged children pulled themselves and their descendants out of the underclass. Now they are condemned to remain there, illiterate and under-utilised, while the literate elite atrophies.

In the name of social justice, today’s education progressives have entrenched a class system more rigid and ruthless than any devised by the British aristocracy – the haves and the have-nots, divided by the ability to read and write.

Somewhere along the line, the way you teach children to read became inextricably entwined with a type of left-wing ideology, which permeates the education industry.

The whole-language osmosis method became the touchstone of egalitarian,



progressive, “student-directed” learning, in which the teacher is a mere facilitator.

Whether it works or not doesn’t matter if it is your goal not to teach children to read but to effect social change, as advocated by the *International Journal Of Progressive Education*, which last year devoted all of its June issue to “the multilayered dimensions of social justice activism involved in whole language teaching”.

“We strive to help our pre-service teachers understand that their roles as teachers include a political dimension,” wrote two authors.

While most individual teachers just get on with the business of teaching, the grip of progressive educationists is entrenched in teacher training.

But they may have met their match. Now, in a grassroots movement of students to tackle the left-wing bias in education, the Young Liberals have launched a dob-in your-leftie-teacher campaign. They say “bias at our high schools and university campuses has reached epidemic proportions” and they want students to video biased teachers on their mobile phones so they can construct an internet shame file.

The Young Liberals federal president, Noel McCoy, says students have been complaining to the Young Liberals about being subjected to teachers and lecturers using propaganda because the students have nowhere else to go.



One student claimed a lecturer at the University of Western Sydney had told an industrial relations class that if anyone wrote a paper in favour of the Howard government's Work Choices policy they would automatically be marked down.

A former Sydney University education student, Beccy Merzi, complained to McCoy about ideological bias in her courses. In a first-year subject, Human Development and Education, she wrote in her complaint, "the lecturer was openly left-wing and stated that ... 'the will of the collective is more important than the freedom of the individual'."

In second year, in Educational Psychology, she was taught "constructivist" learning methods, the essence of whole language, in which children "construct their own knowledge".

"The worst of the subjects (and the catalyst for me transferring to something much more sane) was a subject called Social Perspectives on Education [which] may as well have been called Socialist Perspectives on Education because the lecturers spent more time bashing John Howard and the Liberal Party than they did actually teaching anything useful."

In that course she was told that "when educating indigenous children in isolated areas one should teach them in Aboriginal English, rather than in standard English because it was racist to do otherwise".

The sole textbook for that subject, *Education, Change And Society*, was studded with concerns about "the role of the school in the construction of gender" and criticisms of the "2005 industrial relations reforms".

It referred to the "continuing importance" of the "legacy of the Marxist idea of class". And it claimed there was a "hidden curriculum [which] is a powerful means by which education and schooling maintain the status quo in our society with all its inequality and social injustice. The function of schools [is] the supply of suitably trained and stratified power for the capitalist workforce".

McCoy is the son of a teacher, with two teacher sisters, so he can hardly be described as a teacher-basher. But he says he wants to "encourage a tolerant education system where a diversity of opinions is valued and nurtured."

"School syllabuses are force-feeding students on 'self-esteem' and 'social justice' instead of teaching them how to read, write and add up."

It is not that conservatives fear the power of the bad ideas pushed by educators. Thinking people eventually figure out the truth for themselves. The problem comes when the bad ideas actually stop children from being taught to read and write - and therefore to think.

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