

Many of us would believe that we now have a scientific research base that has allowed the development of interventions that can teach most children to read. Effective strategies exist for teaching phonemic awareness, phonics skills, decoding and a range of reading comprehension skills. Surely it is not unreasonable to expect that schools would use these research-based interventions to teach children to read and to provide appropriate individualised assistance to those children who need it. However it seems that Dr Brendan Nelson, the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training believes that schools do not and should not meet this expectation. His announcement in May that parents of students who are making poor reading progress will be provided with a \$700 voucher for reading tuition seems to return the responsibility for deciding on appropriate remedial intervention to parents.

In his press release of 19th May, Dr Nelson suggests that this tuition could be provided by “experienced tutors, including school teachers” and that the tuition will be provided outside school hours. It is hard to disagree with Dr Nelson’s position that reading skills are foundational skills, but if teachers have not been provided with the necessary skills and resources to teach reading in schools, it is unclear how they will accomplish this task outside schools. Providing individualised reading instruction to students experiencing difficulty in learning to read is one of the roles undertaken by special educators. Research tells us that students who have difficulty learning to read are likely to need explicit and expertly sequenced instruction in phonemic awareness, decoding, word meanings and comprehension strategies as well as good models of oral language and the chance to listen to and read a range of texts. It would be more appropriate to provide for the employment of a sufficient number of skilled educators within schools to support

regular teachers and to work with students than to delegate this task to private tutors selected by parents.

A call to the information line (on 28th May) to enquire about the standards and qualifications needed to become a tutor in the scheme revealed that these have yet to be established, and that the brokers will probably be the people to employ tutors. This suggests that the crux of the whole scheme, ensuring that children receive appropriate instruction has not yet been a major consideration. Perhaps those with an interest in special education should be more vocal in their calls for the provision of effective, research based interventions to students with reading difficulties and for appropriate pre and in-service education to equip teachers with the skills to deliver such instruction.

This issue of AJSE contains two articles. The first, which has some relevance to the reading issue and to teacher professional development in all areas, describes the professional reading habits of teachers. This paper, by Neale Rudland and Coral Kemp received the Lee Mills Award from the NSW Branch of AASE for an original paper by an individual undertaking postgraduate study in special education. The paper does not inspire confidence in the likelihood of teachers reading to increase their professional skills in the teaching of reading, but does offer some suggestions about ways to encourage teachers to read the professional and research literature. The other paper, by John West, Stephen Houghton, Myra Taylor and Phua Kia Ling is a qualitative study of secondary students with vision impairments in Singapore who have moved from a relatively protected primary school environment into regular secondary schools. It makes the point, yet again, that inclusion does not just happen when students are physically present in a school, it requires the provision of appropriate supports.

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