

# Spalding in Australia

## Editor's Note:

*In the last issue of Spalding News, Michael Byrne of Spalding Australia wrote about a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) taking place in Australia.*

*The catalyst for the Inquiry was an open letter to the Federal Minister of Education, Science and Training from leading academics expressing concern about literacy education in Australia and asking for "an independent review to examine the research-based evidence relating to the teaching of reading."*

*The Minister issued a call for submissions from all interested parties in late 2004. The submissions, all 446 of them, are published on the Internet, Spalding Australia's excellent contribution among them.*

*<[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school\\_education/policy\\_initiatives\\_reviews/key\\_issues/literacy\\_numeracy/national\\_inquiry/submissions.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/key_issues/literacy_numeracy/national_inquiry/submissions.htm)>*

*The following is an interview conducted by Michael Byrne with the only parent member of the Committee, Yvonne Meyer.*

*Her story will be familiar to many as it is to this writer who, over 30 years ago, encountered the same problem, investigated the research, and joined others who understood the need to change the prevailing method of teaching reading.*

*It has been a long battle, and it is not won, yet, as is evident by this interview.*

*We salute Yvonne Meyer and all who persevere in the struggle for research-based instruction.*

**Michael Byrne:** "Prior to the NITL did you have an involvement in literacy education?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "I have no formal qualifications or previous involvement in education. I'm just a stay-at-home mum with a son who went through six years of formal schooling without being taught how to read, and without anyone noticing he couldn't read.

Every year, I told his teachers that I thought he had a problem, and every teacher told me he was fine. It was only when he told me that the way he read a word was to have someone tell him what it was first and then he would remember it, that I worked out what was going on. None of his teachers understood that memorising the landscape of a word and guessing from context is not reading. I started reading the Reports of Government Inquiries which gave me the information I needed to get the right sort of help for him."

**Michael Byrne:** "Can you tell us how you came to be invited to join the NITL?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "My anger towards the Education system was not because my son had slipped through the cracks, but because the information that should have prevented my son from slipping through the cracks has been well known for decades.

No one was responsible for what had happened to my son. It was not the teachers' fault – they were doing their jobs the way they had been trained. It was not the Education Bureaucracy's fault – they are advised by academics. It's not the academics' fault – no two of them can agree on



any one thing. It made me so angry that countless children go to school every day and do everything that is asked of them, yet the adults who are supposed to put the best interests of children first, let them down and are not held accountable.

I started writing letters to politicians, education bureaucrats and academics and teacher union leaders. Most of my letters were ignored. When Minister of Education Dr. Brendan Nelson announced the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, I wrote to him reminding him of my previous letter and asking to be put on the NITL Committee."

**Michael Byrne:** "Can you give us an idea of the amount of material that you had to review as a panel member?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "I didn't have to read any. The way the process works is that so long as an arbitrary number of boxes are ticked, the Committee has fulfilled its requirement. However, I chose to read extensively.

I read all the submissions to NITL (over 400), and the submissions to the on-going Inquiry into the Education of Teachers (over 100). I had already read the Reports of Australian Inquiries going back ten years. I read extensively from the material published by the US National Reading



Yvonne Meyer

Panel, the UK Teaching Children to Read Inquiry and the current UK Rose Report, and the New Zealand Literacy Taskforce. I read extensively from the work of Reid Lyon, Robert Sweet, Marilyn Jager Adams and Louisa Moats in the USA, Debbie Hepplewhite, Prof. Diane McGuinness, Prof. Rhona Johnston and Melanie Phillips in the UK, Tom Nicholson and Bill Tunmer in New Zealand. I found the work being done in Australia by Ruth Fielding-Barnesley, Kerry Hempenstall, Kevin Wheldall, Max Coltheart and Molly de Lemos very useful.

I read the work of Ken Goodman, Frank Smith, Dame Marie Clay and the TAWL (Teachers advocating Whole Language) Archives. I read the Australian State Education Curricula, the Curricula as it related to children's initial reading from California, Texas and the UK."

**Michael Byrne:** "Have your views and attitudes towards the teaching of literacy shifted as a result of the NITL experience?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "Nothing I've read and no one I've spoken to has convinced me that my 'light bulb' moment, when I realised that if children can't read an unfamiliar word, they can't read, was wrong.

I now know a lot more and drive my girlfriends to distraction because it's all I can talk about. It doesn't bother my husband at all. He just walks away and shuts

the door when I start talking about education."

**Michael Byrne:** "The NITL's findings are still to be made public, however, from a personal perspective do you feel that it will prove to be a watershed for the teaching of literacy in Australia in the same way that the National Reading Panel report in the USA has profoundly effected that country?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "I hope so. Sadly, there are so many individuals in this and other countries who will not change the way they do things. Some individuals believe in the philosophy of Whole Language with religious fervour and no amount of scientific evidence based on research is going to convince them otherwise. Many individuals go to work and do exactly the same thing every day and never question whether there is a better way.

The best chance our kids have of being taught to read by the most effective method is when enough parents are sufficiently educated in this issue to start asking the right sort of questions at their child's school. The questions that parents need to ask are:

'Have the teachers at this school been trained to teach systematic phonics?'

'Does the school have a written Whole School Literacy Plan and details of the program used to teach initial reading and writing, including the testing and reporting requirements?'

'Ask to see it all. If they don't have it, ask why not.'

'Will my child be tested on the subset skills (read aloud, writing from dictation and spelling) that need to be mastered to become a skilled reader?'"

**Michael Byrne:** "Turning to Spalding, how did you become aware of the methodology?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "I found a Spalding submission to a previous inquiry into the education of boys. Everything I read reflected my experience of trying to help my son."

**Michael Byrne:** "Even beyond Whole Language proponents, Spalding is perceived by some in the education community as "old-fashioned" and "kill by drill" – do you think this is fair?"

**Yvonne Meyer:** "A bad teacher can make a trip to Disneyland boring and kill off a child's interest. An ineffective program makes a bad teacher worse, and makes a good teacher exhausted and demoralised, which is why so many good teachers leave the profession. An effective program allows a good teacher to be a great teacher, and makes a bad teacher better.

Those who continue to advocate the philosophy of Whole Language always use emotionally charged phrases like boring and drill and kill. If Whole Language was an effective philosophy they would have the evidence-based research to prove it and would not have to resort to semantics. When anyone tells me that phonics is boring, I reply that it is not nearly as boring as illiteracy. "

*The findings of the panel are to be released in late 2005.*

