

Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Workplace Relations.

Inquiry into the Education of Boys

by

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1. Personal Experiences.

Part one of this submission details the experiences our family has had with the education of our children, all boys, in the public school system of N.S.W.

My husband and I have three sons . The eldest two are currently attending our local state high school. They are in Years 9 and 7, aged 15 and 13, respectively and the youngest, aged 10, is in Year 5 at the local Public School.

We had reasonable expectations when our boys began school. They were all keen to begin school and we felt that they had been adequately prepared. Books, magazines and newspapers have always figured prominently in our home and each of our sons has received a book regularly for birthday and Christmas. They were read quality literature from an early age. All of our sons have a good general knowledge resulting from home discussions, holidays and guided T.V. They are encouraged to watch documentaries and nature programs and their viewing time is restricted, especially during the school term. Each boy also attended the local pre-school.

As parents we both value education. My husband is a farmer and is constantly reading and keeping up to date with agricultural and environmental issues and has completed a number of short courses since attaining his leaving certificate. I completed a four year teacher training course majoring in Music and English and taught both subjects for nine years at our local high school until our first son was born. Since then, I have worked part time as a private music teacher and more recently as a literacy tutor. During this time I have, by necessity, completed two specialist literacy courses with the Spalding Education Foundation. My husband and myself keep up to date with developments and recent research in our respective interest areas via the internet, through membership of various organisations and subscription to related publications.

Our concern with the education of our sons is such that we have joined the parent associations of both the primary and high schools. My husband has been President of both the P & C and School Council at the Public School, while I am currently President of the High School P & C and also a member of the School Council. Despite this level of involvement with each school we are extremely disappointed with the literacy education our sons have received so far within the public education system.

Our eldest son commenced school in 1991, aged 5 1/2, to allow for the later maturation of boys. Since then, I have attended many information and staff development days held at both the public schools, especially those that related to literacy. At home we both make sure all three boys complete their homework and try to read to them on a regular basis as well as listen to them read aloud. We have constantly supported and assisted them in all their endeavours.

The school years should have been a breeze for our family, instead, the last nine years have been an educational nightmare!

When our boys began school I had no understanding of the structure of the English language or how to teach reading or writing, only some knowledge of the history of the language through my remembrances of high school study. My tertiary English training was based on the study of dubious 20th c. texts, with very little attention paid to the content of lessons, although I did learn to plan lessons very well. Even though it was my second teaching subject, in hindsight, I had little preparation for the teaching I was expected to do. So, when our eldest son was slow in developing reading skills my husband and I were not unduly concerned as we had no understanding of what was required in learning to read. His teachers at parent -teacher interviews indicated that his headway was slow, however, their advice was “ Don’t worry he’ll improve as he gets older.” They were the experts, we thought, so we just kept following their advice while each year he was placed in a different remedial group with an assortment of teachers (10 in all by the time he’d finished primary school).

When our second son began school in 1993 we continued to support him and followed school advice. He had some difficulty settling into kindergarten, however, had adjusted by the end of the year. His teacher was the same in both Kindergarten and Year 1. Mid year, at the parent-teacher interview in 1994 she expressed concern at his lack of progress. Unlike our eldest son who had gained some literacy skills between Kindergarten and Year 1, he had made no progress. At this time he had been included in small literacy based groups which had no impact. The class teacher recommended that he be assessed by the school counsellor. The counsellor’s report indicated that he had significant problems, amongst which were : a short attention span and difficulty concentrating; not understanding the concepts of letter, word and sentence; difficulty hearing sounds in words and poor aural memory .She advised that he see an occupational therapist , a developmental optometrist and a paediatrician. He had programs to follow from both the

optometrist and the occupational therapist and was assessed for ADHD by the paediatrician and subsequently prescribed Ritalin. In addition he had

his hearing tested , and was tested by a speech pathologist. A teacher's aide at the school, who had been working with our son on one remedial program suggested that he may have a form of epilepsy as his attention seemed to disappear. The end result was that his brain was scanned, the results of which were normal. Can you imagine what his self esteem was like after this merry-go-round and how stressed his parents were?

None of the afore-mentioned services are available in our country town so we have 40 minutes (one way) travelling time to access these specialists. This period was very trying for our whole family. The visits did not yield any useful advice as to how to improve his literacy skills. Eighteen months later, in early 1996, he was still not reading. Alarm bells were really ringing now and my husband and I began to question what we were being told , and we started to gather information on ADHD and learning, and we began to think of approaching organisations such as Kumon for assistance.

By the time our second son had begun Year 3 in 1996 we were desperate. He had been in all the school's remedial programs and had made no progress. In fact by the time he had turned 9 he still couldn't read one sentence unaided. He certainly could not spell. Now, I know that at that time he had no understanding, (nor did we) of the alphabetical principle that our language is based on. Our eldest son was still struggling but making small gains. Our youngest son had reached Year 1 and he was having similar problems to our eldest boy.

Early in 1996 we were fortunate to hear an interview on ABC Radio with Mary Ruth Reed of the Sydney Literacy Centre at Edgecliff. She was speaking about "The Writing Road to Reading" known as the Spalding Method. Her words gave us hope for the future. I contacted the Centre for further information which they duly sent. *I knew that we had found the answer.*

At about the same time my sister, a special school principal in Sydney referred ,on our behalf, our second son to the Dalwood Assessment Centre in Queenscliff, Sydney. I must point out that our local school did not at any time mention the existence of the centre. We were able to get an appointment for July, 1997.

I completed the 45 hour Spalding 1 training course in Sydney in July 1996. It is extremely thorough and very informative , as well as being quite demanding. **I learnt more about teaching and the English language than I had ever done at school or during teacher training.** All the missing links were provided by the Romalda Spalding and the Spalding Foundation.

The third school term resumed two weeks after I returned from completing the course. I rather naively thought the Public School would at least be curious about my training. I spoke to the Principal about the method but she was not interested in the content at all. When I raised concerns about our youngest son she immediately got on the defensive. "The majority of children learn to read by our methods" was her comment. At that meeting I arranged to teach our middle son at home using the Spalding Method and he would attend school for the rest of the day. Again, she wasn't very happy about this either for she wanted me to teach him on the school premises so that if he experienced success he would associate it with the school. I think by that time he'd already realised he had failed at school.

Initially his progress was slow. His mind set had to change and his attention difficulties tested my patience, as well, I realised how difficult learning was for him. It took him some time to realise that the English language is really only a code for sounds that are used to make up words.

In the meantime I was also tutoring the other two boys - the change in them was remarkable. Our youngest went from a stumbling to fluent reader in six weeks, his spelling and handwriting also dramatically improved. His class teacher was so impressed that she informed the school principal, whose comment was "He would have done that anyway."

Our eldest son, by then in Year 5, turned to me one night at about the same time and said "*I know what the words say now!*"

The progress of our middle son was slower as, I now know, he had all the classic signs of dyslexia, which, unfortunately our school staff seemed to have little understanding, except for the school counsellor at the time. After following the Spalding program for the rest of that year we noticed some minor gains. Many adjustments had to be made in our family at the time and the first six months were really only getting ourselves organised and used to working with one another on a formal basis.

So we started again at the beginning of 1997 after the summer holidays, which meant he had forgotten everything from the previous year. (We all really needed the break, as that year had been very taxing, as well this time was busy on the farm.) Our son very slowly began to improve and become more confident.

In July, my husband and I accompanied him to the Dalwood Assessment Centre. After another barrage of tests and medical appointments we were informed by the centre director, who was (and still is) our case manager, that on their assessment the outlook was poor. He was one of the worst cases they had seen. We made a follow up appointment for February, 1998, then went home to continue Spalding based instruction at home.

During the next few months our son slowly but surely made gains - the night he stood in front of me and read a sentence on his own is ingrained in my memory. *That was the beginning of a miracle.* His confidence continued to grow daily and by the next visit to Queenscliff he was reading. Our case manager was overwhelmed by his improvement. She wrote in his report:

“...although he is still achieving well below his grade level , he has made impressive progress in all aspects of his reading skills since his last assessment...similar improvements were found in his spelling skills...improvements were noted in both his general level of achievement and in his strategic approach to literacy based tasks. The instruction he has been receiving has clearly been most appropriate to his needs and all involved in his instruction deserve much credit.”

Since then we have visited Queenscliff for two more assessments at the Dalwood Centre. The following table shows some of his test results using the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests:

Woodcock Reading Mastery tests	August 1997	February 1998	October 1998
Passage Comprehension	7.1 yr s	7.10 yrs	9.7 yrs
Word Attack	7.0 yrs	8.10 yrs	12.10yrs
Word Identification	7.2 yrs	8.0 yrs	9.4 yrs
Spelling	6.10 yrs	7.10 yrs	8.3 yrs

Our son had just turned 10 in 1997, so his gains were rather marked. His Basic Skills Test results gained two bands between Years 3 and 5.

Now, four years later, the eldest two boys are at high school and the youngest is in Year 5. All boys can read, the younger two more fluently than their elder brother, which indicates the earlier that appropriate instruction is given the more successful it is. It may seem strange but I have to thank the Public School for not teaching my middle son to read, as he is now a competent reader. He still has some problems with comprehension and memory , but we are working on that.As he can now decode well we will be able to continue with the Spalding strategies for teaching mental comprehension. It will always be an ongoing battle to catch up the 3 & 1\2 years that he missed with the school system.

The attitude shown by our local schools, especially the public school, to our boys obvious improvement has left my husband and I dumbfounded, but in hindsight it was probably predictable. Even though I am a qualified teacher I'm still only classed as a parent and any parents will tell you that many teachers will not take you seriously. Parents are only good for fundraising.

At any hint of criticism most schools listen ,sometimes politely, and then get on the defensive. We questioned our youngest sons Basic Skills Test result two years ago and the comment came back “You can’t blame the school for everything.” The same principal actually told me that someone in my position in the school community should not be criticising the hard work being done by the school’s teachers. That hurt me very much as I had spent the previous six years as the school’s voluntary music teacher. I am no longer involved with the school and have focussed my energies on improving the literacy of our sons and anyone else who asks me.

The training I received with the Spalding Foundation has prompted me to find out more about the English language and how best to teach it.I have also learnt a lot about dyslexia and the learning difficulties many children face , including that of “dysteachia”. The latest reading research is freely available on the internet as well as information on boys and their needs.

A small community such as ours has a good grapevine and it is through that I have been approached by parents to tutor numbers of other children during the past four years. My first student was a young boy who was in the same class as my youngest son - he was actually referred to me by the class teacher who said to me “I don’t know how to help him”. His results were ignored by the school as well. Needless to say, but that teacher was the only one really interested in what I was doing. Unfortunately she left the school due to its internal politics and eventually contracted cancer, sadly passing away last year.

The children I have worked with not surprisingly are mostly boys on a ratio of slightly more than 2:1. The children come from the public schools in the district, the high school and the local Catholic school. Their backgrounds vary , two of the boys actually have a primary school teacher for a mother and she couldn’t help them. All the children basically present with the same problems :

- a lack of knowledge about the alphabetic code especially combinations that represent single sounds;
- a difficulty hearing sounds in words;
- a conflict between letter names and sounds;
- habitual guessing of new words and misreading others.

2. Research and Practice.

The United States based National Institute of Child Health and Human Development released the document “ 30 Years of Research : What We

Now Know About How Children Learn to Read” in 1998. The findings were based on empirical research carried out during a thirty year period. The findings published in this report contradict the style of teaching that has been common in Australia for at least the last twenty years ie. Whole Language.

The NICHD report listed the following principles as the key to effective instruction in reading:

1. Begin teaching phonemic (sound) awareness directly at an early age;
2. Teach sound - spelling correspondences explicitly ;
3. Teach the sound - spelling relationships systematically;
4. Show children exactly how to sound out words;
5. Have children read appropriate texts.

These elements are incorporated in Romalda Spalding’s “The Writing Road to Reading”.

The literacy instruction that has prevailed in our public school system used whole word recognition as its ethos and the philosophy that immersion or exposure to the written language would teach children to read. Whole language exponents felt that learning to read was as natural a process as learning to speak, so it should be learnt the same way. Teachers were encouraged to hang list of words on the classroom walls, label everything. Lists of theme words were sent home for children to learn by sight. These practices still continue in the school system.

My first exposure to Whole Language was at a school information day in 1991 the year my eldest son began school. The presenter was the school’s assistant principal, who, incidentally was my son’s kindergarten teacher and she would later be one of the remedial teachers for my middle son.

An information leaflet was given to each parent which listed the following features:

What whole language is	What whole language is not
1. Language kept whole	1. Phonics taught in isolation
2. Child - centred	2. Teacher - centred
3. Literature based	3. Vocabulary-controlled, syntax controlled, high interest/low vocabulary texts.
4. Skills taught in context	4. Skills taught in isolation.
5. Frequent opportunities to read/write for real purposes and audiences.	5. Teacher imposed writing topics and reading books.
6. Talk - focused.	6. Quiet.
7. Purposeful activities with whole.	7. Worksheets.
8. Parent-involved.	8. Isolated from the community.
9. Self-esteem building.	9. Isolated from the community.
10. Corporate, small group and individual teaching /learning situations.	10. Every class taught in the same way every day.
11. Fun.	11. Boring!
12. Hard work for the teacher!	12. Easy for the teacher!

At the time it looked very impressive to ignorant parents. Now I can only shake my head in disbelief! Our sons and many other children could never learn to read effectively under that system. We were also instructed to read to our children as often as possible. This develops children's vocabulary and comprehension but it will not make them good readers if they don't have the skills. Unfortunately for public school students in NSW many of the same people who promoted whole language are still involved in schools either teaching, developing curriculum or training staff.

Whole language has particularly disadvantaged boys who need more explicit and structured instruction. I feel they need set goals and boundaries as well as logical instruction. They question the validity of subject content more than girls and learning must relate to their needs. Sally Shaywitz a U.S. researcher reported in the Scientific American of November, 1996 that her team's investigation had "already revealed a surprising difference between men and women in the locus of phonological representation for reading. It turns out that in men phonological processing engages the left gyrus, whereas in women it activates not only the left but the right inferior frontal gyrus as well...Indeed, our findings constitute the first concrete proof of gender differences in brain organisation for any cognitive function."

The brain imaging technique, known as functional MRI observes the flow of oxygen - rich blood to working brain cells. Shaywitz' team also found that people who know how to sound out words can rapidly process what

they see. The web site of the Child Development Institute graphically illustrates the process. “Basically this research seems to be saying that the brain learns to read the same way it learns to talk, one sound at a time. Once they (*babies*) get the hang of it they speed up...When we read the same process is in operation. Our brain is processing one sound at a time but we perceive it as a whole word...Decoding skills are the key to learning from printed material...The new brain research shows why intensive phonics is also the best way for everyone to learn to read.” (www.cdipage.com/brain.htm)

Many teachers and principals would say that phonics was a part of whole language and that their schools today have phonics as an important part of their program.

The term phonics is often misunderstood. The **implicit** phonics used within the context of whole language moves from the whole word to the parts - many words are taught as sight words; children are encouraged to work words out by “informed guessing” using word shape, beginning and ending letters, any context clues from the sentence or any accompanying pictures. Our school’s current advice on its take home reading guidelines is:

‘ When your child stops at an unfamiliar word, either say the word and **encourage** the continuation of the sentence, or urge your child to guess the word from what would make sense in the sentence or by using the first letter as a clue...but, **please** don’t insist on your child sounding out each word.’

Many children appear to be able learn to read by such methods, especially girls, it does not help boys who need to know the bits ‘n pieces and how to segment the language. That may explain why boys are so much better working on machinery than girls.

Explicit phonics is moving from the small parts to the whole word. Students first learn letters and their sounds, including combinations as they build and combine the letters and sounds into syllables and words. They never need to guess. The individual letter formation is learned during writing along with its sound/s.

Read by Grade 3 is an internet one list that attracts contributions from Britain and the United States as well as Australia. Discussions centre around how best to teach reading and writing.

Most contributors agree that explicit instruction is the most appropriate way to teach literacy skills.

Byron Harrison, a Tasmanian researcher, has studied over 2000 children. His comments highlight the problems that arise through the use of whole language and implicit phonics. "I am convinced after almost 20 years studying the problem of guessing from shape that the shape is determined by what we have called High Visibility Letters (the end letters and those lower case letters with limbs). The high visibility letters in the word *magnet* are *m*g**t* (three letters, the asterisks indicate the letters to which they pay little attention). What we find is that some children are guessing on the basis of 1 letter (*m******) others on the basis of 2 letters (*m*g**** or *m*****t*), others on the basis of *m*g**t*, others on the basis of *mag****." He goes on to say that some children can hold more letters in memory than others. This attribute his team has called Visual Attention Span (VAS). In their current study 50% of children don't reach the minimum level VAS necessary for effective guessing until they are 7 1/2 years old. "The majority of these are boys because in line with general development delays their visual memory capacity is almost 8 months behind that of girls." Byron recommends teaching around this problem by using phonics instruction. "You don't need a high VAS level for phonics...you do for whole word processing". (posted 29 Aug 1999 ; readbygrade3@egroups.com)

In another contribution to the group he also raised another issue that is often a companion problem - the confusion between letter names and sounds. "Some children particularly in Whole Language schools are first taught names of letters. Our data suggests that names then often become the dominant memory. If you ask such children for the sound of a letter they try to access it via their memory for NAMES eg. When asked for the sound of the letter *y* they go to the name *wy* and from the first part of that name deduce incorrectly that the sound of *y* must be *w*. That strategy undermines the following letters *c,g,u,w,y*. The next most vulnerable group are the remaining vowels. In our current study of over 2000 children we are finding these kinds of confusions in the majority of children entering high school. The greater the level of confusion, the less effective they are of course at blending sounds into syllables. Over 65% of children entering high school were unable to read phonetically regular 3 and 4 syllabic words." (posted 29 Aug 1999) "In average readers in primary school about 30% are showing these confusions. Between 30 and 40% of poor readers are showing the same confusions." (posted 2 Sept 1999)

Children, often boys, with attention difficulties, poor memory and those who need explicit instruction have been left behind in schools that use such techniques. These are the young people who are put into various remedial programs, often using a different approach each year. Our three sons were subjected to a variety of methods, none of which made any noticeable difference. Reading Recovery is currently in use in the NSW state school system but research questions its efficacy. A team from Macquarie University in evaluating the method pointed out that :

- it does not stress explicit instruction in phonics (relationship between sound and symbol)
- systematic phonics instruction is not part of the program
- there is no systematic instruction in syntactic awareness
- most children selected for the program were deficient in the above skills
- after 2 years there appear to be no significant differences between Reading Recovery children and those who were not on the program.

“...it is possible that the sizeable minority of low progress readers who entered the program with weak metalinguistic skills failed to benefit from the intervention in the expected manner.”

(Center, Y., Wheldall, K., Freeman, L., Outhred, L. & McNaught, M. An Evaluation of Reading Recovery ; Reading Research Quarterly Vol.30 1995)

Mona McNee a UK teacher and contributor to Read by Grade 3 posted this contribution in June 1999: “The simpler we keep the teaching, the better the teaching, I believe.” This is what **The Writing Road to Reading** by Romalda Spalding is all about. It is a method designed to **prevent** all children, especially boys, from developing reading problems. It is especially useful for children that have been diagnosed with attention disorders.

The Spalding Method promotes simpler, better teaching in the following ways:

1. It is a **multi-sensory** program, which strengthens boys learning, especially in the light of current brain research. Teaching is taught through SIGHT, SOUND, VOICE and WRITING, four neurological avenues to the mind, thus catering for all learning styles.
2. It teaches the alphabetic code, (single letters and combinations), explicitly in isolation before introducing words.
3. It teaches children to blend syllables and sound out words so that they understand and become familiar with the structure of words. Reading therefore is automatic when it is started and the sound is always related to the symbol in the right sequence thus establishing smooth eye tracking skills. (Eliminating the need for visits to the Developmental Optometrist).
4. It helps children understand their learning by explaining why certain letters or combinations are used and when to use them eg. silent final e's.

Students constantly articulate, reason and problem solve using these explanations - improved meta-cognition.

5. It is a complete language arts program integrating handwriting, spelling, reading, writing and comprehension.
6. The focus on writing and saying each sound is particularly helpful for children with memory or attentional disorders as they remember words better when they write them down. It also keeps them occupied and less distracted.
7. Sound awareness is constantly cultivated and reinforced.
8. If the method is followed correctly children develop good problem solving skills which are useful for all subjects. They also have superior decoding skills which enable them to access the meaning of texts more easily.

The many benefits of the Spalding Method have been publicised widely through the media and education journals during the past four years. Unfortunately, with the exception of Tasmania, it is mostly the private school system that has recognised the value of the method. The public schools desperately need the introduction of Spalding to give children from all backgrounds the chance to succeed .

3. Factors that Influence Literacy Acquisition.

As our family's experience has been with the NSW public education system I feel that the following areas also contribute to the literacy problems of so many children particularly boys.

1. The system is dominated by a bureaucracy that is highly *political* and teacher oriented rather than pupil based, so testing and publicity of results is opposed . Teachers are happy to do as they're told rather than look for answers, so issues relating to boys are often side-lined.
2. University academics push pet theories that are often not substantiated by empirical research thus not necessarily promoting best practice in teacher training. Where would medicine be if it ignored research results in the same way that education systems do?
3. Inadequate teacher training, so many teachers feel threatened and get on the defensive if their techniques are queried.

4. The Education Department is locked into band aid remedial programs such as Reading Recovery that would put many teachers out of work if Spalding was implemented. Many U.S. schools are actually abandoning Reading Recovery.

5. Schools must be more accountable and parents concerns or suggestions should be taken more seriously. Perhaps there is a need for an educational ombudsman.

6. Better assistance should be available to high schools to improve literacy levels - if it is not research based it's a waste of time and money! Most high schools have to rely on ex-primary teachers who work as support teachers, many using the same methods that have already failed most boys.

7. Some public school principals and teachers will not consider any initiatives introduced into the private sector. Despite the fact that many public school teachers educate their own children in private schools.

8. The shortage of male teachers in the primary schools.

9. Frequent changes in class teachers during primary school through maternity leave and teachers relieving in other positions. Each teacher has their own way of teaching. Nothing is systematic.

My own experiences as a high school teacher, tutor and parent lead me to suggest that some changes should be made to the literacy training of teachers.

All teachers regardless of subject area in both primary and secondary education need training in the structure of the English alphabetical system. English teachers, as well, must have more thorough training in grammar and writing skills especially in the types required for various careers. The latter skills should be an important part of high school education but are often neglected. Boys especially need more specific and highly structured work in this area, which has been totally neglected with whole language. They also need to have a defined purpose for writing. Many young teachers and teacher trainees who themselves were schooled under whole language do not have a good understanding of grammar which is needed for good writing.

Much has been written about the impact of socio - economic factors on young people's literacy levels. Many children's poor literacy skills are often blamed on family background eg. poverty or single parent families. School's often use that as the first excuse when pupils are not achieving the desired results. Parent education has also been cited as another factor. My own children and those whom I currently tutor certainly do not come

from low income families, though educational levels vary. Parents today often have poor literacy skills, especially in spelling, as many were taught under whole language in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. The parent of my students have commented to me that their own spelling and reading has improved while helping their child with his/her Spalding homework.

Research in the U.S.A indicates that disadvantaged children in poorer areas are not the only ones in trouble with literacy. I believe that the same is true in Australia. Dr Reid Lyon of the NICHD told a U.S. House of Representatives Committee in 1997 that “32 percent of the fourth grade children across the nation who were reading below the basic levels were from homes where the parents had graduated from college....reading failure is a serious national problem and can not simply be attributed to poverty, immigration, or the learning of English as a second language.” (www.ldonline.org/ld-indepth/reading/nih-report.html)

I have had numerous contact by phone with parents concerned about their children - mostly boys - after hearing of my own experiences with Spalding. A number of these parents have had tertiary training, one father is currently a university lecturer.

Multi -sensory instruction with well-structured lessons integrating spelling, writing reading and comprehension such as the Spalding method provides can compensate for most disadvantages at home. U.S.schools in Arizona that have large minority populations were ranked in the top third of National and State Achievement tests in 1997. Dr Mary North, Director of Research & Curriculum at The Spalding Foundation says “with qualified teachers, an effective instructional method and high expectations, exemplary student achievement can be obtained without parental involvement ” (Spalding Reading And Language Test Scores; Spalding Education Foundation December, 1997).

Many children ,particularly boys, have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder. The number is growing at a staggering rate each year. These children are usually prescribed medication to control their impulsivity or hyperactivity, and hopefully enable them to focus and concentrate. My middle son is one such case. Much debate has ensued during the past few years as to the appropriateness of such intervention. Many of these children, coincidentally, have learning problems. I suggest that the use of Whole Language in the school system may have had a major influence on the numbers of intelligent children suddenly appearing with the condition.

Penguin Books in 1997 released a book written by Dianne McGuinness, a cognitive developmental psychologist and professor at the University of South Florida. Titled “Why Children Can’t Read and What We Can Do About It” it outlines the history and development of the English language

as well as outlining many of the issues currently of concern in the literacy debate. The following comments are quoted from her book.

Attentional control has become an important issue...due to the belief that 'deficits in attention' are causing learning failure, which usually means reading failure...Learning failure causes an inability to attend.

The worse you are at something, the more brain cells you need to do it, the harder it is to keep doing it, and the harder it is to keep your attention focused on what you're doing...when we're bad at something, our brain burns more glucose in more and more different brain regions. Burning glucose uses energy and a high, continuous expenditure of mental energy is exhausting. Frustration also reduces mental energy, because it interferes with concentration...

*Attention span **and** the ability to focus and to keep from being distracted are obviously connected. Both are affected by temperament, interest, motivation, and **competence** in a particular skill...*

Many children with reading problems exhibit behaviour problems due to their inability and unwillingness to stay focused and 'on task'. Being asked to do something you can't do for six hours a day, for hundreds of days a year, year after year, knowing that your peers are fully aware of your shortcomings, must be the most distressing experience imaginable. It is scarcely surprising that children fail to stay on task and cause trouble for the teacher, their classmates, and their parents.

*There are scores of studies which show that the majority of children diagnosed with 'attentional' problems have serious reading or other learning problems, and most of the remainder have serious emotional problems, or both. this means that the inability to pay attention in classrooms is a **symptom** and not a cause...*

*A reading programme should be good enough to make every child competent. Because teachers are never provided with the training and skills to teach reading correctly, their classrooms are filling up with children who are 'dyslexic', or 'can't pay attention', or who 'aren't motivated', or who 'have emotional problems'. We are blaming the victims because teachers aren't properly trained to do their job. We need to stop and think what would happen to attention, to behaviour, to emotional stability, if every child was **competent** in the skills he is supposed to be learning in the classroom, where he spends over 1,200 hours per year, year after year.*

The hours I have spent tutoring my ADHD son demonstrates that you **can** teach children to read with the appropriate instruction. Spalding's multi-sensory instruction puts similarly labelled children on an equal footing with those who are able to put the language puzzle together a bit faster.

All children with language - based problems have one thing in common - without the right instruction they will fall behind. This the *Matthew effect* in action -" the rich get richer while the poor get poorer". Poor readers are not able to read in order to develop other language skills , so as they get older they fall further and further behind. The older these children are the harder it is to remedy their problems. Their social behaviour is affected, most noticeably with boys who lose their motivation early in primary school if their needs aren't met. My own boys, after receiving the explicit instruction that the Spalding method provides, have come home from school quite diisenchanted with their class teachers. They often comment "They (the teachers) don't know what they're doing!" They also feel insulted by the phonics worksheets and games that are commonly used in the classroom.(Appendix 6).

My middle son is currently in the High School literacy class as his comprehension skills need further development. He gets very frustrated with the patronising way they are treated by the teacher as well as the "kindergarten" work they have to do. I, in turn, am amazed at some of the so-called "skills" worksheets he brings home. His comprehension needs are not being addressed as many of the other children still have decoding problems. The class teacher has no idea how to solve the problems and the support teacher is using exactly the same ideas that were tried unsuccessfully in the Public School and were recommended by the consultants at the district office who, incidentally, have been seconded from the district schools.

Much of the remedial work he has to complete is very weak or simply wrong in the way it presents the language. When I questioned some of the inaccuracies earlier this year the high school's support teacher said to me "You're talking about linguistics!" and completely dismissed my comments.

Gender equity policies in primary schools often discriminate against boys. Our local primary school has a policy of integration where boys and girls are lined up alternately and seated the same way in class. I have waited at school assemblies for the whole school to be "integrated". I watched a 'reading' lesson when my eldest son was in year 6. He was the only boy in his reading group and as he read one of the more dominant girls at the table kept interrupting by reading words for him, each time he paused to decode a new word.(At the time he had only just begun on the Spalding program.) I got so annoyed I finally told her to be quiet. Such policies really alienate boys. I also know of another occasion at school when the boys organised a sports competition at lunchtime. They were not allowed to hold it in the end because none of the girls wanted to play. It's no wonder boys opt out!

Such situations have made me rather cynical towards public school education. My husband and I understand why so many parents are making the sacrifice to send their children to private schools. Sometimes I

wonder whether we should be doing that too, but we want to support our local community .

Many parents do not have a healthy relationship with their children's school. This is reflected in poor attendance at meetings organised by the various parent bodies. It is hard to discuss your child's education with teachers when you can see them falling further behind and all the teacher can say is "don't worry he'll get better as her gets older ". While waiting for a parent interview I heard another parent say to the class teacher "If he could only read..." The teacher's answer to another query about spelling "you have to learn to see the word with your mind's eye" - not a very reassuring reply.

The former principal of our public school and also the teachers, with one exception, have shown little interest in the work I have been doing with my children. Not one has ever asked how they were going, or congratulated them on their obvious gains, especially the middle one ,who they were once *so* concerned about. The fault always lies with the parents first, then the child, never the school! Any questions I ask about research based instruction are usually brushed off . Most teachers don't even know about recent research. One of our district's Learning Disabilities Consultants actually told me one day that I knew more than she did. I was staggered. Teacher's need to take some responsibility for education - after all, they're the ones getting paid.

Conclusion.

The primary school literacy education of our sons was unsatisfactory. If left in the hands of the teachers, as many parents do, our middle son would have been illiterate today. My husband and I have worked hard to get their skills to a satisfactory level, and relinquished much of our time and energy in the process. I have had to give up my own career as a music teacher to help our sons and there is still a long way to go. Our advice to parents is to do it yourself if the school won't. Unfortunately, many parents are unable to shoulder that burden because of their financial situation or their own education. Work commitments make it difficult to allow the time it takes. Family size is another factor. Not all families are the model two parents and two children. We have found it almost impossible to give our boys equal attention. A maths degree is not needed to realise that 3 divided by 2 does not give an equal solution. The larger the

family, the more uneven the ratio. Our focus has had to be on the son with the worst problems.

The Public School system needs a major overhaul from the top down. Parents need educated and honest teachers who in turn respect the parents and the child. The focus needs to be on skilling boys and girls to equip them for life. Literacy must be the top priority for all children, not just the majority.

Christina Hoff Summers in the article "The Gender Project" (Sunday magazine, The Sunday Telegraph 9 Jul 2000) wrote *The vast majority of girls and boys are psychologically sound. But when it comes to the genuine problems that threaten their prospects - moral drift, cognitive and scholastic deficits - the healers, social reformers and confidence builders provide no solutions. On the contrary, they exacerbate the problems and stand squarely in the way of what needs to be done to solve them.* This was and remains our family's experience with the school system.

Today we hear from teacher union's that because all children do not learn the same way their individual needs must be met. Sharan Burrow who at the time was federal president of the Australian Education Union put it in these words *Let me present a final plea for understanding what happens in schools in regard to the teaching of literacy. Teachers do not subscribe to a single method to teach children to read. Children have different learning styles and intellectual development cannot be choreographed to ensure that students learn at the same pace. Teachers are professional educators who borrow from all known techniques to construct a tool bag that will work for each child.* (Education Goes Beyond Basic Skills, Opinion; The Australian 19 Sept 1997). As a former high school teacher I do not feel that it is possible to teach a class of 20 or more children individually let alone know how each one learns. Unfortunately the tools in the tool bag are the wrong size for boys! Research has proven that boys do not access literacy skills easily. The Writing Road to Reading by Romalda Spalding is a multi-sensory method that **prevents** the development of dyslexia and also compensates for developmental delay in boys - one method that caters for learning differences. It is **proactive** teaching. Literacy toolbags are reactive teaching.

We have gone some way in solving the problems of our own boys but it has only been with much sacrifice, patience and determination as well as plenty of support and encouragement from Dalwood Assessment Centre and The Spalding Foundation.

Teaching reading is such an important task that the American Federation of Teachers released a paper in July 1999 title *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science* . The document is available on their web site.

I conclude my submission with quotes from that document .

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Research now shows that a child who doesn't learn the reading basics early is unlikely to learn them at all. Any child who doesn't learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life.

Thanks to new scientific research...the knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well.

In medicine, if research found new ways to save lives, health care professionals would adopt these methods as quickly as possible, and would change practices, procedures and systems. Educational research has found new ways to save young minds by helping them to become proficient readers; it is up to us to promote these new methods throughout the education system. Young lives depend on it. And so does the survival of public education...

Thus, while parents, tutors and the community can contribute to reading success, classroom instruction must be viewed as the critical factor in preventing reading problems and must be the primary focus for change.