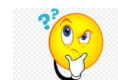


## Phonics failure is “child neglect”. Really?



Frank Johnston

**Writing for *The Australian* on August 17, 2020**, correspondent Rebecca Urban reported this astonishing statement linked to submissions to the disability royal commission by dyslexia advocates from several states.

SPELD Victoria claimed “failure to adequately train teachers in evidence-based reading education was a major cause of educational neglect of children with dyslexia”.

After my jaw recovered from hitting the ground, a creeping, prickly sense of guilt overcame me... how many lives had I ruined over 50 years?



From the time I attended Teachers College, for decades the most effective teachers had two major qualities:

**First**; they understood what reading was - not just an accumulation of letter-sound relationships. It is the ability to extract **meaning** from print.

That can be achieved through a wide range of strategies, only one aspect of which could be figuring out the pronunciation of a word. Phonics strategies may enable a reader to decode an unknown word, but decoding is not reading.

True reading often requires looking at many other signs and hints gained from context, word shapes, related

illustrations, personal experience.

A competent teacher brings many different aspects to the classroom experience to enable the range of students every opportunity to bring meaning to the text with which they are dealing.

**Some phonics supporters just go a ‘bit over the top’.**

**Learners come in a wide variety shapes, sizes and forms and so do their needs in order to succeed.**

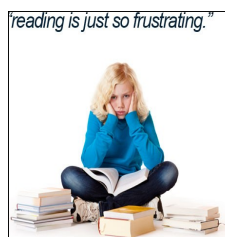
**Second**: Over 50 years ago the buzz term was ‘eclectic’ and this was used to describe the range of activities a teacher brought to the classroom in their armoury of learning strategies.

Teachers were encouraged, not to limit their teaching to one or two well-worn activities, but to broaden their approach in the classroom so at least most, if not all, students had the best opportunity to contribute and succeed.

Inclusiveness was key; providing the strugglers with a more varied approach to encourage them to participate and not be discouraged.

And, after 50 years I don’t think these good teaching principles have diminished.

To state that



focussing solely upon one narrow skill in learning to read and disregarding very important contextual matters is an appalling neglect of the more complete picture of what reading really is.

In our humble business, we have had many dyslexic students approach us as a last resort and they have found immediate, rapid and significant success with the application of non-phonetic strategies.

**There are around 10% of the population for whom phonics mean little and do not enable reading to succeed**

This is NOT to say phonics are not important; they are. However phonics strategies are not infallible (cough, tough, through, bough, though, thought...), and readers need more than correct pronunciation to understand text.

English and French are opaque and orthographically deep languages with many variations in letter-sound correspondence.

But people who are visual, picture thinkers and for whom sequential word thinking is not their style, if they haven’t ‘got’ phonics in the first year or two of school, then why continue to flog something which is not working?

Phonics is only part of a patchwork of strategies which enable the teacher to take all students on a pathway to success.



# When school staff have permission to use their creativity...

From the New Zealand Education Gazette  
Issue: Volume 98, Number 5

*When Kenakena School Principal Bruce McDonald began leading the school more than 20 years ago, students were being lost to other schools, teacher morale was low and there was hardly any connection between governance and management.*

*These things flow into all areas of the school so the first thing Bruce did was to tell teachers they should do what excites them. He incorporated this into the school vision, which was the starting point for change.*

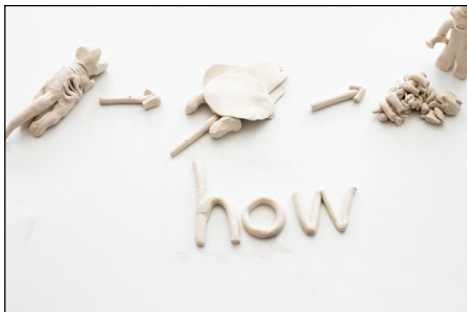
**Their Dyslexia Program was one vital cog in the range of their six goals based on the NZ National Administration Guidelines.**

*Kenakena School has around 20 students in the dyslexia programme each calendar year and use their own adapted version of the Davis Approach: improving classroom practice, individual assistance and expert advice.*

*"The results from the programme are astonishing," says Bruce. "We have an average increase of 2.4 years in reading age in just over a year. After the pilot*

*programme around 2009 and every year since, the board asks the same question: 'How can we not do this?'"*

*The programme is run by two full-time teacher aides trained in dyslexia and an experienced full-time facilitator, Janet Pirie-Hunter.*



*Clay modelling is an integral part of the dyslexia program*

*Students come from other schools and teachers come from across the country to learn about the programme.*

*One family sold their house in Wellington to move to the Kāpiti Coast so their child could participate in the programme.*

*After their son had been in the programme for 18 months and was doing really well,*

*they wrote to Bruce, saying, "The healing of our son's self-worth has been the most important thing to us as a family."*

*"When the kids say, 'now I know I'm not dumb', and they leave here with self-esteem, that's what matters – and that's why we say we can't afford not to do it," Bruce says.*

*"What is unique about this programme is that it approaches dyslexia as a strength to be built on, not as a disability to be overcome. The Davis Approach utilises students' strengths as 'picture-thinkers' and equips students with tools for mental and perceptual focus, stress reduction, and self-regulation of energy levels."*

**The principal's acknowledgment of each teacher's professional judgement and his encouragement to employ their own strengths and creativity is in contrast to schools where a 'one size fits all' policy exists.**

**Read more about this successful school and their approach to dyslexia and other aspects of the school program at:**

**<https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/new-thinking-a-winner-at-kenakena-school/>**



## Erin Brockovich and her dyslexia

From People.com and Sam Gillette  
August 27, 2020

"The minute you run into that person who starts taking you down and starts throwing those barbs at you, and starts that gaslighting moment, that is the minute I'm watching you."

Brockovich describes her way of handling doubters.

In her book, *Superman's Not Coming*, Brockovich writes that her dyslexia impacted her reading comprehension and her grades.

Only with the support of a friendly teacher, who recognized how smart she was, and her parents' encouragement did the young girl regain confidence in herself — and learn the importance of persistence (or "stick-to-itiveness," as her parents would say).

"My mom and dad, the greatest gift they gave me was being honest with myself, being accountable," Brockovich says. "It's okay if you make a mistake. Owning it. My dad wasn't big on lying. And my mom, [she taught me] you've got to have that gumption, and when the going gets tough, you've got to get going."

In his PEOPLE article Gillette describes

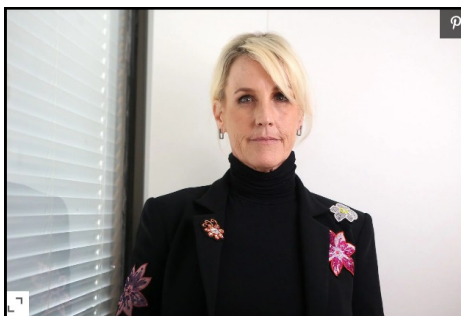


PHOTO: Jono Searle/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Brockovich as a 'gutsy truth teller'.

Gillette continues... Brockovich has been on the warpath fighting not only water contamination, but other problematic developments that impact vulnerable communities, like dangerous medical devices, for the past 24 years. Surprisingly, she continues to get doubters, despite her success in pushing for change.

While advocating on the behalf of the citizens of Columbia, Missouri, who were dealing with issues tied to chloramine, Brockovich battled it out with a scientist on a radio show.

"Here was a scientist on who said, 'Come on, Erin. Be honest. You don't have all the data to conclude that this chemical in the water and what we're doing is in fact harming these people,'" Brockovich remembers. "First of all, you

are correct. I don't have all the data and I'm willing to own that. But here is what you're not seeing on your side of the science: You don't have all the data either to conclude that it doesn't hurt those people."

Brockovich urges people to continue to fight for what they believe in — even if they don't have a science degree. She says that people who attack or try to cast doubt often have something to hide.

"I tell people all the time: The minute you run into that person who starts taking you down and starts throwing those barbs at you, and starts that gaslighting moment, that is the minute I'm watching you," she says. "Because there is a reason why you need to throttle me back in hopes I don't find out what you're doing."

"In high school I was labeled the girl least likely to succeed.

"I was a dyslexic. I remember so many events growing up — in grade school, being giggled at by the other kids because a teacher would say in front of the class: 'What are you, stupid?'"

Erin... another undervalued, ridiculed but exceptionally talented person with dyslexia.

