

The Sydney Morning Herald [18 October 2007]

Op Ed: New chapter: the class revolution by Miranda Devine

"It is a conservative criticism of John Howard that, while he has been in power for 11 years, he has not managed to win the culture wars. "And nowhere is the battle more entrenched than in school education.

"Education unions and left-wing education academics cling to proven failures in education theory, despite years of evidence demonstrating the errors of their thinking. They reject, for instance, the research-based evidence showing that "whole language" dominated reading programs do not work for a large proportion of children.

"The power of sensible thinking by political leaders in holding off barbarian ideologues can be seen in the influence of the former NSW premier Bob Carr, who saved NSW from the worst educational excesses suffered elsewhere, particularly in Western Australia, where a decade-long experiment in outcomes-based education has just been abandoned.

"But while governments control the purse strings they have little effect on deep-rooted cultural prejudices in organisations such as the ABC and teacher unions. In the battles for hearts and minds, they are outclassed by ideological guerillas, who can only be vanquished from within. At last, however, there are encouraging signs from teachers that the civil war may have begun.

"Take the English Teachers Association, which claims to speak for all English teachers. Its most honoured operative is former president Wayne Sawyer, an associate professor at the University of Western Sydney, who has helped develop the NSW English curriculum and is editor of the journal English in Australia. It was his editorial that blamed the Howard Government's 2004 re-election on the failure of English teachers to properly educate their charges in critical theory.

"And in the last edition of the International Journal of Progressive Education, Sawyer tackled the discredited "whole language" theory of teaching reading in an article entitled Whole language and moral panic in Australia.

"He claimed "moral panic" was behind a "media campaign ... to demonise whole-language methods" of teaching reading, despite the fact the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (which I served on) spent a year examining the worldwide evidence about the best way to teach children reading and came down on the side of systematic, direct instruction in phonics.

"If you ever wondered how the teaching of reading could be politicised, the journal is instructive, having devoted its entire June edition to whole language, including "the multilayered dimensions of social justice activism involved in whole language teaching".

"The articles read like a long confession from the stubborn practitioners of a movement which has condemned so many underprivileged children to illiteracy, while professing to care about injustice.

"In an article about teaching sixth graders in Grover Cleveland Middle School, New Jersey, the authors "search for ways to disrupt the pre-service [trainee] teachers' traditional notions of teaching, learning, and curriculum ... We strive to help our pre-service teachers understand that their roles as teachers include a political dimension ...

"Too often," they complain, the teachers "fall back into the direct instruction model with which they feel comfortable."

"Naughty teachers, trying to teach rather than indoctrinate their students. But Sawyer and his acolytes at the association have so provoked those they purport to represent they have sparked a grassroots protest movement of teachers across the country.

"In Western Australia, one group of teachers became so fed up at having to implement outcomes-based education, a favourite of the English Teachers Association, that they managed to have it overturned this year. Their lobby group PLATO, People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes, persuaded the West Australian Government to reinstate the traditional syllabus, concentrating on literacy and numeracy.

"Now a group of secondary English teachers from Catholic, government and independent schools in Western Australia have formed the English Teachers Forum, the ETFWA, in direct opposition to the English Teachers Association, because they are "concerned about the misrepresentation of English teachers and their views regarding the implementation and the efficacy of the English Course of Study".

"In a letter to the association, the breakaway group wrote: "The ETAWA must realise that the collective voice of the majority of English teachers simply cannot be ignored any longer. It is not just a matter of numbers. It is also a matter of fairness."

"The English Teachers Forum has also managed to have Western Australia's year 11 and 12 curriculum reviewed by a "jury" of impartial classroom teachers, with the result the West Australian Government agreed to rewrite the courses by 2010. [emphasis added]

"In NSW, there is similar grassroots unhappiness with the English Teachers Association, judging by a letter I have received from an anonymous secondary English teacher of 30 years.

"The problem in NSW English teaching is not the syllabus. It is the way the syllabus has been interpreted by the English Teachers Association of NSW and its transformation from a wonderfully principled, supportive professional association to a site of left-wing political activism and ideological posturing ..

"My dismay comes from a jettisoning of our literary heritage for an obsession with critical literacy and an approach to English based on overt critical theory..."

"I look through my past issues of [the association's journal mETaphor] and ask myself what has happened to the aim of fostering a love of literature in our children? What has happened to the great works of literature?"

"That journal is full of articles about postmodernism and such literary gems as: "Power Struggles in the Big Brother House" and "Earnestly Queer: Responding to Oscar Wilde's The Importance of being Earnest Through the Critical Lens of Queer Theory" by Mark Howie, the president of the English Teachers Association.

"It is no good for Australian students that a body promoting extremist ideology should have come to represent their English teachers. But it seems their teachers have finally had enough. Hoorah for them."