

Parents tell teachers their children can't spell

But teachers say kids should be encouraged to read and write

By ANGELA BLACKBURN
Special to The Champion

Should teachers drill students into learning correct spelling and grammar usage and risk turning them off reading and writing, or do you encourage reading and writing by ignoring spelling and grammar mistakes?

That's the core of the whole language versus phonics debate which often puts teachers and parents at odds with one another.

Halton Board of Education Language Arts co-ordinator Micki Clemens told parents recently the controversy shouldn't even exist since phonics is part of the whole language philosophy — and practice — in Halton.

Micki Clemens was the main speaker at the last of nine board presentations aimed at explaining educational jargon during Education Focus 1992 Education: Explained! About 40 parents attended the session at Pine Grove Public School in Oakville last week.

Brewed by media

Ms Clemens contended the controversy actually doesn't exist and is mainly being brewed by the media.

She said the media has confused people with "inflammatory statements" and the misrepresentation of whole language as whole word.

"People are saying whole language doesn't include phonics and it does," said Ms Clemens.

Most parents in attendance, however, were frustrated by their children's poor spelling and grammar.

In an extensive 90-minute presentation, parents were often vocal, reporting how their children — in many instances diagnosed as above-average learners — couldn't spell or write in grammatically correct ways.

"The aim of the whole language program is to produce children who are not only able to read and write, but who want to do so," said Micki Clemens.

Whole language tries to engage children into reading by doing it via materials that appeal to them and challenge them to use reading and writing in natural activities such as conversations, stories, books and videos.

Ms Clemens said literacy used to be taught with reading and writing separate, with a focus on skills in isolation from the whole, writing for grades with a goal of acquiring basic skills.

Literacy taught

Today, literacy is taught with language as integrated skills teamed for a purpose, writing for an audience or personal use with the goal of literacy for life.

One parent countered that while her child loves writing, she can't write in grammatically correct ways. The parent complained she's constantly editing her child's work and a page with 10 to 20 spelling mistakes will come home without the teacher having noted the mistakes.

Ms Clemens said it's important not to extinguish a student's enthusiasm for learning by pointing out negatives.

"Engagement occurs when a learner is convinced, 'I can do it,'" and if someone makes a mistake, they're not going to be stomped on, she said.

Ms Clemens recalled the "spitting,

hissing and growling" method of the old style of marking — "SP" for spelling, "SS" for sentence structure, and "GR" for grammar.

Parents also heard that it's important for children to become literate

through a variety of triggers not just memorization of grammar and rules — that it's important to gain comprehension and communication through the "big picture", through context for a purposeful end.

Ms Clemens noted that when reading, a fixation on certain letters could end up with the obliteration of the meaning as a whole.

Ms Clemens noted phonics are addressed in today's classrooms as part

of the whole or on chart sheets in which students examine words and language.

"We're imbedding it in something that is meaningful and functional for the child," said Ms Clemens.

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