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Scientific take on reading to tackle the teaching guesswork

JUSTINE FERRARI THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 30, 2014 12:00AM



Sarah Kelly with Year 1 students Liam Hatch, left, Stella Morgan, Louis Bei and Molly Pleasance at St Patricks Primary in Geelong. Picture: David Geraghty Source: News Corp Australia

THE nation's first trial assessing whether a new teaching method improves the learning of students over existing techniques in the classroom is being run to address reading difficulties in children.

About 100 government and Catholic schools in Victoria are participating in the study, a collaboration of health and education researchers run along the lines of a medical research trial: comparing an intervention to improve teaching with a “control” group.

The randomised controlled trial started this year with half the schools assigned to the intervention, which focuses on improving teachers skills in developing the oral language of students.

While randomised controlled trials are the gold standard in scientific research, education - researchers have been slow to adopt the model. Pediatric associate professor Sharon Goldfeld from the Centre for Community Child Health at Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital said the study stemmed from the idea improving teachers' knowledge of oral language and their understanding of it improved teaching of literacy.

“Can we improve what teachers know, does improving what teachers know change what teachers do and does changing what teachers do change outcomes for children?” she said.

“Teachers' knowledge is one thing, but the ability to apply that knowledge in the classroom

environment is more limited ... it's simply hard to do, particularly if they're not taught how."

The study started this year with teachers in prep and Year 1 given training in improving vocabulary, using longer sentences, teaching letter-sound relationships, telling a story in sequence and understanding instructions.

Students' reading and speaking skills will be tested at the end of next year, as well as their social and emotional wellbeing, with their Year 3 national literacy results providing the final indicator of success.

Dr Goldfeld said an increasing body of research showed a child's speech, including vocabulary and the ability to give and understand information, was a critical precursor to learning to read.

The trial extends a pilot study by the Victorian Catholic Education Commission that gave teachers training in how to improve students' speaking skills, doubling the rate at which they learnt to read. St Patrick's primary school in Geelong West was one of the pilot schools, and all its prep students over the past five years have reached the benchmark in reading, where a handful had struggled in previous years.

Literacy teacher Sarah Kelly is an enthusiastic supporter of the randomised trial and evidence-based research in teaching, and is acting as a support officer for other schools. "Proof is the most important part, that's what parents want to know, that what we are doing is going to work. They don't want you to be guessing, they want you to know," she said.

Dr Goldfeld said there was a growing move around the world to test teaching and learning strategies in this way. "There is a sense that randomised controlled trials are difficult because some children get the intervention and some children don't, and that raises questions around the ethics of children missing out," he said. "We would argue the ethics of not having an effective intervention is far more problematic."

The Education Endowment Fund, a British-based charity, funds projects to evaluate innovative approaches to improve the education of disadvantaged children, and research manager Robbie Coleman said most of its projects had been randomised controlled trials. "They are the best way to gather information about the educational impact of a new idea."

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