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Teacher reaps reward of truce in 'reading wars'

By **JEWEL TOPSFIELD**
EDUCATION EDITOR

GEELONG Grammar teacher Fay Tran's "Eureka" moment occurred the day last November that Julia Gillard declared the reading wars were over.

Ms Tran, a specialist literacy teacher, had sent a manuscript to publishers Wilkins Farago staunchly advocating the "unfashionable" method of phonics — the explicit teaching of letter-sound combinations — to teach children to read.

The manuscript was sitting on the pile when Ms Gillard uttered the words Ms Tran had waited 25 years to hear: "Grammar is back. The reading wars are over, with a proper emphasis on phonics."

Ms Tran said Wilkins Farago director Andrew Wilkins read that Ms Gillard had pledged phonics would be taught as part of the national curriculum from 2011 the day he was deciding whether to publish her book, *Teaching Kids to Read*. The book got the green light and will be launched by

Geelong Grammar and Wilkins Farago next week.

"It's been a relief to me to talk about it openly because before I would just be stomped on. Teachers would say, 'You're just backwards, you want to go back to the Dark Ages,'" Ms Tran said.

The so-called reading wars erupted in the 1980s, when phonics was declared outdated and the "whole language" approach — in which children are effectively taught to read by osmosis, in a similar way to how they learn to talk — was introduced into most schools.

Ms Tran, who for 25 years has taught children with learning difficulties how to read, staged an insurrection in 1985 when an expert attempted to "convert" her to the whole-language movement.

To Geelong Grammar's credit, she said, she was allowed to continue teaching phonics and direct instruction, when most schools discredited it altogether.

Ms Tran said phonics was particularly important for chil-

dren with learning difficulties.

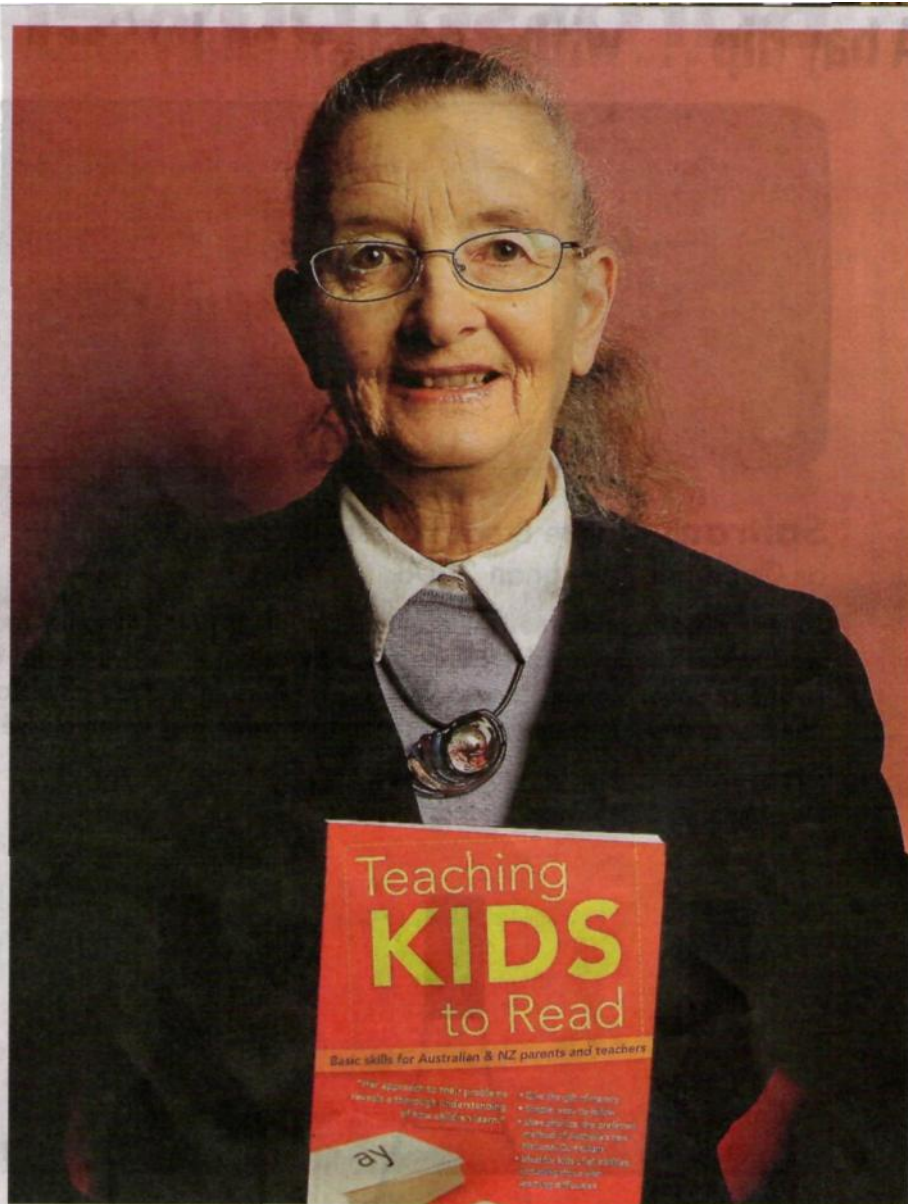
Under the national curriculum, phonics must be taught from the first year of school.

Ms Tran said that while she was optimistic that schools would start to change their teaching methods, the experience from Britain and the US had been there was an initial resistance, particularly given that most teachers and academics had been trained to use the whole-language approach.

But Janet Scull, a senior lecturer in language and literacy at the University of Melbourne, said the whole-language versus phonics debate was a "false dichotomy".

"The whole misnomer around whole language does a disservice to the very credible, informed, balanced literacy programs that we have in our schools," she said.

Dr Scull said children were taught to draw on a range of information when learning to read, with phonics, language and context all considered to be important.



Veteran literacy teacher and phonics champion Fay Tran, with her new book.

PICTURE: PAUL ROVERE