show me phonics

and I'll show you a bored child, used to be the catchcry of legions of primary school teachers.

However, a British system introduced in a few independent and State primary schools is proving a hit among children and parents.

Letterland is a fantasy place where all sounds are characters. The characters, ranging through songs and books, puzzles and games, are part of a mnemonic system.

It is now in its third year at Connel's Point Primary School, where Miss Anne Clegg, assistant principal and infants teacher, emphasises that it is only one of a variety of strategies she used to teach reading.

There are other commercial systems on the market, but she says that in all her years of teaching she has found nothing that has made more impact on parents, or is more enjoyable for children than this way of teaching phonics. She adds: “We have observed a significant increase in the sound knowledge of children entering Year 1. While some still say the character names for the letter sounds, this decreases with time. When the children are writing stories, they may ask, ‘Which c’ do I need: Clever Cat or Kicking King?’”

Professor Kevin Wheldall, head of Macquarie University Special Education Centre, says: “Anything that encourages kids to learn their letter sounds accurately has got to be a good thing. I am not aware of any research evidence on [Letterland’s] efficacy, but certainly it sounds very much along the right lines.”

At Sydney University, Dr Len Unsworth, a senior lecturer in education, says: “It is useful to find those things that are amusing and enticing for kids, but what we don’t want to do is pretend they are sufficient. [Miss Clegg] has hit the nail on the head, not seeing it as an entire reading program.”

The literacy “crisis” has stirred debate over “whole word” versus phonics, but Dr Unsworth says most schools appear to have a balanced, professional approach. “There may be some that aren’t up to speed, but the department has been pretty strong this year, making sure it’s a balanced program.”

Miss Clegg has her doubts about the literacy “crisis” in schools, “I think back when I first started teaching, a very long time ago, and I had a 1A class, and I’d write on the board: ‘Through my window I can see...’, and they would write a ‘cat’, a ‘dog’ – and one child wrote a ‘rainbow’ – and I just immersed them in hugs.

“These children today write pages and pages. Now, these are little babies who are one term out of kindergarten.”

LEONIE LAMONT