

# MULTILIT<sup>®</sup> Moments

The Newsletter of MULTILIT<sup>®</sup>

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## Phonics not an '*F*' word

### In this issue

Phonics	1
In the news	2
FAQ's	2
Holiday hours	2
Teaching boys	3
A mother's note	3
Staff news	4
Workshops	4

A leading article by Alice Russell in 'The Age' (28/7/03), entitled 'Phonic Youth', traces the re-emergence of the need for explicit phonics instruction in teaching children to read: "For decades, phonics has been a dirty word. But some experts now say that a greater emphasis on it would mean fewer children had reading problems."

It is fair to say that a so-called 'whole language' approach to reading instruction has been confidently adopted in Australia in recent decades. But confidence is no substitute for evidence. In my view, the scientific evidence is now overwhelming, not to say unequivocal, that overt, explicit, systematic phonics instruction is essential, at least for those students struggling to learn to read, for whatever reason.

It is easy to understand how well meaning but fundamentally misguided views about reading instruction can arise if one's experience is limited to teaching students who indeed do appear to learn to read 'naturally' with little or no need for overt instruction. The mistake is to assume that this obtains for all children when experience with low-progress readers demonstrates that this is manifestly not the case. Such students do not learn to read 'naturally'; they only learn to read with careful, systematic instruction, to which phonics instruction is central.

It is clearly now time for a rapprochement, for both sides in the 'reading wars' to admit their past mistakes and to be able to say that some students will not pick up the alphabetic principle without explicit phonics instruction and at the same time agree that in the past phonics instruction has been *over-emphasised* by some teachers. Some phonics instruction in the past has been ill-conceived, has often been

unnecessary or too heavy in concentration and, as a result, some students, especially low-progress readers, have been denied adequate access to, and engagement with, real books, and sometimes with any books at all.

In this spirit, the present author is more than willing to 'come clean' (or 'come out') and admit my own relatively recent conversion to this perspective. Having witnessed the excesses of mindless phonics instruction practised in parts of the West Midlands in the UK, prior to moving to Australia in 1990, I freely admit to having been deeply sceptical of the benefits of isolated phonics instruction for low-progress readers. In the light of greater familiarity with the relevant scientific research literature, however, and experience with a more balanced approach, I am now in no doubt as to the necessity for this form of instruction for low-progress readers if they are ever going to 'make up lost time in literacy'.

*Professor Kevin Wheldall*



**The MULTILIT<sup>®</sup>  
staff wish you  
a Merry Christmas  
and a Happy New  
Year!**

"I'd rather be reading"

### MULTILIT® Office Hours During School Holidays

Our offices will be closed from 21 December until 5 January when we will open for assessments, administration and publication orders only. If you need to book your child in for an assessment, place a book order or confirm placement in one of our education programs, please ring 9850 9695 before 19 December or after 5 January on 9850 9695.

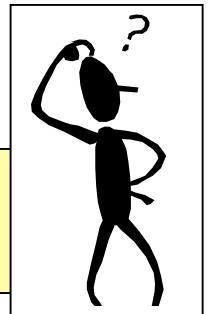
Term 1 will  
commence on  
Monday,  
2 February 2004



## Making the news

Over the past few months, Professor Wheldall has been interviewed several times, particularly about his views and research into the phonics vs. whole-language debate. Following are a couple of highlights:

- "There are 20 to 25 per cent of kids who are always going to struggle to learn to read unless they get intensive, systematic, skills-based instruction. And they are the ones who have been failed in particular by the whole-language movement." (*"The war of the words"* by Jane Cadzow, *Good Weekend Magazine*, 4/10/03 - Entire article can be viewed at [www.multilit.com](http://www.multilit.com) in the "What's New" section.
- "Many aspects of Reading Recovery are wonderful, not least the publicity and political engine...My view is not that Reading Recovery is bad; it's just that it is not good enough...It has failed to adapt and change in the light of new knowledge." (*"Why young readers hit the wall"* by Miranda Devine, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4/12/03.)



## Frequently asked questions

**Question:** *What is a non-categorical approach and why does the MULTILIT® Clinic choose to take this approach?*

**Answer:** All children can learn if the instruction is effective. In fact there is no evidence to show that separating or categorising students into subgroups such as dyslexia or ADHD for example, provides educators with any useful information in terms of instruction. A non-categorical approach focuses instead on the student's current level of functioning and assesses the needs of the individual student.

At MULTILIT, assessments are conducted with the non-categorical approach in mind. In addition to standardised testing, we conduct curriculum-based assessment of skills to determine what a student's strengths and weaknesses are and then place them at an appropriate starting point in a program.

**Question:** *Are all MULTILIT® programs held during school hours?*

**Answer:** The Intensive Program for students in Years 3-6 who are two or more years behind in reading is held Monday-Friday from 8.30-11.30am at the Macquarie Special Education Centre during term time.

However, spots for the Monitoring and Individual Tutoring programs can be booked Monday-Thursday with the earliest appointment at 1pm and the latest at 5.30 or 6pm.

The Independent Program is conducted from home by the parent with contact/feedback from the clinician via phone, fax or email.

**Making Up Lost Time In Literacy**

## Positive Teaching for Boys

One of the most powerful influences on children's classroom behaviour has repeatedly been shown to be teacher praise and attention. Most teachers are well aware of the power of this form of positive reinforcement but it appears to be deployed less than optimally in most classrooms. Whereas praise for academic work is relatively plentiful, praise for appropriate classroom behaviour is rare. Moreover, reprimands for inappropriate behaviour are frequent, especially for boys.

In Australian primary schools teachers typically nominate a boy as the most behaviourally troublesome student in the class and of the four students per class who are, on average, regarded as troublesome, three are typically boys. Our recent research on teacher attention to boys and girls in primary classrooms paints a grim picture of life in the classroom for many boys. We observed 55 primary (predominantly female) teachers interacting with their classes and recorded teachers' responses to boys and to girls separately.

At first blush, it appeared that boys were treated better than girls because they clearly received more attention overall than girls, as other researchers and commentators have observed (Dale Spender, for example). But while boys did receive about 25% more praise than girls for their academic work, boys also received *over twice as many reprimands* for their classroom social behaviour than girls. This is in spite of the fact that the on-task behaviour of girls (84%) while higher than that of boys (79%) was not that much higher.

Boys typically experience a very negative classroom environment. Assuming about 25 hours of classroom instructional time in the usual school week, boys, on average, are told that their classroom behaviour is inappropriate 44 times per week (girls 18 times). Praise for appropriate classroom behaviour is typically experienced about 12 times per week by both boys and girls.

The reader is encouraged to reflect on how they might feel about their place of work, if their line manager criticised their workplace behaviour 44 times every week. Many boys could be excused for the negative attitudes they may hold about school and hence their poor reading levels. We are also left to wonder as to the effect that this barrage of disapproval might have on boys' self-esteem.

In contrast, at our School for Children with Special Learning Needs, where over 70% of the students are boys, teacher responses to boys and girls are much more similar. This may partly be a function of the smaller class sizes and more favourable staffing ratios but, while reprimands for inappropriate classroom behaviour are still evident, they are offset by the remarkable number of times that boys (and girls) are praised for their appropriate classroom behaviour. In our school, on average, both boys and girls are praised for their classroom behaviour over 200 times every week. Students at our school typically display very favourable attitudes towards their school and their teachers. This may not be unrelated to the way they are treated in class.

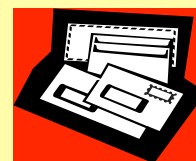
**Kevin Wheldall**

## A mother's note of thanks

*A special thank you to all involved in your Intensive Program for continually keeping up with your wonderful standard. Thanks to you, our family has learned to slowdown and get back on track. The hardest part for me was –if only they had MULTILIT when I was 9. I knew then that I couldn't read and wasn't going to put my hand up.*

*But out of all that and two terms for our son in your wonderful program, our family has grown more than words can ever say. Our hearts are strong again to get on with things...I am now looking forward to the rest of my life being brave and going back to school myself.*

**Thanks heaps, George, Liz and Eli Drakos**



## Making Up Lost Time In Literacy



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## MULTILIT® staff news

- Congratulations to Fiona McMullen (formerly 'Ryan') who was married in September.
- Welcome to Rene Coleman who joined the MULTILIT® Team in Term 4 as a tutor.
- Congratulations to Simone Pogorzelski whose Master of Special Education thesis received excellent reports from her examiners and she has gained the award.
- Further congratulations to Simone on the impending birth of her first baby in mid-January. She will be on maternity leave for the first term of 2004, returning to MULTILIT for Term 2.
- Fiona will assume most of Simone's responsibilities during Term 1, including managing the Independent Program.
- Beginning in 2004, Rita Carey will be the MULTILIT teacher for our Intensive Program, with Megan Cooper joining MULTILIT as Rita's assistant.

## MULTILIT® Reading Tutor Program Professional Workshops for 2004

If your school is already using the MULTILIT® program or you want to start using it, we highly recommend that you receive professional training in how to implement the Reading Tutor Program in the classroom setting. These workshops are also of great value to speech therapists and other professionals who want to use MULTILIT.

The workshop runs from 9.30am-1.00pm and costs \$275 per person. If you want to purchase the MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program kit at the time of registration, we offer a special package for \$425 (*includes workshop and kit, which would normally total \$480*).

### 2004 Workshop Dates

- Thursday, 18 March
- Thursday, 27 May
- Thursday, 29 August
- Thursday, 11 November

For more information or to make a booking, see our website:  
[www.multilit.com](http://www.multilit.com) or ring 9850 9695.

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