

MULTILIT[®] Moments

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Yes (or no) Minister?

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In an attempt to initiate a public debate about the effectiveness of current reading instruction in Australian schools, a group of 26 leading academic experts on reading have written to Dr Brendan Nelson, (federal) Minister for Education, Science and Training, pressing for a public enquiry. Professor Kevin Wheldall, Director of MULTILIT, was one of the two main organisers (and a signatory) of the letter. Following are extracts from the letter:

“As researchers, psychologists, linguists and educators who have studied the processes underlying the development of reading, and who are familiar with the scientific research literature relating to the acquisition of reading, we are writing to you to express our concerns with the way in which reading is typically being taught in Australian schools. We would like particularly to draw to your attention the continuing discrepancy between the model of reading development that forms the basis for

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MULTILIT is on the move

As many of our clients are aware, demand for MULTILIT[®] Clinic services, particularly our Education Programs, has increased substantially over the past year. To provide our clients with the best possible tutorial space and to meet the need of the Macquarie University Special Education Centre for additional space, MULTILIT[®] is relocating to larger, purpose-designed premises in the North Ryde Research Park. MULTILIT[®] remains a linked University program and our new offices are only a couple of blocks away from the University and very near Macquarie Shopping Centre.

Our new MULTILIT[®] Centre will house all of our clinical and consultancy services and our administration (*with the exception of parent and professional training which will continue to be held on the Macquarie University campus*).



The offices are currently being designed and fitted-out. We hope to move sometime in late July or early August. Our new contact details will be:

The MULTILIT Centre
Unit 13, 64 Talavera Road
Macquarie Park NSW 2113
Phone and fax numbers to be advised

Hyperlexia

The other day one of my MULTILIT colleagues, Val Woods, drew my attention to a fascinating article, originally published in the *Washington Post*, about hyperlexia.

As many of you will have heard me say before now, some kids seem to learn to read very easily with relatively little instruction, most learn at the rate we have come to regard as normal as a result of the typical instruction found in schools, while about 20 to 25 percent of children really struggle to learn to read unless they are afforded intensive, systematic instruction with a strong phonics component (such as that provided within MULTILIT programs). Many children in this struggling category of low-progress readers are said to have dyslexia, a learning disability.

Imagine, then, having a child with a very different 'disability', so-called hyperlexia.....

Children with hyperlexia learn to read unbelievably quickly without any apparent instruction at all; they just seem to absorb the skills of reading by looking at and hearing books read. Spelling also appears to present few challenges to such children who are, by the way, also extremely rare, about two per 10,000 children

The *Washington Post* article tells the story of Alex who could read at a twelve-year-old level by the time he began school. If this all sounds too good to be true

well it is; because the downside is that Alex presents with many of the characteristics we have come to associate with Asperger's syndrome (an autism spectrum disorder). Alex's verbal skills were slow to develop and he has great difficulty understanding what he reads especially when it concerns the emotions and motivations of others, not to mention the social niceties of everyday life. This typically presents problems when interacting with his peers, especially as Alex tends to talk like a book in perfectly formed grammatical sentences.

Researchers are hoping that the study of students with hyperlexia will help them to unravel the knot of exactly how reading works within the brain with the aim of eventually being able to address the needs of dyslexic children more effectively. Apparently Alex shows greatly increased brain activity in two key areas of the brain associated with the abilities of first being able to link individual letters to sounds and then to assemble the string of sounds into words.

All of this is enormously encouraging to those of us (parents, teachers and researchers) concerned with dyslexic readers but the fact remains that, at the moment the only proven intervention for such children is intensive systematic instruction in the basic skills of reading.

Kevin Wheldall

MULTILIT® in the media

- *The Australian* newspaper's April article entitled "Phonics at core of new literacy war" quoted Professor Wheldall who said, "It can't be emphasised enough that the whole language philosophy still has a grip on the education system in Australia and that while whole-language advocates would stress their approach included phonics, there was only lip-service to phonics."

MULTILIT recently featured in three ABC Radio Interviews:

- On *The National Interest* program, Professor Wheldall was interviewed about his new research that challenges the widely held view that low literacy levels are linked to crime and imprisonment.
- In an interview with ABC health reporter, Dr Norman Swan, Sally Loane was talking about dyslexia in children and said she had heard that MULTILIT, a program at Macquarie University works better than the NSW education programs.
- In an interview with Julie McCrossin on *Life Matters*, Robyn Beaman discussed research involving the sort of behaviour which teachers find most troublesome with their classes as a whole and also the behaviour of the most problematic kids.

What teachers read



Have you noticed how everyone seems to be a researcher these days? No one reads magazines or watches TV for fun anymore, they are too busy researching.

Noticing that you have gained a kilo or two, your significant other will remark "I've been doing some research on the Atkins diet and it sounds just right for you". (Translation: "I've been reading about fat slobs like you eating too many carbs in *Women's Weekly*"). Or one of your kids tells you that they "have to do some research on the computer for school". (Reality: Cruising the net for four hours, tying up the telephone line, downloading random paragraphs, while simultaneously chatting to three different e-pals via MSN.)

But real research, of course, amounts to rather more than the passive consumption of ill-digested snippets from sources of unknown veracity. Real research implies a critical, direct examination of original source material, rigorous data collection completed objectively, and conceptual synthesis of what is found with what was previously known. Real research is hard work but is well worth doing if, as a result, we become more knowledgeable about the reality of our world and our place within it.

Research can be even more valuable if it has a direct practical application in our lives. Moreover, and because of this, most professional people feel that it is incumbent upon them to keep reasonably up to date with new developments arising from research in their field of practice. Indeed, many professional organisations, especially those regulated by registration requirements for continued permission to practice, actually require evidence of continuing professional development.

This is not yet the case for teachers but it is interesting to ask just how much and what professional reading do teachers engage in? After

all, there is not much chance of classroom practice being influenced by research if teachers are not aware of the research findings in the first place. One of our postgraduate students, Neale Rudland, with his supervisor Dr Coral Kemp, recently won the Lee Mills Award of the Australian Association for Special Education for an article detailing their research on this very topic. It made for sober reading. In brief, Neale and Coral found that teachers do very little professional reading and that hardly any teachers read the research in its original form. Teachers are more likely to be influenced by what they read in subject area newsletters and magazines and 'how to' books for teachers than by the findings of real research. They are even more (and usually only) impressed by what other classroom teachers have to say.....

Kevin Wheldall

Professional Training Dates Added

To meet demand, we've added more dates for our Sydney MULTILIT® Reading Tutor Program Professional Workshops.

Workshop dates for the remainder of 2004 are:

Thursday	19 August
Friday	10 September
Thursday	11 November
Friday	19 November

For more information and to book in for a workshop, see our website: www.multilit.com or ring 9850 9695.



Making Up Lost Time In Literacy

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MULTILIT® in New Zealand

Chuck Marriot has been using and promoting MULTILIT within the Christchurch area of New Zealand for two years and is very enthusiastic about the response he has been getting from both teachers and students. He is particularly interested in Boys' Education.

Chuck writes:

"I have trained a number of teacher aides to deliver MULTILIT® to children. This has been very attractive to schools because:

- there is minimal planning to do, so harried teachers are not having to do a lot of extra prep for their teacher aides;
- it is structured, so personnel feel secure in what they are doing;
- it is a less expensive option for schools struggling to meet budgets;
- the personnel really enjoy delivering MULTILIT and feel huge satisfaction out of helping children improve who otherwise probably would not;
- it gives a generic way forward for those older readers who are often in classrooms where skills teaching in reading is less of a priority than in the first three years;
- it is a research based programme that has not been commercially driven."

Professor Kevin Wheldall will be presenting the keynote address to the Boys' Education Conference in Auckland, New Zealand in July as well as two workshops with Robyn Beaman on the effectiveness of MULTILIT for boys.

Yes Minister—continued from page 1

for most of our current school curricula and teaching methods, and the model of reading development that is emerging as a result of the research into reading that has been undertaken over the past twenty to thirty years.

Reading instruction in Australia is based largely on the whole language approach, which makes the assumption that learning to read is like learning to speak, and requires only exposure to a rich language environment without any specific teaching of the alphabetic system and letter sound relationships. However, the research on reading development has shown clearly that this is not the case, and that the ability to read is a complex learned skill that requires specific teaching.

In the United States there has been widespread public debate about different approaches to the teaching of reading, which has led to a series of government-funded reports designed to examine the scientific evidence relating to how children learn to read, and what strategies are most effective in teaching reading. All of these reports have come up with essentially the same conclusion; that mastery of the alphabetic code is essential to proficient reading, and that methods of instruction that teach this code directly are more effective than those that do not.....

Given the emphasis that is now being placed on evidence-based policy, we ask that consideration be given to setting up an independent review to examine the research evidence relating to the teaching of reading, and the extent to which current practices are based on this evidence."