



Is Phonics Fascist?

By Kevin Wheldall

Some people seem to believe that teaching young children the alphabetic principle is a right wing plot, that teaching phonics is somehow fascist. Teaching kids to read by emphasising letter sound correspondence is portrayed as the first step on the road to totalitarianism - the next step clearly being to invade Poland!

Reading scientists with the most impeccable liberal credentials have had their integrity impugned by overheated lobbyists for the whole language approach to teaching reading, eager to discredit (by whatever means necessary) any research findings of which they disapprove. How to teach young children to read has, in fact, been transformed into some sort of liberality test of political correctness. These disagreements about the teaching of reading have not been dubbed 'the reading wars' for nothing.

Even more bizarre are the so-called 'critical literacy' enthusiasts who seem to think that being able to learn to read is merely a trivial prerequisite for what primary kids should really be doing. Now, I assume that you might have been entertaining the rather reactionary notion that primary schooling was about learning the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. What poor deluded fools we are! Let me share with you this advertisement from the magazine *'The Reading Teacher'*.

It is an ad for a book on critical literacy headed "No more stories about dogs named Spot, trips to Grandma's or broken arms" (!) The author (Lee Heffernan) is quoted as saying "Instead of simply recording life events, critically literate readers and writers use text to get something done in the world". This book (for upper primary school children) urges an approach to writing that "allows students to question multiple viewpoints, explore sociopolitical issues, and take action to promote social justice."

***Teaching kids to read should never be
about politics – it is far too important for that.***

Social activism? For 10 year olds? Political correctness notwithstanding, my MULTILIT team clings tenaciously to the view that the most important academic gift we can give to children is the ability to read fluently and easily. At a more appropriate time in their development, and without political indoctrination in either direction our children will then be able to make up their own minds on social issues, having been able to read all sides of an argument.

continued on page 2

Welcome to the new look MULTILIT Moments. A lot has changed at MULTILIT since you received the last issue of this newsletter in 2004.

As many of you may know, in January MULTILIT moved from its former home within Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC). The MULTILIT Centre is now based just off campus in purpose-designed offices on Talavera Road, Macquarie Park. Of course, we are still closely associated with Macquarie University where Professor Kevin Wheldall continues to be Director of MUSEC as well as of MULTILIT.

Moving MULTILIT proved to be quite a task and was masterminded by MULTILIT Manager, Robyn Beaman. Ensuring that we continued to have access to all of the services we had previously taken for granted was quite a steep learning curve but MULTILIT staff rose to the challenge magnificently.

Our new contact details are listed on the back page of this newsletter.

Meanwhile, we continue in our endeavours to teach students who are struggling to learn to read, such as the students attending our Schoolwise Program in Ashfield, NSW. We recently analysed our most recent data from four intakes of students who participated in and completed the Schoolwise Program for a full two terms in 2002 and 2003. Altogether, over these two years, 136 new students completed the Schoolwise Program.

The 136 students, who were assessed as they commenced and completed their two terms in the Schoolwise Program comprised 61 girls and 75 boys. Of these, 113 were primary school students, of whom 27 were in Year 5 and 86 were in Year 6. Twenty three students were from high schools in Year 7.

Schoolwise students on entry were typically about four years behind their

chronological age in both reading accuracy and in reading comprehension. The main findings were as follows:

- On average, these students made overall gains (over the five month period of the program) of 16 months in reading accuracy, 12 months in reading comprehension and 19 months in single word recognition. They also gained 11 months in spelling.
- On average, they were able to read nearly 50% more words correctly per minute than they could when they first entered the program.
- 74% left the program reading books at a level approximating functional literacy.

Call me a fascist if you will, but I think that these results speak for themselves. Joking aside, teaching kids to read should never be about politics – it is far too important for that.



Reading Recovery and Reading Science

Kevin Wheldall

I have been accused of being anti Reading Recovery, as if I wanted to abolish it as a pernicious evil, like slavery. In fact, I want to improve it or to improve on it.

My view is not that Reading Recovery is bad; just that it is not good enough. I have a deep and abiding respect for the research work of Dame Professor Marie Clay that underpins Reading Recovery. In its day it was ground breaking stuff; but that day was in the 1970s..... The problem with Reading Recovery is that it has failed to adapt and change in the light of new knowledge. Given that we now know so much more about the processes by which children learn to read, knowledge garnered over the last 20-30 years, it seems to me

either perverse or monumentally arrogant to ignore that research and to refuse to incorporate it into the Reading Recovery model.

Moreover, remember that we are not talking about a program for good or even average readers, for whom the method of instruction seems to be relatively unimportant, but a program for low progress readers for whom it is critically important. These students deserve the very best instruction we can offer, uncompromised by misplaced notions of literacy instruction as a form of political correctness. Yes, of course, literacy can be enormously liberating but not if you cannot actually read.

In 2002, a group of leading academic reading scientists from the United States

and New Zealand (where Reading Recovery was developed) wrote to members of the US Congress alerting them to the severe limitations of Reading Recovery. They argued, as do I, that Reading Recovery fails to address the needs of young low-progress readers, especially the lowest performing students, because its developers have failed to integrate the findings of more recent, independent scientifically-based reading research into their program. More specifically, the program does not include explicit instruction in phonic word attack skills.

Being a one on one program, employing highly trained teachers as tutors, it is also extremely expensive. This would not be so bad if it were effective but our own research,

We should be responsive to new data and make changes, on a systematic basis, accordingly.

presented in a commissioned research report to the NSW Department of Education and Training in 1993, showed that, at best, it is probably effective for only one student in three who is put through the program. You might be surprised to hear that our report has not been officially released to this day and that our state continues to pour millions of dollars into this only marginally effective program.

A closing thought.... I am proud of what my research and development team have achieved with MULTILIT but, as I have said many times, it is not rocket science. In fact, it is little more than the systematic application of what is known, from the research literature, to be effective in helping low-progress readers learn to read. In discussions with my team recently I expressed the view that I sincerely hoped that MULTILIT might still be around in 20 years time but (and this set my team members back a bit) I also hoped that it would be very different from what it looks like now! My point is not that what we are doing is deficient but that I want it to be better, to be more effective, to be more efficient, to deliver more bangs for your buck. I trust that this will happen as we try out new ideas as our research (and the research of others worldwide) generates them. What appear to be key elements now may be discarded if they do not appear to be earning their keep compared with other new techniques. Research will determine this.

My view is not that Reading Recovery is bad, just that it is not good enough.

For example, we used to employ a method known as repeated reading as one of the procedures that accompany the MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program. It is widely regarded as one of the most simple and yet effective interventions for low-progress readers. A careful reading of the literature on repeated

reading to date, however, while yielding a plethora of articles extolling its virtues, includes relatively few empirical articles testifying to its efficacy. Moreover, many of these empirical articles are methodologically weak and where they are relatively sound, the evidence for the efficacy of repeated reading is more equivocal.

Now, don't get me wrong; the jury is still out on this one and I do not intend to make a

precipitate decision about its value without further research. But the evidence is not strong enough at this stage to warrant its continued inclusion in our programs. The point I am making is that we should be responsive to new data and make changes, on a systematic basis, accordingly. It seems to me that Reading Recovery has signally failed to do this.



A school's MULTILIT experience

We have been using the MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program at our school (K-12) for four years. Our first students participated in the program when they were in Year 6 and are currently in Year 9. We began with 10 low-progress readers attending before-school sessions with teachers and trained parents. Applying the positive teaching strategies practised by MUSEC (Macquarie University Special Education Centre) and by the MULTILIT staff, the students bathed in the feedback they were receiving.

Before MULTILIT, these students had rarely contributed in class, were embarrassed

about their reading abilities and had low self esteem. After around two terms they had completely changed. They were excited about learning, were the first to volunteer to read aloud in class (which completely surprised their teachers) and they entered high school much more confident in their abilities. I can't speak highly enough of the merits of MULTILIT.

One aspect we have adopted is using peer tutors. Currently Year 10 and 11 students, working toward their Duke of Edinburgh Award, tutor our students once a week. This has been especially beneficial for our MULTILIT boys and they find it so "cool" to read with the "big high-school boys", as they refer to them.

Jennifer Exton,
Northern Beaches Christian School

MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program Professional Training Workshops

Thursday 10 August
North Ryde

(Macquarie Graduate School of Management)

Thursday 11 November
North Ryde

(Macquarie Graduate School of Management)



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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. Our workshops are also of great value to speech therapists and other professionals who want to use MULTILIT.

The workshops run from 9.30am-3.30pm and cost \$300 (inc GST) per person, including morning tea and lunch. If you want to purchase the MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program kit at the time of registration, we offer a special package for \$450 that includes attendance at the workshop and the kit. This is a saving of \$55.

Register now by either ringing us on (02) 9886 6600 and book over the phone, or log onto our website (www.multilit.com), print off the booking form and fax it back to MULTILIT.