



By Kevin Wheldall

My father has never had a piano lesson in his life (and cannot read a note of sheet music) but he has an extensive repertoire of old style pub piano favourites he can play by ear. As a child, I was treated to "Roll out the barrel", and similar ditties from yesteryear, on a regular basis. Given a few minutes, he can usually work out how to play most popular tunes, complete with a rudimentary left hand accompaniment.

I envy him his gift. I managed to learn a few piano chords after hours of self-tutoring and rapidly ground to a halt. My ability to play the guitar is (or, rather, was) a little more advanced but it took hours and hours of

Is learning to read like learning to talk or like learning to play the piano?

to "Will you stop your tickling, Jock" and "She's a lassie from Lancashire" in F# proved to be quite a challenge.

When it comes to learning to read, some kids are like my dad – they pick it up quickly and easily with little or no instruction. They are just very fortunate in that their brains are so wired as to make learning to read a very simple matter. But most of us do need instruction in order to learn how to read and we need a lot of practice, as I did when I learned to play guitar.

Some so-called experts, however, those who identify with the philosophy of 'whole language', insist that learning to read is more like learning to talk. With very, very few exceptions, almost all children learn

that have not evolved a written form of their language. There were no written forms of Maori or of the aboriginal languages of Australia, for example, prior to the attempts by missionaries and settlers to codify the languages into an alphabetic form.

Note also that reading is not even processed in the same way by all cultures. English and other European languages are all alphabetic but Chinese is logographic or character-based: when you read Chinese you do not break up the characters into component sounds as you do words in English. Reading is then both a complex and, in some respects, a rather arbitrary process.

What all this means is that while some children (the lucky ones) do indeed pick up reading quickly and easily, as 'whole language' theorists believe, many children do not. Moreover, a significant minority, possibly 25% of children, will always struggle with learning to read unless they are given highly specific, structured and intensive instruction in the alphabetic principle. For these dyslexic and other low-progress readers, learning to read will be like learning to play the piano when you have no ear for music. It will be a hard slog. It is perverse, and indeed cruel, to persist in believing otherwise when all the available evidence is to the contrary.

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practice without ever achieving the mastery I so desperately desired. (Eric Clapton was certainly never in any danger from me.) It was only when I tried to play along with my father, on rhythm guitar, that I discovered that he played every tune he knew in the same key, which was a little disconcerting, to say the least. Trying to play the chords

to talk quickly and easily as a result of their everyday interactions with their parents and others. Learning to talk is indeed a natural phenomenon that we all appear to be biologically predisposed to achieve.

But learning to read is not 'natural'. In evolutionary terms it is quite a recent achievement and there are many cultures

Submission from Learning Difficulties Australia to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy



Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) was originally founded forty years ago to represent the professional interests of those working with children who experience particular difficulties in learning basic skills in the absence of any measurable intellectual disability or developmental delay. Our members include remedial teachers, educational psychologists, speech pathologists and others. As such, we are particularly concerned with the central remit of the current inquiry into the teaching of reading and related skills and would offer the following brief comments on matters of concern to us.

1. We welcome the inquiry and the opportunity it affords of examining seriously the teaching of reading and related skills in Australian schools. Many, if not most, of the students who become our clients would not need to access the services we provide if they had been offered adequate initial instruction in the first place.

2. The model of initial (and remedial) reading instruction provided in Australian schools should be based on scientifically

validated best practice. Over the past thirty years, we have seen the growth of a considerable body of scientific research literature internationally, illuminating both how reading works and how it should best be taught. Moreover, a number of comprehensive reports have been produced collating, summarising and consolidating these researches and drawing inevitable conclusions. De Lemos (2002) has produced for the Australian Council of Educational Research a short digest of these more extensive reports and their implications for practice. We commend the report by de Lemos as essential background reading for the Committee of inquiry.

3. It is now universally acknowledged by the scientific community researching reading and related skills that reading is quintessentially phonologically based i.e. that the ability to decompose the word stream of human speech into its component sounds is an essential prerequisite of learning to read. Children who experience difficulties in so doing typically experience

problems in learning to read if these difficulties are not specifically addressed by appropriate instruction.

4. The development of phonological sensitivity, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning to read to take place. The beginning readers must also understand that the decomposed letter sounds of speech may be associated with graphic symbols or letters. This is known as letter-sound correspondence and is best taught overtly and systematically in the early stages of learning to read. Learning to read by this so-called 'phonics' method has been shown to be the most effective method of teaching reading, a conclusion reached by the National Reading Panel in the United States (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

5. Reading instruction based on the body of scientific research referred to above must replace the practices of many teachers, even though they are commonly advocated in many teacher education establishments and by state education departments. It is recognised that the views of those

Whole language based teaching will continue to fail an unacceptable and substantial minority of students

advocating a 'whole language philosophy' towards reading instruction are sincerely held and, indeed, did much to correct a previous preoccupation with sub-skills teaching to the neglect of a need for, and an appreciation of, reading meaningful connected text. The fact remains, however, and regardless of how well meaning its adherents, that whole language

based teaching will continue to fail an unacceptable and substantial minority of students (twenty to thirty per cent) in our schools if it is not supplemented with programs of explicit and systematic phonics instruction.

6. We are confident that the introduction of such evidence-based practices into the initial training of teachers and professional development courses for serving teachers would lead to immediate and considerable improvements in the overall literacy standards of Australia's young school students in their early years of schooling.

7. This would reduce the need for very expensive (and not always very satisfactory) large-scale remedial reading programs in schools. (Reading Recovery, for example, consumes a large part of state education budgets but has been shown to be only mildly effective and for only the less disabled readers.) More effective initial reading instruction would drastically reduce the numbers of students in need of remedial reading instruction, perhaps to less than five per cent.

8. By ensuring that the vast majority of students learn to read quickly and easily, as a result of employing the evidence-based best practice teaching methods referred to above, students with more intractable reading difficulties may be afforded more time and resources. Members of LDA would welcome the opportunity to restrict their remit to serving the needs of such a small minority of students rather than continuing to attempt to stem the tide of low-progress readers emerging from our schools.

References

De Lemos, M. (2002). Closing the gap between research and practice: Foundations for the acquisition of literacy. Camberwell, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read (00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Prepared by Kevin Wheldall (Vice President) and Sylvia Byers (President) on behalf of the Council of 'Learning Difficulties Australia', March 2005.

Still Wild About Harry?

(A review of 'Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince' by J. K. Rowling, 2005, published by Bloomsbury (London).)

By Kevin Wheldall

In London, the British prime minister is struggling to come to grips with a wave of terrorist activity and to understand the dark forces that underpin them. While this might sound like the terrorist situation in the real world today, it is, in fact, the opening scene in J K Rowling's latest children's novel in the Harry Potter series, where the political situation is, if anything, even worse.

'Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince' weighs in at just over 600 pages, quite lengthy but well short of the nearly 900 pages of Rowling's last book. With each succeeding volume, there will always be some critics eager to take a little shine off the Rowling phenomenon. There was talk last time of the fifth book being not only too long but also too dark but I found it possibly the best so far in a breathtaking series of children's novels. (Perhaps some reviewers would be wise to remember that, in spite of her undoubted popularity with adults too, Rowling's books are primarily for children.) If this sixth title in the series appears possibly a little slow moving initially, then this should be understood in the context of the exceptionally high expectations we now have of her work.

Rowling's work may be read on many levels.

If the last novel was 'too dark' for some, the latest might present as too romantic for others. Perhaps there should be a 'Snog Warning' on the cover to prepare ten-year-old boys in particular for what they might perceive as a rather nasty outbreak of pashing among their heroes. Of course, Harry and the gang are now 'sixteen going on seventeen' and so a fair amount of snogging is only to be expected.

Along with her gifts for characterisation and imaginative plotlines, Rowling is also splendidly inventive in the names she gives to the magical devices she has made up. One of my favourites is the wonderfully evocative 'pensieve', a fabulous gadget that allows users to relive not only their own captured memories but also those of others. By combining the words pensive and sieve, she captures the essence of, almost literally, the process of thoughtfully sifting through one's memories.

Of course, much of this detail may pass young readers by but, like all of the best children's books, Rowling's work may be read on many levels. Few young readers will perhaps pick up on the theme of slavery evident in her discussions of the role and place of 'house elves', for example, or the racism implicit in the abusive term 'mudblood'. And yet she achieves an awareness of these concepts in young minds without labouring the point in the heavy-handed fashion we have come to expect, perhaps especially from those prize-winning children's authors who produce 'relevant' and socially realistic novels, beloved of politically correct critics and (rightly) ignored by the children for whom they are supposedly written.

This latest book in the series, like its predecessors, is a book to be enjoyed by a wide readership. Some younger readers might find it challenging, and may need a little parental reassurance, not least because the ending in particular is both dark and shocking. It will, however, provide a satisfying continuing story for parents and children alike.

MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program Professional Training Workshops

As this is the final issue of MULTILIT moments for this year, Professor Wheldall and the MULTILIT team send all of our readers our best wishes for a healthy and happy New Year.

The MULTILIT offices will be closed between 24th December, reopening on 9th January for literacy assessments and resource orders. Term 1 for our educational programs will commence on Monday, 30th January 2006.



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The popular MULTILIT® Reading Tutor Program is used in schools all over Australia to help low-progress readers develop the reading skills they need to access the whole curriculum. Delivering individualised instruction in the all important skills of word attack, sight words and supported reading of text at the appropriate level, the MULTILIT® Reading Tutor Program is an invaluable tool for all teachers who have students who are struggling to learn to read.

MULTILIT® Educational Consultants conduct professional development workshops in how to implement this powerful intervention in the school context. Designed for students in Year 1 and over, the MULTILIT® Reading Tutor Program is delivered in just 30 minutes a day.

Who Should Attend?

Regular classroom teachers, Specialist teachers and Other professionals (speech therapists, etc.)

Final Workshop for 2005

Friday, 25th November - South Melbourne

Venue: Clarendon on York Business Centre

Time: 9.15-am-1pm

Cost: Workshop only \$275 per person

Package Deal: \$425 per person includes workshop and MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program Kit (savings of \$55)

(includes morning tea and GST)

2006 Workshops

All workshops conducted in 2006 will be held from 9.15am-3.30pm at a cost of:

Workshop only: \$300 per person

Package Deal: \$450 per person includes workshop and MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program Kit (savings of \$55)

(cost includes morning tea and lunch, as well as GST)

New South Wales

Friday, 10th March - North Ryde

Friday, 19th May - Sydney CBD

Victoria

June (exact date to be announced)

- Melbourne CBD

Queensland

Friday, 24th March - Brisbane CBD

HOW TO BOOK:

Numbers are limited (maximum 20 participants per workshop) so book early. You can register by ringing MULTILIT on (02) 9886 6600 and book over the phone or request a booking form be faxed, emailed or posted to you. Or log onto www.multilit.com, print off the booking form for the seminar you wish to attend and fax it back to MULTILIT.