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MULTILIT moments

A newsletter for parents and teachers

Semester 1 2006



WORDS IN MY EAR

Kevin Wheldall

I think I must have been about ten or eleven years old when I developed an interest in what we would now call self-sufficiency. This was many years before Felicity Kendall and Richard Briars popularised the concept on television in 'The Good Life'.

I had acquired, at a church jumble sale, a quantity of old copies of magazines with names like 'The Home Moneymaker' and 'The Smallholder'. The more I read, the more convinced I became that my parents should acquire a smallholding of land and rear pigs or goats, "for pleasure and profit" as the magazines put it. The fact that we did not even own our own home and lived in a 'council house' (a housing commission home) did not strike me then as a necessary impediment to my plans for a country lifestyle.

Whatever else it may have done for my education, it improved my vocabulary as I came across words like 'legume' and 'cloche' for the first time, although their place in my vocabulary was still a little uncertain.... Having tried and failed miserably in my endeavours to persuade my parents to buy a pig, "just to get us started", I searched frantically for another proposition that might offer more success.

Perhaps we could grow things, I ventured. "Like what?" said my parents, doubtless humouring me. Wanting to impress with something more exotic than peas or beans, I searched my newly acquired horticultural vocabulary for legumes, a word that was still linked to cloches in my mind. "We could grow klosches", I proclaimed authoritatively.

The green-fingered among you will know that a 'klosch' or rather a 'cloche' is, in fact, "a translucent cover for protecting outdoor plants". My parents' unconstrained laughter at my suggestion of growing 'klosches' did little for my confidence, or credibility, as a horticultural expert and my mind soon turned to other schemes.

I read to my own children from (almost) birth to certainly late primary school and might even have been first year high school!

In the Radio Times I came across an advertisement claiming that you could travel to Australia for only ten pounds – what a bargain! The bit about "assisted passage scheme for migrants" passed me by but my attempts to convince my parents of the soundness of my latest scheme were no more successful than my proposals to rear pigs or grow 'cloches'.

On another occasion, I was reading aloud to my parents from the local newspaper when I came across the word 'anxiety' for the first time. I did, however, know the word anxious and so, sure that it was somehow connected to anxiety, I confidently pronounced it as 'ankshuty' – more hilarity in the Wheldall household.

Words like legume, cloche, migrant, assisted passage, and anxiety do not crop up that frequently in everyday conversation, especially not in conversation with children. So how then do children learn these words ...? The simple answer is that they usually learn them by reading, because unfamiliar words like these are far more likely to crop up in print than in conversation.

Serious problems arise, of course, if the child cannot read very well ... Low-progress readers, then, experience a double whammy of disadvantage: not only can they not read very well but they also suffer restricted vocabulary growth because they encounter far fewer new

words than the child who can read competently. As a consequence, they get further and further behind not only in vocabulary development but also in their general knowledge about the world and how it works. The famous reading scientist Keith Stanovich refers to this as the Matthew Effect, whereby (if you remember your new testament):

“Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath’, (Matthew ch 25 v29).

This is sometimes referred to as: “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”.

So how do we get around this problem of children falling further and further behind because they cannot read very well? The answer is, of course, to read to your kids. Read to them every day if possible and read to them from a variety of sources. There are so many wonderful books for children that I guarantee that parents will enjoy reading aloud as much as their children will love hearing them.

I read to my own children from (almost) birth to certainly late primary school and might even have been first year high school! The times we spent reading together are memories we all treasure. For me this meant the opportunity to re-read the Chronicles of Narnia, for example. Danny, the Champion of the World by Roald Dahl was another great favourite. And then there are the wonderful Adventure series of books by the much-maligned Enid Blyton – pure joy.

Parents (and teachers) should also discuss what they are reading with their children and ask lots of questions about the plot and the

characters and, of course, explain and define words as they crop up in the story.

Like Mem Fox, the celebrated children’s author, I believe passionately in parents reading aloud to their children. Where I am in total disagreement with Mem Fox is in her ignorant insistence that this is all that children need to learn to read. This is quite simply nonsense – and dangerous nonsense at that. The vast majority of children need a sound phonics program if they are going to learn to read easily and quickly in their first few years of schooling. I am delighted that the (now former) federal minister for education Dr Brendan Nelson agrees with me and that the Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy entitled ‘Teaching Reading’ (released late last year) advocates intensive systematic phonics instruction.

Before I close, all this talk of kids and vocabulary puts me in mind of the story about the boy reading a book who comes across the word ‘altercation’ and asks his father what it means. “I’ve no idea about that word, son’, says Dad.

A little while later the boy asks for the meaning of the word ‘amnesty’. “Ooh, that’s a hard word – I haven’t a clue”, says Dad.

Five minutes later the boy asks his dad to explain ‘subterfuge’ to him. “Subterfuge?” says Dad, a little bit exasperated by now, “You’ve got me beat on that one, mate.”

So the boy says, “Dad, you don’t mind me asking all these questions, do you?” “Of course not”, replies Dad, “If you don’t ask, you’ll never learn.”

Introducing Dr Louise Ellis



Professor Kevin Wheldall is proud to announce the appointment of Dr Louise Ellis to The MULTILIT Centre. Following the resignation of Simone Pogorzelski who has

relocated to Melbourne with her family, Dr Ellis has been appointed to replace her as Senior MULTILIT Clinician.

A registered psychologist, she completed her first degree at Macquarie University and her PhD in educational psychology at the Self-concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Centre at the University of Western Sydney. Dr Ellis’s appointment prior to joining MULTILIT was with the prestigious Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), where she recently completed her first book “Balancing Approaches: Revisiting the educational psychology research on teaching students with learning difficulties”.

Commenting on Dr Ellis’s appointment, Professor Wheldall said: “Simone Pogorzelski’s resignation was a huge blow to MULTILIT and I am relieved that our association with her will continue, albeit at some distance. I am, however, absolutely delighted that we have been able to attract a psychologist of Dr Ellis’s calibre to replace Simone. Dr Ellis will be a major asset to the next phase of MULTILIT’s development.

She will lead a highly trained and experienced team of MULTILIT Clinicians (all of whom are registered psychologists and who will complete all MULTILIT assessments in future), MULTILIT Instructors and MULTILIT Tutors. She will be responsible for all MULTILIT clinical services.”

HOT OR NOT?

Literacy leaders lukewarm about scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction

Kevin Wheldall

Every year, since 1996, the bimonthly newspaper of the International Reading Association (IRA), 'Reading Today', has published the results of its annual survey of 25 'literacy leaders'. The panel of leading literacy educators (largely North American academics from education faculties) are asked to comment on "what's hot and what's not" in reading research and practice by selecting which topics from a supplied list are currently receiving more (and favourable) attention ('hot') and which are currently being viewed less favourably ('not hot'). The experts are then allowed to give their personal opinion of whether they think the topic should be hot or not.

For 2005, '*scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction*' topped the list as the hottest topic. In fact, all of the respondents were in agreement (rated "extremely hot"). The front page article in Reading Today then goes on to explain that "*scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction* refers to quantitative research that is usually conducted with a control group and an adequate number of students randomly assigned to each group".

This sounds like good news for those eager to promote evidence-based practice in the teaching of reading. To have the support of 25 leading literacy educators is surely gratifying if a little surprising, given that IRA has been a fulsome advocate of whole language over the years. As in so many things in life, however, the devil is in the detail. The article goes on to say:

It is interesting that most of this year's group of literacy leaders who rated scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction as "hot" also said that the topic "should not be hot".

Many of them believed that there was too much emphasis on this type of research and that other types of research, such as qualitative and correlational studies, were being ignored.

And so there we have it: *scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction* is clearly the hottest topic but it shouldn't be and they wish it would go away. What further evidence do we need to conclude that the so-called literacy experts who led us into the sorry educational mess in which we now find ourselves are unlikely to change their views in a hurry? This does not augur well for the fate of the 'Nelson Report' of the National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy that has come out strongly in favour of evidence-based practice in general and explicit systematic phonics instruction in particular. It will take a lot more than recommendations from a government report to make literacy experts like these change their attitudes or their behaviour.

NEWS from MULTILIT

- Professor Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman have both received a Macquarie University Community Outreach Award for their work on MULTILIT over the past ten years.
- The Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy was released just before Christmas. The Inquiry was initiated following an approach to Dr Brendan Nelson by 26 leading academic researchers into reading and related skills led by Professors Kevin Wheldall and Max Coltheart from Macquarie University and Dr Molly de Lemos. The 'Nelson Report' recommends intensive systematic instruction in phonics and urges that teachers be properly trained to teach reading.

- Professor Kevin Wheldall has recently become President of Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) and is also Executive Editor of LDA Publications.

- At the end of 2005, the MULTILIT Schoolwise Program (provided for the Exodus Foundation in Ashfield) celebrated ten successive years of helping older low-progress readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project is a collaborative venture with the Rev Bill Crews, directed by Professor Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman.



Following an approach from Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, Professor Kevin Wheldall (pictured above with students) and Robyn Beaman (pictured below) are now working with a remote Aboriginal community in Coen, Cape York. The results for the first intake of indigenous low-progress readers into the Coen MULTILIT Tutorial Centre program have been very encouraging with gains averaging over a year in just two terms.



Professor Wheldall and Ms Beaman were shortlisted and 'highly commended' for a Macquarie University Innovations Award for their innovative partnership with Cape York Partnerships for the Coen MULTILIT Project.

The new MULTILIT book levels

Parents and teachers are sometimes at a loss to know which books to read with low-progress readers; when they are doing Reinforced Reading using Pause, Prompt and Praise, for example. The new MULTILIT Book Levels take away the guesswork by providing a chart to help you to establish the right book level for the child and then a list of books for each level for you to choose from. It really is that simple. For full details follow this web link: www.multilit.com/resources/booklevels

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MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program Professional Training Workshops

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 successfully 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 savings of \$55. Workshop participation is limited to teachers and other appropriate staff currently employed by a school.

Workshop Dates

Thursday, 8 June

Friday, 4 August

Friday, 8 September

Friday, 24 November

Location

Melbourne CBD

Brisbane CBD

Sydney CBD

North Ryde, NSW

HOW TO REGISTER:

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 to be faxed to you. You can also visit our website at www.multilit.com, print off the booking form and fax it back to us.