

MULTILIT is key to education in Cape York Welfare Reform

In July, Mal Brough, Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, announced that the Federal Government will fund Noel Pearson's Cape York Welfare Reform initiative to a total of \$48 million, \$12 million of which is earmarked for education.

MULTILIT is named as a key feature of the education component of the Welfare Reform program and funding will be available to roll out MULTILIT across four sites in Cape York: Hope Vale, Mossman Gorge, Arukun, and includes a continuation of our pilot work in Coen. MULTILIT has been working with students and staff at the local school in Coen since 2005 as part of Cape York Partnership's Every Child Is Special project.

Project directors, Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn

Beaman, are, of course, delighted to be part of this ground breaking initiative and welcome the opportunity to demonstrate, on such a large scale, the progress that indigenous students can (and do) make when offered effective literacy instruction.

This will be a huge undertaking and MULTILIT is very keen to hear from any of our teaching colleagues in Special Education who might be interested in a tour of duty in Cape York. Implementation of this program will commence in the 2008 school year.

Thank you to all the members of the MULTILIT team, past and present, who have worked with us to help make this happen. We are confident that we can make a real difference to the lives of young indigenous Australians in Cape York and beyond.



Students at the local school in Coen catch up on their reading skills using the MULTILIT program.



Noel Pearson and Kevin Wheldall outside Cape York Institute.

Type cast



by Kevin Wheldall

As a result of the wonders of word processing, the many and various emails and documents I produce daily appear to have been

produced by a fluent touch typist. The sad truth, however, is that I am a resanobably dast – oops, make that reasonably fast – if somewhat inaccurate, two fingered typist. I have been typing for over forty years

and I still make use of only two fingers. When challenged, I airily dismiss such criticism by claiming modestly that I type as quickly as I can think, and that is good enough for me.

But the simple truth is that I have never bothered to learn to touch type and for a very good reason: it would slow me down. I have never been prepared to go back to the basics of beginning to learn to type all over again because my typing speed would inevitably be so painfully slow, at least to start with. I know, I know... the gain would outweigh

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the pain and within months, if not weeks, I would begin to see enormous improvements in productivity. But I have not done so and probably never shall now – old dogs and new tricks perhaps...

I believe that something very similar may happen to older low-progress readers. A very common scenario is to find that a child appears to be making reasonable progress in learning to read until he seems to hit the wall at about the age of eight years in Year 3. Whether as a result of home background, poor teaching, less well-developed phonological skills or whatever, such children have not learned to decode written words using phonic word attack skills but have relied instead on rote learning by sight a large lexicon of what we call sight words.

Now learning sight words can be a useful strategy. In my work, we actually teach the 200 most frequently occurring less regular words in children's books because we know that knowledge of these 200 words means that a child will be able to read half of all of the words in any text from children's books that we care to put in front of her. The problem is, of course, the other half – the fifty per cent of words in the text that she does not know. When she comes across an unfamiliar word she has not already memorised, she will be completely stuck, with nothing to help her, unless she has learned to decode using phonic word attack skills. Now, not all words can be read easily using phonological recoding but an awful lot can.

Take the following sentence that we might find in a book such as one from the Harry Potter series: "The

boy got on to his broomstick and sped after the snitch". A child who has hit the sight words wall might be able to read eight of these twelve words – 'the' (twice), 'boy', 'got', 'on', 'to', 'his', and 'and' - all eight are in the two hundred sight words we teach, for example. But it is unlikely that she will have learned the other four words: 'broomstick', 'sped', 'after', and 'snitch'. As a result, and in spite of reading eight out of the twelve words correctly, she will not have any idea of what is going on in the sentence. If she had mastered even some very simple phonic decoding rules, however, she should be able to sound these four words out, read them comfortably and make good sense of the sentence.

Our aim in MULTILIT is to help low-progress readers to catch up with their classmates in reading. We teach students to decode regular words

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using phonics, we teach a bank of frequently occurring sight words, and we provide an effective model for hearing children read aloud, so that low-progress readers can practice their newly acquired skills by reading from real books.

Now, back to my typingmy problems won't be fixed because I am not prepared to go back to the basics and learn the right way. But in teaching low-progress readers, this is precisely what we have to do. We have to take our students back to the basic building blocks for effective literacy growth, providing them with the strategies to become competent, if not always great, readers. Our MULTILIT research and development activities have shown repeatedly that low-progress readers make major gains if they are taught using programs based on this premise for as little as half an hour daily. We have shown that we can help children who have 'hit the wall'; we can help them to grow literacy wings and fly over the wall to become more proficient readers.

MULTILIT opens second reading clinic

In April of this year, MULTILIT opened a second Reading Clinic located in Bondi Junction. The Clinic is conveniently located in the Westfield Bondi Junction Shopping complex. We are currently offering reading assessments and our Monitoring and Individual Programs at this location.

Bookings for assessments and programs at the Bondi Junction and North Ryde MULTILIT Reading Clinics can be made by ringing 1300 55 99 19.

Who's for Coffee?

by Kevin Wheldall

My wife, Robyn, and I recently found to our amazement that we had actually won something in a prize draw. Apparently our name had been pulled out of the hat at the local vet clinic and we had won a brand new, all singing, all dancing, espresso coffee machine. (Considering the vast amount of money we invest at the vet's each year to keep our three dogs in tip top health, it was not a huge return, but decidedly better than nothing at all.)

With mean-spirited glee, and to the angst of our trendy kids, we decided to take it away with us to our weekender in the country, so that the 'young adults' would not wreck it while we were away.

It sat on the kitchen bench, still in its box, for several country weekends before I finally decided that I really did have to learn how to drive the thing. To this old fogie, it looked more like something that belonged in a science lab or in Dr Who's Tardis than in a kitchen.

I examined each part carefully and gratefully located the instructions booklet. This is when the trouble started... I read the instruction booklet thoroughly. Then I read it again. I was still none the wiser. As a literate adult, I could read and understand every word in the booklet but I still had no idea what to do with the coffee machine.

The booklet continually referred to 'the coffee maker' that, not unreasonably, I took to mean the gadget, the espresso machine. It was only on the third reading that the light went on and it dawned on me that it meant me. I was the coffee maker!

Now what lessons can we draw from this little tale of domestic confusion, other than that it is never safe to trust a baby boomer with a Generation Y affectation...?

First, we can reflect on the simple model of reading that posits that reading comprehension is the product of reading accuracy and listening comprehension. It is no

use being able to read the words if you do not know what they mean. I thought I knew what was meant by coffee maker in this context but I was wrong. Hence, I could read the booklet but I could not understand what I had read.

Second, what I really needed was tutoring in coffee making from a barista or at least someone who was more accomplished in the dark arts of coffee preparation than I am. And this sort of tutoring is, of course, one of the things that low-progress readers need to achieve success: effective tutoring by a more accomplished reader.

Third, I should have stuck with the coffee plunger that works really well for me. (Incidentally, my wife bought about ten coffee plungers on sale, for next to nothing, but we could not give them away to our sophisticated kids!) Now the analogy is not perfect because I like good espresso coffee as

...I could read and understand every word in the booklet but I still had no idea what to do with the coffee machine.



much as the next poseur but new and modern, let alone cool and trendy, is not necessarily a good thing. And so it is with reading instruction.

We have learned to our cost that cool and trendy Whole Language teaching made for far too many low-progress readers. We once knew how to teach reading; we did it quite well and most kids learned how to read reasonably quickly. And then we wilfully adopted an unproven method that proved to be not nearly as effective, but we carried on using it regardless. And we called it progressive education! As my kids would say: "how weird is that?"

Fourth, it wasn't my fault! The espresso machine booklet was a lousy instructor: it did not operationally define its terms and present the information in a logical order. Nor did my pathetic attempts at discovery learning serve me any better. I was completely unable to construct my own personal approach to coffee making with this machine.

With basic skills, like coffee making and reading, we all need initial direct instruction in the early stages. I can construct my own version of a decaf triple shot macchiato later, in the same

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Due to the continued growth of our North Ryde Reading Clinic, which shares office space with MULTILIT administration/headquarters, in early October, we relocated to larger premises, also in the Macquarie Park area of North Ryde.

MULTILIT's new address for all administrative matters and for our North Ryde Reading Clinic is shown below. Our new phone number is 1300 55 99 19. Our fax number remains the same.



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Now available: MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program (Revised)



In late September MULTILIT moments subscribers were sent information about the October release of our new MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program. This second edition represents a thoroughly revised version of our individual instruction program that was originally published in 1998. It also incorporates all of the recommendations for effective reading instruction from the Government's 2005 report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy.

Our one-day Professional Training Workshop has been updated in conjunction with the revised materials. Our 2nd November Sydney workshop is already booked out, but places are still available for:

16th November (Brisbane)

23rd November (Melbourne)

30th November (Sydney)

For details about the new MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program, professional training workshops, licensing and accreditation, please see our website at www.multilit.com or ring us on 1300 55 99 19.

Who's for Coffee?

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way that I'll subsequently be able to detect the inherent, privileged phallogocentric hegemonies in the books I read. But I do actually need to learn how to read first.

I could go on... I'm on a roll here with the lessons to be learned about reading from my attempts to make espresso coffee. Suffice to say that the espresso machine now languishes in a kitchen cupboard while I still use the plunger every day. Now, who's for coffee...?

(Note: This is an edited version of the chairman's introduction to the LDA Seminar, Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties: Trends and Issues, held on August 18, at the Camberwell Centre, Victoria.)