

A matter of balance

By Professor Kevin Wheldall

In some respects, there has been little progress on the battlefield in the literacy wars, neither side giving way, but the language describing the opposing camps has changed. Advocates of a 'whole language' approach rarely describe their position in these terms these days, redolent though it sounded of all things good and natural. Like a sort of literacy muesli, you could feel it building up your moral superiority.

But all good things come to an end and 'whole language' began to be exposed as the sham it is, based on unsubstantiated predicates emanating from romantic theory about what

should ideally be rather than what is empirically founded in fact. As it became harder and harder to cling to discredited notions, such as the idea that learning to read was a natural process like learning to talk, a new term, 'balanced', entered the literacy lexicon to describe essentially the same model with a tiny tip of the cap to phonics as a method of last resort, to be used only when all of their discredited, ineffective methods for teaching decoding had failed. The term 'balanced' also had the added benefit of 'getting your retaliation in first' by its implication that those favouring an emphasis on phonics instruction are clearly not balanced – 'unbalanced' in fact. And, of course, if your opponents are not balanced, it

is only a short step towards depicting them as extremists who favour phonics to the exclusion of everything else. This is unfortunate since even the most fervent advocates of a synthetic phonics approach today would never seek to claim that phonics is all that is needed to teach reading effectively. They too favour a 'balanced' approach – but that seat is already taken...

As I have said before, elsewhere, the inconvenient truth is that advocates of whole language or balance and those who favour a phonics emphasis actually agree on more than they disagree. If we look at the five pillars of effective reading

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An innovative partnership

In April 2008, Donna Vinci of the Leonardo's Education Assistance Foundation (LEAF) approached MULTILIT with an exciting proposal. Her son had been attending lessons at the MULTILIT Clinic in North Ryde for a couple of terms and was making good progress. However, Donna was aware that the time taken out of school to attend these sessions meant that her son was missing the best part of a school day twice a week. There had to be another way of doing things. Donna approached Sister Venera, the principal of St Angela's Primary School in Castle Hill where her son is attending school, and suggested that MULTILIT run a 'satellite' clinic at the school for six children, sponsored by LEAF. This was duly set up with one of our most experienced MULTILIT tutors working in a little room off the school's library twice a week. Anne Cronin, the special education teacher, selected the first six children who responded with great enthusiasm to their lessons and parents attended a short session on how to support the reading at home. The trial is now in its fourth term of operating and results speak for themselves – three children 'graduated' as they had reached an acceptable standard to enable them to cope in the classroom and each child made significant progress in their reading.

The Leonardo's Education Assistance Foundation was established by Donna and Nat Vinci in 2008 as a not-for-profit foundation to address the gap they identified in supporting children with learning difficulties during those formative years. Specifically, LEAF was established to provide additional assistance to close the gap in programs and financial assistance required to improve the learning experience of our

children with learning difficulties within the school curriculum. The organisation carefully selects programs based on sound research. The unique relationship between LEAF and St Angela's has meant that six children at any one time are able to receive MULTILIT tuition delivered by a MULTILIT staff member twice a week in the school setting. The progress of the children is overseen by the MULTILIT Senior Clinician in consultation with Anne Cronin.

LEAF and St Angela's have also worked together to provide MULTILIT training for teacher aides so that even more children can benefit from MULTILIT programs, including the Reinforced Reading sessions which are so vital to reading progress. Thanks to the innovation and flexibility of LEAF and the staff at St Angela's, in its first year of operation a total of 31 students benefited from LEAF programs, including MULTILIT Reading Programs. The seamless integration of internal and external resources to help those children who need that extra boost has been an inspiration to all involved and MULTILIT would like to thank both LEAF and St Angela's for their commitment and support as the program becomes embedded in the school.

As LEAF grows as a charity, it is their hope that more children will be given a chance for a brighter academic future through the provision of suitable resources to get them over the hurdles that can be so debilitating. If anyone would like to learn more about the work and vision of LEAF, please contact Donna or Nat Vinci at vincifamily@aol.com, or if you would like to learn more about this school's model of delivery, please contact MULTILIT at multilit@multilit.com.

An Interview With Glenys O'Riley

After more than 16 years of using MULTILIT, Glenys O'Riley is now the National Education Manager of the Exodus Foundation Literacy Programs, managing the Centres in Ashfield, Redfern, Gladstone and a new centre recently opened in Darwin.

You were with MUSEC working on the original MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program, is that right?

I was lucky enough to be part of the original team that began work on the MULTILIT program in the early 1990s under the guidance of Margrit Frishknecht, then the executive teacher of the AIM program at MUSEC. The first edition of the MULTILIT package was published in 1998.

What was the gap in the market that the MULTILIT Program fulfilled?

There are very costly programs like Reading Recovery that cater for the early years but once a student progresses to Year 2, there is nothing on offer for older students. The MULTILIT Program is unique because it caters for these older low-progress students. There was (and still is) no program that can first of all accurately identify low-progress readers, and secondly, offer an intensive, systematic and explicit intervention to help these students 'catch up' in reading related skills and bring them up to the level of their peers. The school syllabus statements and expectations of the upper primary years do not cover the skills taught in the MULTILIT Program. For the low-progress students, the gap simply gets wider.

What do you think differentiates MULTILIT from other literacy programs?

One of the important things that differentiates MULTILIT from other literacy programs is that it is a researched, controlled program so student gains are always accurately measured by the teachers/tutors using the principle of data-based instruction which informs their teaching. Data is collected regularly to ensure students are always at their correct instructional level and that students are being taught the relevant skills. As well as the CBM data, there is also standardised pre- and post- testing which measures the overall gains students have made.

The use of 'Positive Teaching' strategies completes the MULTILIT package. It lays the foundations for the overall success of students into the future. It gives students a belief in their

ability to achieve academically and socially. They gain a more optimistic approach to learning. Expectations rise not only for the student, but also for their teachers.

You are now running the Exodus Literacy Programs. What has attracted you back to the Exodus Foundation?

I had a wonderful experience working at the Exodus Centre in those early (pioneering) days when the MULTILIT Program was first established at Ashfield. It was a very rewarding time. The partnership between Professor Kevin Wheldall, Robyn Beaman and the Rev. Bill Crews gave greater emphasis to the idea of MULTILIT being a preventative model. Rev. Bill Crews' mission involved working with homeless people, in particular homeless youth, many of whom had dropped out of school because of poor literacy skills. The goal was to use the MULTILIT Program to help prevent this from happening. With good literacy skills, at least there was a choice for these students as to whether or not they stayed on till Year 10 and beyond. Follow-up studies showed a high retention rate for those who attended the Ashfield Schoolwise Tutorial Centre. I felt very lucky to be part of the team that helped lay the foundations of the outreach model. So accepting the position was an easy decision to make.

Are there any particular results or success stories that stand out in your mind?

Yes, there are many stories, but a few will always be close to my heart.

I remember one boy in Year 4 who came to MUSEC as a non-reader. This student made gains of four years in just one year, reaching the reading age level of his peers. He was so grateful that his parents had sent him to MUSEC and given him the chance to improve his literacy skills that he organised to treat his family to a special dinner where he bought the ingredients and cooked the dinner himself, reading from a recipe book. He went from strength to strength, becoming captain of the school in Year 6.

Another student who really stands



Glenys O'Riley at the new Exodus Building in Ashfield

out is a Year 11 student from a local high school. He had a reading age of just 7.6 years but after just nine months of tutoring, he had almost reached a functional level in reading accuracy. His reading gains gave him loads of self-confidence in terms of being able to make eye contact with people he spoke to, talking to girls, ordering a meal in a restaurant and being able to pass his driving test.

How do you think the MULTILIT program will go at the Exodus Centre in Darwin?

In Darwin we are looking forward to starting in Term 2, with 20 students using the MULTILIT Program in the afternoon and 20 students using MINILIT in the mornings. The program is actually at the school so it will be easy for kids to get to and from the centre.

Every site is different, it is a learning experience. They all have unique problems and issues. Yet, the same methods work for everyone. We teach and test the same way and the Positive Teaching is the same at all centres.

If you had to name one reason for your involvement with MULTILIT what would it be?

It would probably be the framework of Positive Teaching, it is truly inspiring. Marrying Positive Teaching with the program gives the MULTILIT Program its powerful qualities. Positive reinforcement helps students know they are on the right track both academically and socially. The key is recognising appropriate behaviours and giving students specific, contingent, and genuine praise for their success. It's a powerful approach to behaviour management and learning.

Thanks Glenys for your time and your passion!

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instruction as identified by research (sometimes known as the 'five big ideas'), both sides would have little to quarrel about with regard to the importance of teaching phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary or comprehension. The key distinction is on the little matter of phonics and how and when phonics should be taught. Even the most rabid adherents of the old school whole language philosophy today claim (at least in public) that there is clearly room for phonics in the mix – some even claim that they have always said this.

But here is the rub: they typically do not advocate phonics instruction as the method of first choice for teaching decoding and prefer, if it has to occur at all, that it be incidental as opportunity arises. Those on the other side, favouring a strong emphasis on phonics, however, are adamant that phonics must be taught in a structured, systematic, intensive way from the outset and not left to happenstance. To be fair, it is important to emphasise that those of us with long memories also recall the bad old days of bad phonics teaching when children with reading difficulties rarely saw a real book but instead read lists of sounds to the exclusion of almost anything else – not an edifying spectacle. Very few of these old style phonics backwoodsmen exist still today, if any, and it sometimes seems as if the advocates of whole language or balance are fighting, at least in part, an imaginary enemy.

And so, in effect, we are all 'balanced' these days while still having our differences in terms of how reading should best be taught. For what it is worth, my version of balanced is, however, rather different. At the risk of sounding like a promotion for a new dog food, I favour what I would call a 'scientifically balanced' approach to teaching reading.

By a 'scientifically balanced' program of reading instruction, I mean instruction in the five key areas of reading and related skills as identified by the scientific research literature, as advocated by the reports of the National Reading Panel in the United States and reiterated in the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy and the Rose Report in the UK. This constitutes the what of that which needs to be taught for students to become effective readers. But we must consider not only the 'what' of reading instruction but also the 'how'. In a scientifically balanced approach, the methods employed must also be based on the most effective methods of instruction as identified by scientific research; that is, instruction that is systematic, intensive, explicit and (in the case of phonics) synthetic.

Over the past thirty or more years, by means of steady, cumulative scientific research, we have learned a very great deal more about how reading works and how it may best be taught. And yet some are still clinging to notions and methods that are now clearly well past their sell-by date. The ideas underpinning Reading Recovery, for example, were good in the 1970s, ground-breaking even, but we now know that the use of what is, in effect, 'incidental phonics' as part of the mix is very inefficient and has led to a program of only marginal cost effectiveness. It is time to move on, to put young and low-progress readers first, instead of pride or ideology, and to use what has clearly been shown by scientific evidence to work effectively for most students most of the time.

Professor Kevin Wheldall is Director of the MULTILIT Research Unit and Chairman of MULTILIT Pty Ltd. MULTILIT is a research initiative of Macquarie University. Email: kevin.wheldall@mq.edu.au; www.multilit.com.

Other Projects

Eight independent schools in Tasmania will be conducting a MULTILIT trial in their schools over the next 2 terms. We look forward to learning of their students' progress. A big thank you to Terese Phillips from the Association for Independent Schools of Tasmania for initiating this trial.

Great work with MULTILIT continues in Cape York with the fourth site at Aurukun now in operation, in addition to Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman. We look forward to publishing some results from Cape York in the next *MULTILIT Moments*.

MULTILIT in New Zealand

MULTILIT attended the RTLB (Resource Teachers – Literacy and Behaviour) conference in Auckland in September last year which was an excellent opportunity to introduce ourselves to the teachers who are responsible for advising and supporting clusters of schools across NZ on matters related to literacy and learning. We are delighted to report that there is a growing number of schools now implementing the MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program (Revised) throughout New Zealand. Our MULTILIT agent, Deb Grover, is available to help with questions and would love to hear how teachers are getting on. MULTILIT strongly holds the view that a program is only as good as the person delivering it so we do recommend attendance at a training workshop. The first workshop of the year will be held in Christchurch on 21st May. At the workshop you will be shown exactly how each component of the program needs to be delivered with practical exercises to help

you get the most from the kit. Deb is also keen to hold a workshop in Nelson on 22nd September – the day before the National RTLB Conference starts. This will save travel costs for those already attending the conference. Please register interest in this workshop with Deb asap. For more information about MULTILIT or the upcoming workshop, contact Deb on +64 03 5472336 or email deb@launchpadlearning.co.nz.



Alison McMurtrie of MULTILIT and Deb Grover at the RTLB Conference in Auckland

New Programs through the MULTILIT Clinic

The Clinic is now offering a new Partnership Program. The Partnership Program is a combination of our effective Monitoring and Individual Programs. Parents deliver the Reading Tutor Program at home on at least two days per week and students attend tutoring sessions at the Clinic for an hour two or three times a week. The Partnership Program provides parents with another option for helping their child learn to read. It places less demand on parents' time by spreading the tuition across home and Clinic. Parents attend one of their child's Clinic sessions per week which enables them to observe correct program delivery by our highly skilled tutors.

Our Clinic Christmas holiday groups were also popular again this year. Participating students enjoyed the tuition and making new friends.

Professional training gets underway

Professional Training Workshops are off to a flying start with a great response in all capital cities, including our first workshop in Tasmania. Attendance at the first six workshops scheduled is high with many schools opting to send more than one staff member, demonstrating real commitment to the program. By early April, 140 teachers and paraprofessionals will have attended our workshops!

The first three-day accreditation course for 2009 commences on 18 March, with more dates to be announced. This course provides greater understanding of the Reading Tutor Program and includes some

training on Positive Teaching, additional intervention strategies, monitoring and data collection. Licensees are required to do the course but it is also open to teachers and is recommended for those overseeing the program on a large scale.

The introduction of e-bulletins has enabled us to announce new training dates and locations quickly and conveniently. We look forward to announcing more training dates very soon. If you would like to receive updates via the e-bulletins, please send your details to kyle.pitt@multilit.com.

MULTILIT also offers on-site consultancies for schools or clusters of schools that are unable to attend our regular workshops. Schools or school clusters often opt for an on-site consultancy as it is a cost-effective way to train large numbers of staff. We already have several consultancy bookings scheduled this year.

If you would like to find out more about our training activities, please contact our training manager, Kyle Pitt, or you can visit our website for up-to-date training information.

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We have listened to feedback from teachers and parents and revised and simplified our website. Pop on to www.multilit.com and let us know what you think!

WORD ATTACK

By Bronwyn Lovell,
MULTILIT Instructor,
Mossman, Cape York

I'm buried in words –
and that means us and os
that sound like es

and hs and ks
that whistle or knock
but don't say a thing.

Wazzz that an s
I saw napping?

or just an e bossing

the others out of their names?
How to cope
in an alphabet of tricksters

that bind together to
I'd have thought
bend the rules?

you ought to look
even a bit like
you sound,
but apparently

knot.

MULTILIT comings and goings

- Elizabeth Ryan joined MULTILIT as our new Sales and Marketing Manager in August 2008.
- Maria Galluzzo, formerly MULTILIT Receptionist, left the company in December 2008 and was replaced by Kristen De Lutiis.
- Katie Spaulding joined the MULTILIT Research Unit in late 2008 as Project Coordinator.
- Katja Dienst, formerly MULTILIT Administrative Assistant, left the company in March 2009.

**Keep an eye out for the new Word Attack Skills –
Extension Program to be launched June 2009!**