

## Whole language approach to literacy reaps rewards

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As one who taught many a struggling child **to** read, I bridle at Miranda Devine's denigratory labelling of Brian Cambourne as the "godfather" of **whole language** learning ("The crazy politics of learning **to** read", March 21-22).

Cambourne has produced a wealth of impressive evidence **to** substantiate his advocacy of holistic **approaches to literacy**. He is one of many dedicated **literacy** leaders who rightly emphasise the centrality of meaning in learning **to** read and that excessive emphasis on fragmented decoding achieves only limited results. Such reductionism can produce "readers" who are able **to** decode print, but who seldom go near a book.

**Whole language** advocates are not averse **to** teaching phonics; they teach embedded phonics as one strategy among many necessary **to** help children with reading problems. How many times must it be said that almost all schools teach phonics thoroughly?

MULTILIT, or Making Up Lost Time In **Literacy**, is a program aimed primarily at low progress readers. It is demanding in terms of time and resources and there are question marks about the persistence of some reading gains made. Like more holistic **approaches**, it also recognises the importance of reading interesting material **to** and with children, building up sight word competence, linking spelling and writing with the reading program and so on.

**To** characterise **whole language** advocates as those who think "children learn **to** read naturally just by being exposed **to** books" is insulting. It fails **to** recognise the wide acceptance of **whole language** emphasizes on skills being taught in context, **literacy** across the curriculum and quality literature at all levels of the reading experience.

Well-implemented **whole language approaches**, far from being discredited, are preferable **to** those that treat reading in isolation and splinter the complex process of becoming literate.