

Phonics & Educational Research: Editorial

**“Reading the Riot Act: Critical literacy is about indoctrination, not education”,
The Australian, 5 September 2007**

The editor responds to a paper by University of Western Sydney academics Associate Professor Wayne Sawyer and Dr Susanne Gannon, which argues that particular examples of media reporting of the ‘whole language’ approach to the teaching of reading have contributed to an unwarranted sense of “moral panic” about education in Australia. The paper by Gannon and Sawyer critically examines the “discursive tactics” commonly employed in 55 articles published in *The Australian* in the period 2004-2006. The articles were selected on the basis that they all comment on the whole language approach.

In attempting to refute the analysis by Sawyer and Gannon, the editor reasserts the case for intensive phonics based instruction for all students, applauds the recommendations of the recent National Inquiry into The Teaching of Literacy and makes an extraordinary *ad hominem* attack on the professional standing of Associate Professor Sawyer.

The Facts

The editor thrusts himself into a complex educational debate in a most self-assured but scarcely reflective manner. Ironically, a key element of the argument put forward by Sawyer and Gannon, namely that media criticisms of ‘whole language’ are typically and too readily “bundled” with other supposed educational ills within the “moral panic” framework, is confirmed in the way the editorial positions phonics against the twin evils of whole language instruction and critical literacy, as if these are one and the same thing.

The conflating of such diverse aspects of the English-literacy curriculum is quite typical of the editor’s approach, which is a triumph of overtly ideological rhetoric over reason. This would not be remarkable except for the fact that the editor makes the same charge against Associate Professor Sawyer, and paradoxically stakes the validity and authority of his criticisms of both English-literacy teaching and Sawyer’s scholarship on his paper’s role as a guardian of reason and common sense: “*The Australian* is proud to have waged a campaign not just for three years but two decades, going back to the 1980s, to bring back phonics and ensure that children learn how to read.” Such authorial positioning has been a frequent and even more obvious refrain in previous editorials about educational issues, such as this from 2006: “[There is] a postmodern rot at the core of Australian academic and cultural life that seeks to divorce art from beauty, replace skills-based excellence with warmed-over sociology and inject a politicised, deterministic view of the world in which identity groups trump individuals in virtually every sphere of life.... At the heart of the matter is an abdication of responsibility by the traditional guardians of the culture.” (And still the editor maintains that it will come as a surprise to readers of *The Australian* to learn that the paper is running a campaign to create a sense of “moral panic”....)

For all of these reasons the editorial of September 5th warrants a detailed response.

1. Citing the report of the National Inquiry, *Teaching Reading* (2005), it is claimed that the weight of national and international evidence-based research “indicates that instruction in phonics makes significantly greater contributions to children’s progress in reading, writing, spelling and comprehension.” On the basis of this extravagant claim, it becomes axiomatic that all learners are currently being let down by the

absence of an intensive focus on phonics in the nation's classrooms: "bring back phonics and ensure that children learn how to read." Associate Professor Sawyer is accused of "steer[ing] clear" of the empirical evidence cited in *Teaching Reading*.

On its own terms, the editor's claim that a renewed emphasis on phonics is needed for *all* students to learn to read makes no sense. If, as is indeed the case, a "significant minority" of Australian students is experiencing reading difficulties, it is unproductive to suggest that this is due to the supposed predominance of the whole language approach in the nation's classrooms. The editor notes that *The Australian* has been campaigning for phonics against whole language since the 1980s, when whole language presumably gained its stranglehold. Yet, according to the *Teaching of Reading*, data on student underperformance in reading comprehension was consistent in the period 1975 – 1998 (p.26). Evidently, phonics based approaches were not a universal panacea for students in the 1970s, giving rise to scepticism that they can ever be so. (Indeed, the difficulty proponents of phonics have with dates in establishing a historical basis for their claims about the negative effects of whole language instruction is examined in another contribution to *They Said WHAT? See 'Phonics & the Teaching of Reading'.*) Student underperformance clearly relates to more complex factors than pedagogical approach alone. Subsequent to 1998, test data has indicated that the balanced approach to reading which is currently employed in Australian schools has taken our 15 year olds to the highest levels of the international rankings for reading comprehension. As Gannon and Sawyer point out with regards to the OECD's PISA program, in 2000 Australia had one of the highest proportions of students of any country at the highest proficiency level for reading comprehension and one of the lowest proportions of students at the lowest level. These results were repeated in 2003. This is empirical evidence the editor refuses to acknowledge.

The editorial also fails to acknowledge that the research referred to in *Teaching Reading* in support of phonics is drawn from the special education area, involving intensive work by psychologists with individual students or small groups (see footnote 18 on p.28), as well as experimental and quasi-experimental studies (pp. 31 - 32). The whole issue of the transferability of the findings of such experiences and studies to *all* students in mainstream classrooms across the nation is broached neither in the report nor the editorial. Tellingly, the assertions made in the National Inquiry report about the benefits of phonics for disadvantaged students go unsupported by any reference to existing research (see p.28).

We are now seeing in the US the deleterious consequences of uniformly subjecting large groups of students in mainstream classrooms to intensive phonics-based programs of the sort advocated by the editor. The *No Child Left Behind* program has mandated, and enforced through federal funding processes, a systematic and exclusive emphasis on phonics in school reading programs (Taylor, 2003). Independent research by the Northwest Evaluation Association (Cronin, Kingsbury, McCall & Bowe, 2005) has revealed that the intensive teaching of phonics has led to a decline in the long term learning growth of students across all demographic groups and most markedly in students from non-English speaking backgrounds and minority cultural groups.

This raises questions as to why the 'balanced' approach to reading, including an element of explicit instruction in phonics, which is uniformly present in Australian syllabuses and which Sawyer and Gannon clearly support in their paper, needs to be 'beefed up' for all students by a more intensive focus on phonics. On the editor's own terms, only a "minority" of students do not currently learn to read in Australian

classrooms. Clearly, Australia has little to learn from the US experience other than what *not* to do, a fact reinforced internationally by Australia's superior standing in the PISA literacy rankings. Furthermore, researchers here (eg Cambourne, 2006) and overseas (eg Taylor, 2003; Delandshere, 2006) have raised serious questions about the supposed 'science' behind intensive phonics based instruction.

A fundamental weakness of *Teaching Reading* is its failure to account for what is actually working for the great majority of students. The editor of *The Australian* might be better served turning his attention to this question, rather than arguing that the baby be thrown out with bath water.

2. It is suggested in the editorial that Sawyer and Gannon do not acknowledge the fact that "a significant minority of children in Australian schools continue to face difficulties in acquiring acceptable levels of literacy". This charge is used to reinforce the claim that Associate Professor Sawyer is professionally irresponsible, being more interested in politics and "indoctrinating his students" than effectively equipping them with the skills they need to teach reading.

In fact, Sawyer and Gannon make much of Barry McGaw's argument that Australia is a "high quality, low equity" country educationally. In stressing the relatively poor performance of Australia in ensuring equitable educational outcomes for all students, Sawyer and Gannon frame the issue as one that involves more complex questions than teacher effectiveness and choice of pedagogical approach on their own. In contrast to the authors of *Teaching Reading* (see section 7), they see the underperformance of particular Australian students on the PISA test of reading comprehension (eg Aboriginal students, students from socially and economically disadvantaged areas) as an equity issue: "it is public policy, not teachers, that creates relative disadvantage and makes Australia a low equity country. Thus, as Vinson's [2007] report confirms, it is public policy around lost notions of equity that need to be addressed if Australia is to turn around its real areas of need in literacy." Of course, the editor of *The Australian* could always dismiss the very real issue of the impact of social disadvantage in this country as the politics of "identity groups", but at what cost in terms of Australia's long term future?

3. The editor claims that "the predominant whole-language approach to the teaching of reading in Australian schools is problematic because it assumes that children teach themselves, with little or no explicit instruction."

This generalisation is laughable in its simplicity. It is clearly intended to engender a sense of 'moral panic' within the readership, as Sawyer and Gannon in fact suggest has been the general thrust of much of the commentary about education in *The Australian* in recent years. In short, it is a claim put forward as further evidence of the professional negligence and culpability of Australian educators. It is, however, not a claim that has any basis in the reality of what a whole language approach involves (see Watson, 2004).

The phonics / whole language binary is one that has no meaning, except for some ideologically blinkered and extreme advocates of phonics. Moving beyond this binary, Gannon and Sawyer write in support of the "four resources" model, an approach dismissed in *Teaching Reading* as being beyond the professional capabilities of most teachers(p.37) :

an approach that underpins all state syllabuses and the national electronic resource *MyRead* (ALEA/AATE, 2002) - and that identifies literacy

as entailing a repertoire of practices including: *code breaking* (coding competence), *meaning making* (semantic competence), *text using* (pragmatic competence) and *text critique* (critical competence) (Luke & Freebody, 1999a). This model couples together the sociocultural and cognitive elements of literacy practice, positioning literacy firmly as a meaning-based and purposeful activity. The four resources model positions teachers as professionals who are responsive to the needs of individual students and to the range of evidence to which they have access. Teachers undertake analyses of student weaknesses. As Luke (2005) explains, teachers select from a repertoire of literacy pedagogies as they “make principled decisions based on analyses of their analysis of student performance data and student linguistic and community resources” (p. 677).

This hardly amounts to advocacy for students teaching themselves.

4. The editor suggests “it is a sorry indictment of Australian education that he [Dr Sawyer] remains so influential in shaping the minds and pedagogical skills of so many Australian teachers.”

In 2006 the English Teachers’ Association of NSW made Associate Professor Sawyer a life member, the highest accolade the association can bestow upon an individual. The executive of the association were proud to do so, and Sawyer’s award was very warmly received by delegates present at the annual state conference. Associate Professor Sawyer continues to hold the respect and esteem of English teachers and educators nationally and internationally. English teachers support his democratic right to free speech and open academic inquiry.

The Gannon and Sawyer paper is available online at
<http://www.inased.org/ijpeci.htm>

References

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