

## **“Whole language” and moral panic in Australia**

**Susanne Gannon\* & Wayne Sawyer\*\***

University of Western Sydney

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the media and political landscapes within which “whole language” is currently constituted in Australia. Through surveying the themes and rhetoric deployed in media texts over recent years, we consider how “whole language” has been taken up as part of a wider media campaign around education generally. We consider how this campaign has been instrumental in constructing a moral panic around literacy education in particular. We begin with an overview of how the literacy standards of Australia's young people compare on international measures with young people elsewhere. We consider how the media has bundled these with populist concerns about literacy pedagogy and other educational issues to create a sense of national crisis about education. We argue that the sociological concept of “moral panic” provides a useful and systematic theoretical framework for reading these discursive tactics of the media. Finally, we examine how a National Inquiry into literacy responded to this panic by reinscribing a familiar – and unhelpful – binary between “whole language” and phonics-based instruction. In the title and in the body of the paper we keep “whole language” in quotation marks to remind the readers that use of the term in the media texts that are analysed differs widely from its usage by literacy specialists.

\*Dr Susanne Gannon is a Senior Lecturer in secondary English and literacy teacher education. Prior to this appointment she was a teacher and literacy consultant to primary and secondary schools for many years. Her research interests include media representations of educational issues and the impacts of neoliberalism on education. Susanne Gannon, School of Education, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith Sth DC, NSW, 1797, Australia, Ph: 61 2 47360292 Fax: 61 2 47360400

\*\*Associate Professor Wayne Sawyer is Head of Secondary Teacher Education programs at the University of Western Sydney. He is a former high school Head of English. His research interests are in secondary English education, teacher education and the politics of literacy. He has published over 20 books on the teaching of English. Wayne Sawyer, School of Education, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith Sth DC, NSW, 1797, Australia, Ph: 61 2 47360795, Fax: 61 2 47360400

## Introduction

Literacy instruction in schools, as with all educational practices, takes place within complex cultural, political and policy landscapes that ultimately determine the most intimate aspects of classroom life. In Australia at present a sense of moral panic around literacy instruction in particular, and education in general, fomented by the media and supported by influential political figures, threatens to derail significant advances in theoretical and practical understandings of the multifaceted nature of literacy development. One key target of the media's attack, as we will outline in this paper, has been a simplistic and demonised version of "whole language." As the rhetoric of the attack rests on an assumption that the literacy levels of children in Australia are poorer than they would be if "whole language" were abandoned, and as the attacks tend to valorise a "scientific" (i.e. quantitative, measurable, evidence-based) paradigm (cf. Lather, 2004; Lather & Moss, 2005) for educational research, we begin by examining the most comprehensive set of recent statistics available on literacy standards in Australia.

### Literacy Standards in Australia

The two PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies which have been conducted in the first few years of this century suggest that Australia is a world leader in teaching literacy and that Australian teachers are achieving among the best results in the OECD (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development)<sup>1</sup>. PISA 2000 compared the reading, mathematical and scientific literacy performance of Australian 15-year-olds with the performance of 15-year-olds in 31 other countries, including the United States, Canada, Japan, Korea and many European nations such as the U.K. and Russia. Some 265,000 students took part in this first PISA survey. In Australia, 6,200 students from 231 government, Catholic and independent schools in all states and territories were involved. The major focus of PISA 2000 was reading literacy. Only one country, Finland, performed significantly better statistically than Australia in this area. In fact, in reading literacy, Australia had one of the highest proportions of students of any country at the highest proficiency level (Level 5) and one of the lowest proportions of students at the lowest level (below Level 1). All Australian States and Territories performed at or above the OECD average (Lokan, Greenwood & Cresswell, 2001).

PISA 2003 repeated these results. It compared achievement in 4 areas (reading, mathematical and scientific literacy and problem solving) across 41 countries and 276,000 students. Just over 12,500 students from 321 schools around Australia took part in PISA 2003. In reading literacy, once again, only Finland performed significantly better statistically than Australia (Thomson, Cresswell & de Bortoli, 2004). Comparative results from Australian States and Territories were similar to 2000, with the only change being that the Northern Territory (NT) performed relatively better. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW), Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA) achieved statistically similar top mean results (Thomson et al, 2004).

### Literacy as Crisis

Such figures, if they suggest anything about Australian teachers and teacher training at all, suggest that Australian teachers of English and literacy ought to be lauded as among the world's very best. Yet, 2004-6 saw one of the most sustained public campaigns of crisis rhetoric around education that Australia has ever seen – with the strongest focus on teachers and teacher educators in the fields of English and literacy.

The curious nature of this paradox is reflected in the public statements of the then Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Brendan Nelson<sup>ii</sup>. In January 2004, reporting on another set of statistical data generated by his own Department, Minister Nelson announced:

Today's release of the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services* provides further assurance that school students are achieving foundation literacy and numeracy skills.

The 2001 National Reading, Writing and Numeracy results for Year 3 and Year 5 students contained in the report confirm evidence from international studies that Australia's schools are well placed to provide their students with the necessary skills to participate effectively in the workplace and community.

The 2001 results show the overwhelming majority of students are performing over and above national benchmarks of minimum literacy and numeracy standards. (Nelson, 2004a)

However, just 10 months later, such was the state of Australia's literacy teaching that the same Minister had to announce a National Inquiry into the teaching of literacy, or "teaching of reading" (Although the name changed in various reports, the terms of reference of the Inquiry were firmly fixed on reading)<sup>iii</sup>:

One in five Year 5 students could not pass a basic reading test in some parts of Australia, federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson said yesterday when announcing a national inquiry into literacy in primary schools.

And he said employers were "sick and tired" of university graduates unable to spell or write, and teaching graduates who struggled with grammar. (Maiden, 2004b; cf Nelson 2004b)

What was said to have changed between January and November was signalled by a specific focus on "whole language" when *The Australian* newspaper published on April 21 an edited version of a letter (hereinafter referred to as the "Nelson letter") to Minister Nelson from 26 psychologists and special education academics<sup>iv</sup> (Anderson et al., 2004) which attacked "whole language" methods as failing Australian students, especially those struggling with reading. This letter was itself later both implicitly and explicitly constructed as the rationale for the Minister's change in attitude (Maiden, 2004c, 2005a). In a radio interview<sup>v</sup> on the day after his announcement of the inquiry, the Minister signalled his explicit concern that "whole language" was the cause of the supposed problems with literacy (Nelson, 2004c). The counter example of good practice that he provided in this interview was a phonics program developed by some

of the psychologists at Macquarie University who had written the Nelson letter. The influence of educational psychologists, funding regimes that favor so-called “evidence-based” research<sup>vi</sup> and single solutions to problems have also been documented recently in the U.S.A. by Sanacore (2007) who stresses that this occurs “even though literacy educators have known for decades that effective classrooms are based mostly on effective teachers who focus on children’s individual needs rather than on any singular approach to teaching reading” (p. 8).

The announcement of the National Inquiry continued – indeed, strongly increased – a sustained public campaign against teachers, teacher educators and methods of teaching reading. Especially demonised in this process, as signalled by the letter and the Minister’s radio interview, was “whole language.” In the following section we trace the themes represented in an archive of articles from *The Australian* newspaper collected over the last three years, since the appearance of the Nelson letter (Anderson et al., 2004) and which specifically refer to “whole language.” This represents 55 separate articles published in *The Australian* between April 2004 and August 2006. *The Australian* is a Murdoch newspaper, a broadsheet and Australia’s only national newspaper (all others are city/state-based). Thus, this textual corpus enables a national reading of how this particular media agenda has played itself out in Australia. The 55 articles represent only a fraction of the articles critical of educational practices published in *The Australian* over this period (cf Sawyer, 2006), but they do include all of those with specific reference to “whole language.”

To be fair, most journalists from *The Australian* tended to try to represent views from both proponents and opponents of “whole language.” Cooper (2004a), Macnamara (2005a), Maiden and Hart (2005) and especially Meiers (an academic researcher) (2004) for example, run against the general trend. However a number of well-known neoliberal commentators<sup>vii</sup>, some of whom are *Australian* staffers and some of whom are not, were also given many column inches. In any case, the sustained focus on the reading debate within the context of the larger, very extensive coverage of the failures of education carries suggestions of a campaign.

### “Whole Language” in the Media

“Whole language” was firstly derided as “ineffective for new or struggling readers” and for groups who traditionally score badly on reading tests in Australia – boys, indigenous students and those from low socio-economic groups (Buckingham, 2004a; Editorial, 2005b; Kolker, 2006; Maiden, 2004b 2005a, 2005c<sup>viii</sup>). “Whole language” might work with children who are already good readers or who come from privileged backgrounds, but it is allegedly negligent of the problems of the disadvantaged (Cooper, 2004b; Editorial, 2006; Pearson, 2004; Roberts, 2004).

“Whole language” from the first was seen as neglecting the strategy of “sounding words out”, substituting instead, “memorizing words”, “recognizing words” and “guessing” (Albrechtsen, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Buckingham, 2004a; Cooper, 2004b and others<sup>ix</sup>). Part of this strategy is the representation of “whole language” as something called “whole word” (Albrechtsen, 2004b. cf also Nelson, 2004c). Predictably, then, stronger phonics instruction became the panacea advocated by those attacking “whole language” (Albrechtsen, 2004b; Bremner, 2006; Buckingham, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c 2005 and others<sup>x</sup>). On its release in December 2005, the Report of the Minister’s Literacy Inquiry, *Teaching Reading*, was presented

as containing an explicit warning that Australia's schools should embrace "systematic, direct phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic codebreaking skill required for foundational reading proficiency" (Maiden, 2005c. cf Maiden, 2005a).

"Whole language," of course does not "abandon" phonics, as anyone genuinely acquainted with the approach knows – hence its name. "Whole language" sees reading as consisting of a number of cueing systems, of which phonics is one. We would argue the essential difference between strongly phonics-centered approach and "whole language" is the beginning point of instruction – one begins with bits of language and build up from them, the other begins with meaningful language in whole texts and derives sub-skills from these: "top-down vs. bottom up" in an earlier parlance.

As in the United States, phonics was seen to have the advantage of "evidence" behind it and the National Reading Panel and Reading First were continually held up as based on "rigorous" studies in advocating intensive phonics instruction (Buckingham, 2004a, 2004c; Hempenstall, 2004; Kolker, 2006; cf Editorial, 2005c). The implication – and often directly stated claim (Editorial, 2005c; Hempenstall, 2004) – was that there was no evidence to support "whole language" success. "Whole language," in fact was represented as "guarantee(ing) reading failure" (Donnelly, 2005d. cf Donnelly, 2006d).

"Whole language" was said to have been abandoned by educators in Britain and the United States (Donnelly, 2005b; Hempenstall, 2004; Maiden, 2004b;). Part of the rhetorical strategy, then, was to suggest that Australia was falling behind other nations – despite the fact that in the PISA tests Australia strongly outscored the United States and numerous comparable nations. (The response rate from the United Kingdom was too low to report.) In the face of the implication that Australia was riddled with "whole language" teaching *and* had achieved such strong results in PISA, the PISA results had to be forgotten. Claims were made that "30 percent of Australian children entering high school still cannot read or write properly"<sup>xi</sup> (Hempenstall, 2004 and others<sup>xii</sup>). In addition, the validity of current testing regimes such as benchmark testing, which, it will be remembered, showed Australian students doing well, had to be called into question by those opposing "whole language" (Buckingham, 2004d; deLemos, 2004; Donnelly, 2005d). Donnelly even questioned the validity of the PISA tests themselves (Donnelly 2005b, 2005c, 2006c), or, alternatively, simply implied that Australia was falling behind other (named) nations in international testing (Donnelly, 2004b).

Phonics was seen not only as a cure for reading problems, but even for spelling problems<sup>xiii</sup> (Donnelly, 2005c; Ferrari, 2006a; Lane, 2005b; McDonald, 2004; Roberts, 2004). In this way, "whole language" was positioned as responsible for a whole series of problems in education.

Moreover, mixed methods were seen as not really good enough. Phonics could not happily sit alongside "whole language," but needed to be "direct ... structured, systematic and scripted" (Buckingham, 2004a<sup>xiv</sup>). "Synthetic" or "systematic" phonics became the buzz phrases (Buckingham, 2005; Maiden, 2005a, 2005c).

"Whole language" was portrayed as a hangover of the 60s and 70s and this, in

itself, was enough to render it discreditable, especially in the eyes of neo-conservative commentators such as Donnelly and others (Donnelly, 2004a; Editorial, 2006; Maiden, 2004b; McDonald, 2004; Ritchie, 2004).

Crucially, “whole language” was presented as a technique of neglect, since teachers and parents are encouraged not to correct every mistake a child makes or to do nothing, relying instead on “immersion” in language (Albrechtsen, 2004b; Donnelly, 2004a; Maiden, 2004b).

Nelson and others went beyond an emphasis on struggling and new readers, however, and charged that “whole language” had also damaged prospective teachers themselves (Donnelly, 2005e, 2006c; Maiden, 2004a, 2004b, 2005c; Ritchie, 2004). Undergraduate literacy across the board was seen as deficient (Donnelly 2006c), but trainee teachers were themselves portrayed as having suffered from “whole language” instruction in their own schooling. Reports claimed that trainee teachers did not know what a syllable was (Maiden, 2004a), and were having to enroll in remedial literacy programs at university (Maiden, 2005c)<sup>xv</sup>. This last rhetorical move enabled the demonising of “whole language” to be broadened beyond just being “ineffective” for *specific groups* of students to being a definite and *general* force for bad in education.

This move also made possible the attack on teacher educators and university Faculties of Education (Albrechtsen, 2004a, 2004b; Buckingham, 2004a, 2004c; Cooper, 2004b and others<sup>xvi</sup>). Academic expertise was accorded to the 26 psychologists who were signatories of the Nelson letter while other academics were portrayed as politically motivated, left-wing ideologues.

“Whole language” also became “bundled,” by which we mean a tendency to collect together and simply dismiss a number of educational theories and strategies as weird and dangerous fads – a strategy in which “whole language” becomes implicated. Chief among the bundling strategists was Donnelly who has extended this strategy into populist books (2004d; 2007) as well as the media articles that are referenced here. “Bundled” with “whole language” were:

- The Reading Recovery program of Marie Clay (Donnelly, 2005d; Maiden and Warne-Smith, 2004),
- The work of John Dewey (Buckingham, 2004a, Donnelly, 2004a) and other “radical educators” such as Freire, Young, Graves, and Britton (Donnelly, 2004a),
- Problems in indigenous education (Illing, 2004; Pearson, 2004),
- Alleged moves away from teacher authority (Donnelly, 2004a),
- The alleged “dumbing-down” of education (despite Australia’s PISA results) (Donnelly, 2004b, 2004c),
- Accompanying alleged moves away from examinations, direct instruction and rote learning (Albrechtsen, 2004a; Donnelly, 2004a, 2005b),
- Alleged moves away from traditional subjects (Donnelly, 2004a, 2006a, 2006f),
- The alleged valorising of creativity and self-expression (Donnelly, 2004a),

- Radical teacher unions (Albrechtsen, 2004a, 2006; Donnelly, 2004a, 2004b),
- Radical teacher professional associations (Donnelly, 2004a, 2005a, 2006b, 2006c),
- Political correctness (Albrechtsen, 2006; Donnelly 2004b, 2004c, 2005a, 2005c and others),
- Critical literacy and postmodernism (Donnelly 2004b, 2005a, 2005e, 2006b, 2006c and others<sup>xvii</sup>),
- Public education (Donnelly, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; 2006a),
- English syllabuses (Donnelly, 2004a, 2006c; Roberts, 2004),
- Education bureaucrats and academics who are wedded to fads (Albrechtsen, 2004a, 2004b; Donnelly, 2005c),
- “Fuzzy maths” (Donnelly 2004b, 2004c, 2005b, 2005c, 2006a and others<sup>xviii</sup>),
- Being wedded to “facilitating” instead of teaching (Donnelly 2005b, 2006b),
- Groupwork (Donnelly 2005b, Donnelly, 2006b),
- Constructivism (Donnelly, 2006f; Slattery, 2005).
- Outcomes-based education (Donnelly, 2004b, 2004c; Donnelly, 2005c, 2005e and others<sup>xix</sup>).

The vituperative flavour and the breadth of the media campaign evoke elements of what has been called *moral panic*. In the following section we take up this sociological concept as an analytic lens that might provide some insight into how the attack on literacy and literacy educators has progressed.

### **The Operations and Features of Moral Panics**

According to sociologist Kenneth Thompson (1998) we live in a time of moral panics. The concept of moral panic has been linked to various educational issues in the past, particularly television and popular/consumer cultures (see for example, in the U.K.: Buckingham, 1993; Davies and Machin, 2000; Marsh, 2000; in Canada: Cook, 2001; Kline et al., 2006; in the USA: Thurlow, 2006). Moral panics are often constructed around childhood and risks to (or from) young people (Cricher, 2003) inside and outside educational contexts. Prominent literacy educators in Australia have referenced earlier media and political flurries with the label moral panic. Green (1999), for example, notes an early such event around literacy in the 1980s, also conducted in Murdoch newspapers (*The Australian* and *The West Australian*), that demonstrated what he calls the "classic ‘moral panic’ pattern" (p. 393) where "politically motivated teachers" function as "folk devils" (p. 394)<sup>xx</sup>. Although the term has been widely and sometimes loosely used, Thompson (1998) provides five defining characteristics for the “phenomenon of moral panics”:

The first is that they take the form of campaigns (crusades), which are sustained over a period...Second, they appeal to people who are alarmed by an apparent fragmentation or breakdown of the social order, which leaves them at

risk in some way. Third, that moral guidelines are unclear. Fourth, that politicians and some parts of the media are eager to lead the campaign to have action taken that they claim would suppress the threat. Finally, the ... the moral campaign leaves the real causes of social breakdown unaddressed. (p. 3)

In this section of the paper we trace the elements of Thompson's schema through our corpus of media texts. In an earlier article, Luke and Kapitzke (1999) remarked on the "remarkable stability and tenacity" of "educational fields of disciplinary knowledge and power" (p. 472) in the face of "populist" moral panics. We argue, on the contrary, that alternative narratives and opposing evidence have not been sufficiently robust to counter moral panics around literacy. Rather, at an increasing rate and with greater effects, media-powered moral panics have exacerbated and begun to reframe literacy pedagogy and public policy in Australia.

Thompson's (1998) first criterion for moral panics is that they tend to "take the form of campaigns (crusades), which are sustained over a period" (p. 3). Thompson's use of *crusade* reflects the fervour with which such campaigns are conducted. Part of what sustains this fervour is the all-pervasive quality of moral panics. Whereas "earlier panics tended to focus on a single group...Contemporary panics seem to catch many more people in their net" (Thompson, 1998, p. 2). Those people and organisations who are caught in the net of blame in this case include "progressivist educators", primary and secondary school teachers, especially in public schools, both of the relevant national professional associations (the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) and the Australian Association of Teachers of English (AATE)), teachers' unions, literacy researchers and academics in university Faculties of Education and occasionally state education bureaucrats. Against these suspects are arrayed the victims: the children of Australia, their families, and, by implication, the future of the nation, which is at risk as a result of their pernicious effects.

The character of this panic as a long term crusade has been enabled and sustained by the breadth of the attacks which have, for example, targeted educational standards generally; the alleged neglect of grammar, spelling and punctuation; the teaching of critical literacy and the apparently associated "jargonistic" postmodern theory; the teaching of low-grade popular culture instead of the canon; trendy "new age" curricula; alleged left-wing ideologues in university education faculties, education bureaucracies and classrooms, and even extended to implicit links to the promotion of terrorism (cf Sawyer, 2006)<sup>xxi</sup>. The targets in the larger campaign, in fact, shift across all levels of education and across a number of discipline areas from early reading pedagogy to secondary history, science and geography textbooks and syllabuses, to the infiltration of senior English syllabuses with postmodernism and popular culture and on to "values education." Likewise, the attacks had/have a geographic spread as they whirl about the country, targeting spelling in South Australia, across to the west coast to outcomes-based education in Western Australia and back to the east to English exams in New South Wales. The constants remain the people, groups and organisations who are demonised.

Secondly, moral panics "appeal to people who are alarmed by an apparent fragmentation or breakdown of the social order, which leaves them at risk in some way" (Thompson, 1998, p. 3). Luke and Freebody index these fears as relating to



"new technologies, fast capitalism, and globalization" (1999a). Such appeals have currency with parents who are already anxious about their children's futures in the increasingly competitive markets for schooling and for work in contemporary Australia. Elements of literacy have long been associated with panics around broader social change. Green and Hodgins (1996) have argued that grammar, for example, in the history of English teaching has become code for a set of "manners and morals." A tight nexus of "literacy, grammar and power" has operated to create a discourse in literacy debates of "us" in relation to "them," of "our proficiency" in relation to "their deficiency" (Green and Hodgins, 1996, p. 211). In late-Thatcherite Britain, for example, the Kingman Report firmly put grammar back on the agenda and in what Cameron has called an "extremely divided and unstable society" (in Green and Hodgins, 1996, p. 211), grammar became imbued with highly charged social meanings and "anxieties about grammar (were) at some deeper level anxieties about the breakdown of order and tradition, not just in language but in society at large" (Cameron and Bourne in Green and Hodgins, 1996, p. 211). Grammar is a "disciplining of the flesh...punishing of the rebellious spirit, and the ultimate guarantee of a stable society" (Wilkinson, 1986, p. 34). Arguments over the place of grammar in English become, in effect, arguments over a particular view of society. Grammar – and, indeed, the place of the canon (cf Editorial, 2005; Lane, 2005a; McIlroy, 2005; Rowbotham, 2005; Macnamara, 2005b) – have played just such a role in the current moral panic. The implication that "whole language" is a pedagogy of neglect, in comparison to more traditional methods of instruction, parallels these concerns.

Thirdly, Thompson (1998) argues that moral panics tend to leave the "moral guidelines...unclear" (p. 3). In the current neoliberal economic order, education is market-driven and the mantra of "choice" is pervasive. Apple (2001) argues that in the U.S. today the twin neoliberal policies of the marketisation of schooling and the emphasis on tougher standards are "part of an attempt by the middle class to alter the rules of competition in education in light of the increased insecurities their children face. 'By changing the process of selection to schools, middle class parents can raise the stakes in creating stronger mechanisms of exclusion for blue-collar and post-colonial peoples in their struggle for equality of opportunity'" (p. 78). And already in Australia, some have questioned whether the 2005 education panic was not also "designed to restrict profound learning to certain groups in our society" (Hooley, 2005, p. 4). Moral questions about the effects of reductions in investment in public schooling<sup>xxii</sup> remain largely unasked and unanswered when public schooling and those who deliver it are consistently demonised.

Fourthly, Thompson (1998) notes that "politicians and media are eager to lead the campaign to have action taken that they claim would suppress the threat" (p. 3). Once the threat has been constructed (as, in this instance, a literacy crisis) then the emphasis becomes public action, directed largely at correcting the errors of those who have been constructed as responsible for the crisis. The action in this case was the Minister's call for a National Inquiry into the teaching of literacy in Australia. This maintained the focus on what might be wrong and in need of correction. Its media coverage reinforced the demonisation of individuals and groups. Indeed, as explored in the following section, on publication the National Inquiry (DEST, 2005) was presented in the media in such a way as to reinstate the binary between phonics based

instruction and “whole language,” often ascribing the faults of schooling to “whole language” and those teachers, teacher educators and organisations that promulgate it.

As Thompson's (1998) fifth and final criterion suggests, “the moral campaign leaves the real causes...unaddressed” (p. 3). Today, where Australia does not fare well in international testing is around equity: the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and educational achievement. There is, of course, a link between SES and literacy achievement in all countries. Nevertheless, there *are* countries who appear in the PISA results as *both* “high-quality” and “high equity.” The existence of such countries demonstrates that there is no necessary trade off between quality and equity in educational provision. It is possible to achieve both together. Australia is not among these countries. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much better provided for by the education systems in other high performing countries like Finland, Korea, Japan, Canada and Ireland.

Barry McGaw, an Australian and until recently Director of Education for the OECD, shows that Australia is a “high quality, low equity” country educationally. McGaw argues that Australia may be guilty of conveying educational advantage where social advantage already exists (McGaw, 2006) – the rate of payoff in increased literacy from increased social advantage is greater at higher levels of social advantage (McGaw, 2006). In other words, the more you already have, the more education in Australia adds to your advantages. Moreover, McGaw argues, PISA results show that early stratification into schools of different types, while it might be intended to provide in the most appropriate way for individual differences, tends to exacerbate differences among students, to produce low average performances and to reproduce the existing social arrangements with the socially disadvantaged placed in low- status schools where they achieve low-level results<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Governmental retreat from supporting public institutions since the rise of monetarism has exacerbated the relative disadvantage of low SES groups. The most recent analysis of social and economic disadvantage in Australia, *Dropping off the Edge: Social Disadvantage in Australia* (Vinson, 2007), confirms that pockets of severe social disadvantage have become entrenched at the very time the nation has enjoyed buoyant economic growth. Vinson identifies targeted policy reform and long-term investment in key areas, particularly education, as essential for overcoming disadvantage. Access to early years of schooling, free preschool, and incentives for experienced teachers to work in disadvantaged areas are his recommended strategies. It is public policy, not teachers, that creates relative disadvantage and makes Australia a low equity country. Thus, as Vinson’s 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.

Attacks on “whole language” such as those we have documented in this paper do not add to the equity debate, rather they serve to obscure a number of issues that are likely to be more important. These issues include teacher recruitment and retention, the way in which educational disadvantage is identified and addressed, and public funding of schools. One critical issue in education that rarely appears in media coverage is the public funding shift towards private education<sup>xxiv</sup>. Where it does appear, it is usually accompanied by a push from those fuelling the moral panic for the introduction of a voucher-based funding system (Donnelly, 2006a). Despite the

larger proportion of school funding that comes from the states, economic analysts argue that the funding shifts at the federal level and the subsequent “drift” of middle class students from the public sector in every state of Australia has concentrated socio-economic disadvantage in public schools, and is the direct result of changes to national funding formulas in 2000 (Ryan & Watson, 2004). In particular - substantiating McGaw’s suggestion that educational equity is poor in contemporary Australia - Ryan and Watson (2004) note that the most advantaged elite private schools are those that have reaped the highest rewards from increased government funding (p. 10).

### Conclusion

Although many of the submissions to the *Teaching Reading* Report, notably the 27 or so that came from current teacher educators<sup>xxv</sup>, stressed that the phonics/“whole language” dichotomy is outdated, unhelpful and inaccurate, the Report was certainly presented as reinstating this binary. A number of these submissions made reference to the influential “four resources” model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b) of literacy development – 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). These decisions would tilt the program balances between “coding,” “semantic,” “pragmatic” and “critical” practices of literacy.

Each of the dimensions of the four resources model foregrounds particular practices and skills and a balanced literacy program entails the development of all of these skills (cf. ALEA/AATE, 2002 for the most comprehensive elaboration of the model in terms of classroom practice). With this approach teacher professional knowledge is not about delivery of a commodified curriculum, but about developing shared vocabularies and theoretical and analytical models. It requires continuing professional development and refinement so that teachers are best prepared to select and tailor literacy learning experiences for their students.

Nevertheless, the model was dismissed in a footnote of the report (DEST, 2005) as lacking “empirical support” (p. 37). The Committee noted, furthermore, that it was “not confident that sufficient numbers of teachers have the necessary knowledge, training and teaching strategies to provide their students with the essential alphabetic code-breaking ‘resources’” (DEST, 2005, p. 37). Rather than making recommendations about increasing resources to ensure that teachers *do* acquire sophisticated understanding and practical skills in all the dimensions of

literate practice, the Report is constructed as opting for a more “teacher-proof” and technicist adoption of phonics as the core literacy pedagogy.

Our use of an archive of texts in this article allows us to consider how media criticism of “whole language” has gained momentum and influence over time at the highest policy levels. We do not disregard the importance of sound knowledge of the phonological elements of language; rather, we object to a campaign that favours phonics as sufficient pedagogical substitute. Like the literacy educators who prepared submissions to the National Inquiry, we advocate a “balanced” approach to reading instruction, such as the “four resources model” (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b) which has been endorsed by the Australian Literacy Educators Association, the Australian Association of Teachers of English and DEST, who funded the development of *MyRead* (ALEA/AATE, 2002). As secondary educators, we are also particularly cognisant that early reading pedagogies are often inappropriate for adolescent first language weak readers. Rather, we advocate a repertoire of strategies for the reading teacher’s use.

What can be done in the face of moral panic? One obvious long-term answer to this is the creation of a citizenry critical of the way in which the media constructs such debates. However, a key problem here is that the creation of such a citizenry through critical literacy practices appears to be a horrifying prospect to most of the media commentators we have discussed here. Any attempt to argue for the importance of a critical citizenry is immediately attacked as party-political and “dismissed as either irrelevant or unprofessional” (Giroux, 2000, p.4). Critical literacy was a particular target of attack in the bundling strategy discussed above. This becomes part of a larger question about the kind of democracy we want to have – one which consists of a 3-4 yearly visit to the ballot box, or one in which citizens are active, critical questioners of the texts they come up against every day? Other questions about equity – about public policy priorities and social cohesion – might then begin to be more widely asked.

In the short-term, teacher activism on two fronts also seems obvious. One is to do with public education about the realities of “whole language” – what it really does, what it really means, as opposed to the straw man purveyed in the media. This is where professional associations might play a key role on the local level. The second is to greet data head-on. In Australia, as we have shown, we are told that we are infected with the virus of “whole language.” Yet our PISA results are outstanding. Ergo? Notwithstanding the narrowing definition of what counts as “scientific” in the education community (Delandshere, 2006), hard data that both defines in a sophisticated way what “success” in reading means and that investigates the *actual* specific strategies being used in classrooms to achieve such success ought not be difficult to come by.

Ultimately, though, we are not starry-eyed about this. The “whole language”-phonics debate is hardly new and will always be exploited by politicians and the media who have a series of agendas to run that may or may not actually concern educational quality. Perhaps, as George Lakoff (2004) argues, resisting moral panic is, finally, a question of how we frame our values in the public arena.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The OECD (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development) is an international organisation established in the 1960s with 30 core member countries including most European countries, as well as Canada, USA, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Korea. Member countries are characterised by their commitment to democratic governance and market economics and provide a stable base for comparative international research on social and economic indicators of national wellbeing amongst member countries and beyond. The OECD conducts research across a range of areas but the most interesting to educators has been PISA. This program began a three year cycle of testing of 15 year olds in 2000 and continued in 2003 and 2006 with between 4,500 and 10,000 students tested in each participating country using equivalent test instruments. The number of countries involved has expanded with each round of testing with fifty-seven countries in the most recent round.

Rather than being embroiled in the local politics of curriculum instruction and assessment, PISA measures the extent to which young people have mastered literacies in reading, mathematical and scientific domains of knowledge by this point in their schooling and how well they can apply these literacies to the real world. PISA also collects a vast array of information about student backgrounds.

<sup>ii</sup> Public school education is largely controlled and funded by the states in Australia, who manage most elements of curriculum, assessment and reporting. However the federal (national) government has considerable and increasing control via its capacity to allocate additional special purpose grants to schools and its more general funding of the states. Schools in the rapidly expanding private sector receive direct funding from the federal government (Ryan and Watson, 2004). Universities, and thus teacher education, have always been funded and directly controlled across the nation by the federal government, though recent policies are increasingly forcing “public” universities to depend on private sources of income. In the period 2004-2006, while nationally a conservative Liberal Party government was in power, every state government in the nation was under Labor Party control. Education has thus been one of several sites of skirmishes between these levels of government in recent years.

<sup>iii</sup> For an analysis of the actual announcement of the Reading Inquiry and a discussion of the motivation behind the crisis rhetoric, see Cambourne, 2006a and 2006b.

<sup>iv</sup> It is important to note that the signatories were – and signed themselves as – clinical hospital-based psychologists or neuropsychologists (4), academic psychologists (13), clinical speech therapists (3), general academic researchers (1), special education academics (4), medical researchers (1). Half of the number came from three universities. Thus, none appeared to be, or at least none signed themselves as, academics associated with mainstream schooling. The Macquarie University psychologists, Kevin Wheldall and Max Coltheart, were named by Minister Nelson (2004d) as the key authors of the letter.

<sup>v</sup> With a well-known Sydney-based “shock-jock” and frequent Liberal party advocate.

<sup>vi</sup> For a discussion of the role of “evidence-based” research in literacy teaching, see Delandshere, 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> For example, though now a regular opinion writer in *The Australian*, Kevin Donnelly was a staffer for another Minister in the current federal government until 2004 when he published the book *Why our schools are failing*, for the conservative think tank, the Menzies Research Centre. He recently released a companion volume *Dumbing down. Outcomes based and politically correct: The impact of the Culture Wars on our schools*.

<sup>viii</sup> In the discussion which follows, some of the attacks on “whole language” are made by the article authors and others are simply the relevant journalists quoting the opinions of others. Direct advocates against “whole language” include Albrechtsen, de Lemos, Donnelly and Hempenstall. deLemos and Hempenstall were academic signatories to the Nelson letter, Albrechtsen and Donnelly are neoconservative commentators and Albrechtsen is an *Australian* journalist. In this section of the paper, extended lists of citations to media articles and press releases have been truncated in the text and shifted to Endnotes for easier reading.

<sup>ix</sup> Also de Lemos, 2004; Donnelly, 2005d, 2005e, 2006f; Ferrari, 2006a, 2006b; Kolker, 2006; Maiden, 2004b, 2004c; Roberts, 2004; Yaman, 2004.

<sup>x</sup> Also Cooper, 2004b; Donnelly, 2004a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e, 2006b, 2006e; Ferrari, 2006a, 2006b; Hempenstall, 2004; Illing, 2004; Kolker, 2006; Lane, 2005b; Maiden, 2004b,

2005a, 2005c; Maiden and Warne-Smith, 2004; McDonald, 2004; Pearson, 2004; Roberts, 2004; West, 2005; Yaman, 2004.

<sup>xi</sup> This 30% figure surfaces often in attacks on Australian education. It is largely based on a 1995 national survey conducted as part of the *Longitudinal surveys of Australian youth* (LSAY). In 1997, the Australian Council for Educational Research published a study of reading comprehension and numeracy among (largely) 14 year-olds based on a comparison of four large and four small sets of data gathered between 1975 and 1995. The tests were based on "mastery", defined as the "competence... necessary for active participation in society". The percentage of correct items that represented mastery on these tests was approximately 80%. Thus, in 1995, 70% of 14-year-olds gained 80% or better on tests of reading comprehension and, given that this result remained static since 1975, as the Australian population became composed of far more NESB students, it ought to be seen as a net improvement over similar results in 1975. That would seem to be the most accurate interpretation of the levels of reading among Australian school students over that 20 year period, as represented by this research. Readers are left to decide for themselves to what extent this constituted a "crisis". cf Sawyer, 1999.

<sup>xii</sup> Also implied in Albrechtsen, 2004b; deLemos, 2004; Donnelly, 2004a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006b.

<sup>xiii</sup> In one rather odd argument, the lack of interest in a national spelling bee was regarded as "ominous" and indicative of Australians valuing education less than Americans (again, despite the relative PISA results) (Roberts, 2004). The same article did reveal, however, that the alleged "lack" of interest was due to "only" 25,000 students entering a national spelling bee, while 800 students entered a state-based spelling bee at the same time.

<sup>xiv</sup> Also implied in Albrechtsen, 2004b; Buckingham, 2004b, 2004c; Donnelly, 2004a; Maiden, 2005b, 2005c; McDonald, 2004; Roberts, 2004

<sup>xv</sup> Nelson called for mandatory literacy testing of trainee teachers on both entry and graduation (Maiden, 2005a, 2005c) and Donnelly (2005e) added that they should also be tested on knowledge of methods for teaching reading - teachers who had not been taught to teach reading, nor experienced proper teaching of literacy themselves, were having to "make it up as they go along" (Maiden 2004b)

<sup>xvi</sup> Also Donnelly, 2004a, 2005e, 2006c; Editorial 2005b, 2005c Hempenstall, 2004; Maiden, 2004b, 2005a; Maiden et al, 2005; Ritchie, 2004.

<sup>xvii</sup> Also Donnelly 2006f; Farrelly, 2005; Editorial, 2006.

<sup>xviii</sup> Also Donnelly 2006e, 2006f; Farrelly 2005; Slattery, 2005.

<sup>xix</sup> Also Donnelly 2006a, 2006f; Editorial, 2006; Slattery, 2005.

<sup>xx</sup> Green himself, Cambourne, Luke and Sawyer, amongst other educationalists, have been repeatedly named in media articles in ways that might be considered as attempts to construct 'folk devils'.

<sup>xxi</sup> An example of the ideologically loaded and bizarre nature of these attacks can be seen in one particular article (Bockman, 2006), which slams Australian teachers for daring to suggest that Cuba had a high literacy rate. No argument is put forward to deny the claims – it is apparently enough to deserve criticism to suggest that a communist nation might be successful at anything.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Ryan and Watson (2004) for a summary of the changes to government funding arrangements in education and an analysis of their effects.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Apart from gender in relation to reading literacy, the most important student background variable in relation to achievement in Australia is socio-economic status (SES), based on parents' occupations. Variance in achievement between schools in Australia is largely explained by differences in SES at both student and school levels, with the SES of a school's student population in Australia an even stronger predictor of student performance than individual background. School related variables associated with student achievement are also dominated by SES.

<sup>xxiv</sup> McGaw, speaking on ABC Radio National in 2006 said, "...if you're disadvantaged in Australia, the education system doesn't serve you as well as it does in a number of other countries, countries that we'd like to think we're similar to...The biggest problem is perhaps the extent to which we are now depending on private investment in education. If you look at the proportion of national wealth, of GDP spent on education Australia ranks 18<sup>th</sup> in the OECD, if you look at the proportion spent from private sources, we rank 3<sup>rd</sup> ...so we're shifting balance of expenditure towards private capacity which I think reinforces the capacity of people who are socially advantaged to care better for their own children" (Broadcast ABC RN, 8.15am, Nov 20<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>xxv</sup> We surveyed submissions from individuals and teacher education faculties at: the Australian Catholic University, University of Technology Sydney, University of New England, University of Ballarat, Deakin University, Curtin University, Monash University, Finders University, Sydney University, Charles Sturt University and Macquarie University (where the Education faculty made a separate submission to that provided by the psychologists associated with the Nelson letter). Most of the 453 submissions are available online at: [http://www.dest.gov.au/nitl/submission\\_index.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/nitl/submission_index.htm)