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Making up lost time

PROFESSOR Kevin Wheldall, director of Macquarie University's Special Education Centre is not a well known Australian hero, but he deserves to be. In Darwin, Sydney, Cape York and Gladstone, his Making Up for Lost Time in Literacy program, Multilit, is transforming the educational prospects of children the school system has failed.

As Justine Ferrari reports today, Reverend Bill Crews's Exodus Foundation is enabling the program to be established widely. It is rescuing, among others, Year 6 children who would otherwise face high school next year with Year 3 reading skills. Built around phonics and word recognition, Multilit boosts students' confidence with 18 weeks of small-group teaching and one-to-one support.

Despite the decades-old crusade of "whole word" ideologues, phonics in Multilit have proved vital for older primary students struggling to identify complex new words they have not memorised under the "whole word approach". The success achieved by Multilit in 18 weeks raises questions about why schools fail too many students over six years. At least one lesson is clear from this and other international evidence. Phonics are the building blocks of reading.

Justine Ferrari, Education writer