



MultiLit

A newsletter for parents and teachers

September 2013

moments

Let's do the time(d) WARP again!

There is a clear need for a good, reliable measure of how well children can read so that those struggling to learn to read can be quickly and easily identified, given extra assistance, and their progress monitored. Reading is such a complex business, however, that most reading tests are usually both time consuming and complicated to administer.

But what if a simple, quick method could be established that could be shown to be just as reliable and valid as conventional reading tests? What if, in fact, a measure were to be developed that took only one minute per student, that could be administered frequently, and that required only very simple materials such as short passages of text and a watch with a second hand?

This is essentially what the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (WARP) (published by MultiLit) aims to provide.

The WARP consists of a series of 200-word passages, each comprising a complete story, which the child being assessed is

required to read aloud
"as quickly and as
carefully as you can".

The child's score is the number of words read correctly in one minute. It really is as simple as that.

But that only tells you about a child's reading fluency, you might object. The good news is that reading fluency measures like the WARP have been shown to correlate well with measures of both reading accuracy and reading comprehension.

The WARP has three Initial Assessment Passages to establish the child's current performance level and a further 10 Progress Monitoring Passages (of very similar difficulty level) to track progress weekly over a school term.

For further details, please see www.multilit.com/warp.



MultiLit so proud of Alison McMurtrie



MultiLit is proud to announce that Alison McMurtrie, a long-standing member of the MultiLit team, received the 2012 Special Education Prize for academic excellence in the Master of Special Education at Macquarie University Special Education Centre. On 23 May 2013, Alison was presented with the award by Dr Mitch Parsell (pictured), Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching, Faculty of Human Sciences at Macquarie University, in recognition of achieving the top results for the year. The occasion was also attended by family, MultiLit colleagues and other faculty members.

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Did you know?

The MultiLit Literacy Centre offers online assessments and programs.

Our expert staff deliver one-on-one online tutoring programs before, during or after school time.
For more information or to book an assessment, call the Literacy Centre on **1300 559 919**.

The three-tier model will turn children into proficient readers

Kevin Wheldall

If all children are to learn to read to a good level of proficiency in their first few years of schooling, we need a clear plan to ensure that no child falls through the net. Such a plan must be both effective and cost-effective. It has become increasingly accepted in recent years that a three-tier, phased model of reading instruction, known as Response to Intervention (or Rtl), is the best means of achieving this.

The three-tier Rtl model is predicated upon a first tier of exemplary initial instruction in reading for all students during their first year of schooling (Kindergarten in New South Wales). This first tier of instruction should essentially comprise the best scientific evidence-based instruction.

To the layman, this sounds obvious, but in many Australian schools a less effective implicit model of reading instruction has held sway for the last few decades. Much of this implicit approach to reading instruction is highly desirable as a bedrock upon which to build, and it may even be enough for a minority of children, but most will need direct, explicit and systematic instruction in the five pillars or 'five big ideas' of teaching reading: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

What is often lacking in initial reading instruction, in particular, is effective, specific instruction in what is known as synthetic phonics; how to relate letters to sounds and to blend letter sounds into words.

Even when afforded such exemplary reading instruction, there will always be some children who take longer than others to catch on. It is important to identify these low-progress readers as early as possible so that they do not fall too far behind their peers as their difficulties compound.

Children who do not learn to read in the first few years of schooling are typically destined to a school career of educational failure because reading underpins almost all subsequent learning. A safe strategy is to target students who fall into the bottom 25% of the population for remedial reading intervention, as soon as their difficulties become apparent. Students' progress should be checked regularly, in order to provide remedial intervention for those who need it from the beginning of Year 1, at the very latest.

The Rtl model recommends that struggling readers, the low-progress readers who comprise the bottom 25%, should be offered more intensive Tier 2 intervention in small groups of three to four students. Again the

instruction provided to these students should be based on what the scientific research evidence has shown to be most effective: essentially the same five big ideas of reading instruction but more intensive and more individualised. In small groups, teachers are able to be more responsive to the specific idiosyncratic needs of the students with whom they are working. Small group instruction can be just as effective as one-to-one instruction for children without severe reading difficulties.

Even with a solid Tier 2 small group reading program in place, there will still be a very small number of students who 'fail to thrive', perhaps about 3-5% of all Year 1 students. These are the students for whom we should reserve Tier 3 one-to-one intensive reading instruction, preferably with a specialist reading teacher with a sound background in special education. The same five big ideas are still critical.

What is different, of course, is the intensity of instruction. Having successfully taught the vast majority of Year 1 students the basics of learning to read by Tier 1 and, where necessary, Tier 2 small group teaching, it is a far more manageable proposition to provide these few remaining students with the individual reading support that they will need, for as long as they need it.

With this three-tier Response to Intervention model in place, predicated upon scientific evidence based reading instruction, almost all, if not all, children will become proficient readers. Of course, the Rtl model does not stop at the end of Year 1; it is important to monitor reading progress closely for all students, especially for the first three years of schooling. But by employing these procedures rigorously and teaching scientifically, it is not too much to expect very nearly all of our children to learn to read.

Originally published in *The Australian* newspaper.

Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, AM is Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd and Director of the MultiLit Research Unit. You can follow him on Twitter (@KevinWheldall) where he comments on reading and education (and anything else that takes his fancy). He also has a blog, 'Notes from Harefield: Reflections by Kevin Wheldall on reading, books, education, family, and life in general': www.kevinwheldall.com.au. Email: kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au



The need for NAPLAN

This article is based on an invited submission (made by MultiLit) to the Inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on: 'The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy'.

Robyn Wheldall

There has been considerable public debate about whether or not the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, or NAPLAN, is a good idea. As with many issues in education and educational standards, feelings generally run high. This brief article summarises some of the benefits that we at MultiLit see from our standpoint of helping low-progress readers.

A good starting point

It is our view that the introduction of NAPLAN has resulted in more systematic identification of students in need of additional support in terms of learning to read and write.

Clearly, the first step in offering services to students to improve their literacy skills is to identify those most in need of support. NAPLAN provides a scheduled (and therefore predictable) assessment structure that enables school leaders and teachers to identify those students who are struggling to make adequate progress against national benchmarks.

The utility of the NAPLAN assessment is that a common scale has been introduced across the nation, providing a common language that helps identify when and where targeted resources should be deployed. The result is a reduction in more subjective assessments of relative student performance. This is necessary because there is evidence that teacher judgment alone may not

be an adequate means of identifying struggling students.

A highly desirable impact of NAPLAN is that teaching resources are more effectively deployed and students who need the most help are more likely to receive that help.

Parental empowerment

Information about individual children that is available from NAPLAN is also very important to their parents. NAPLAN has effectively given parents a clear window through which to see how their children are progressing in the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. Not only do parents have a right to this information, this is critical if schools and parents are to work together to enable children and young people to reach their full potential.

It is also our view that parents are now much better informed about their children's progress in the areas of basic skills learning since the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008. This represents a profound advancement in empowering parents to take a more active role in their child's education. Moreover, with many families moving between states, and therefore education systems, the introduction of an Australia-wide assessment framework has

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Alison's interest in special education and particularly in learning difficulties began early in her career as a classroom teacher. When encountering students with reading difficulties, she did not feel equipped to deal with them. Her undergraduate training had not given her the necessary skills or knowledge to teach reading, and this led to postgraduate studies in the UK in the area of learning difficulties. The degree of Master of Special Education further expanded her interest and provided her with a greater understanding of how best to approach special education more broadly.

When asked what she had learned from her studies, Alison said:

"If only I had known all of this information at the start of my teaching career. The practical application of theory has been so empowering. Classroom teachers are expected to teach a wide range of students within a mainstream setting, but unfortunately, the training they receive is often insufficient. This course has the potential to transform one's teaching and, in fact, all students in your care will be better off."

Heartiest congratulations, Alison, from all of us at MultiLit!



Alison with MultiLit colleagues, from left: Hans Wijgh, Rose Ye, Geraldine Pratt, Alison Madelaine and Meree Reynolds.

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reduced some of the issues associated with moving a child from school to school.

This increased level of information for schools and parents is especially important for students who are at-risk of, or who are experiencing, difficulties in learning how to read. Shared information on a child's progress in NAPLAN may assist school personnel in assessing the likely needs of a child coming into their school.

Transparency is important for parental choice

Furthermore, it is our view that the publication of NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website provides parents with important information about what school they would like their child to attend. This type of information has not been available to parents previously and we consider it to be very important. In addition, once a child is attending a certain school, his or her parents are able to monitor the performance of their school in relation to other schools with a similar profile and with the rest of the nation. Parents are typically the most passionate advocates for their children and having information about how their child's school is performing in the areas of basic skills teaching is very important.

Making it better

While we applaud national testing commencing in Year 3, we think it would be prudent to introduce a further test earlier, in Year 1. An appropriate assessment at this point would enable school leaders and teachers to identify those students who may be having (or may be at risk of having) difficulties in learning to read. Early intervention for students who are identified as having difficulties is much more effective and more cost-effective than allowing difficulties to persist into the primary school years.

Back up testing with the necessary resources

But, clearly, there is little point in identifying students in need of assistance if there are not the resources available to provide the help these students require to become proficient readers. The vital next step is to provide support to these students.

This will typically mean the student being taught more intensively, in small groups or one-to-one if small group instruction is not found to be sufficiently effective for a particular student. It is hoped that once a student begins progressing at a normal rate, then he or she can receive the same instruction as his or her typically developing peers. Subsequent NAPLAN performance of students who have required extra support is one way that these students can be monitored in the longer term.

In our view, the National Partnerships in Literacy and Numeracy initiative has provided funding for targeted assistance that has seen a great many students benefit. It is necessary that recurrent funding to support students who require additional assistance to develop their literacy skills is available, so that schools can engage the personnel and use the resources they require to meet the needs of struggling students.

Ensuring evidence-based interventions are used

Teachers (and others) assisting students in need of additional support should use evidence-based programs to improve the literacy outcomes of their students. We know from the scientific research into reading acquisition over the last 30 years what an effective program should comprise. The five 'big ideas' of reading instruction are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It seems, however, that approaches that have been found wanting continue to be used by many teachers and in many schools.

Teachers who may not have received an adequate grounding in the teaching of reading in their initial training should be retrained or, at a minimum, engage in professional development and mentoring in effective instructional approaches for teaching reading. Improving the quality of our teachers must be a priority if we are to see improvement in literacy standards in Australia.

*Dr Robyn Wheldall (Beaman) is an Honorary Fellow of Macquarie University and is Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit and a director of MultiLit Pty Ltd.
Email: robyn.wheldall@multilit.com*

Sharing success in WA

I trained in your MiniLit course in 2012, and together with two other colleagues, also did the MultiLit course. We trialled the MultiLit program with a group of Indigenous students with a 100% success rate. Not only did they improve in reading and spelling, the increase in their self esteem was incredible. We attribute the success to your program.

Just over half way through 2012, I started four groups of students in MiniLit. We have just completed the 80 lessons and out of 16 students all but two have achieved total mastery. The two who have struggled have made a powerful improvement but may now need to be immersed in the MultiLit course.

After final testing of the first group I started in MiniLit, I am pleased to share with you that we have had improvements in speed, accuracy and error rates. Two of our real standouts were two students who went from reading 100 words in 2 minutes 28 seconds to 100 words in 44 and 50 seconds respectively.

I wanted to share our success and thank you for the powerful tools you have produced.

*Linda Carr
Education and Literacy Support teacher
Huntingdale Primary School, WA*

Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd
Professor Kevin Wheldall

Editor
Freya Purnell

Address
Suite 2, Level 3
75 Talavera Road,
Macquarie Park NSW 2113

Phone
1300 55 99 19

Fax
(02) 9888 3818

Email
multilit@multilit.com

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www.multilit.com
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