

Girls with reading difficulties overlooked?

New research from our MULTILIT Research Unit (MRU) casts doubt on the widely accepted view that there are far more boys with reading difficulties than girls, and suggests that there is a danger girls experiencing reading problems may be overlooked.

It is commonly believed that four or five times as many boys experience difficulties learning to read as do girls. But two new research studies suggest that this is not the case. Professor Kevin Wheldall, MRU Director, with research colleague Dr Alison Madelaine and doctoral student Lisa Limbrick, report their findings in two new articles published in widely respected educational research journals: the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* and the *Australian Journal of Education*.

In their first study, Wheldall and Limbrick analysed the NSW Basic Skills Test data for the last 10 years and found that although more boys than girls had reading problems, the differences were much smaller than commonly believed: less than twice as many boys as girls. Limbrick, Wheldall and Madelaine subsequently replicated these findings Australia wide in their analysis of NAPLAN test data, again finding less than twice as many boys as girls with reading difficulties. This is in stark contrast to previous estimates.

“There is a very common misperception out there that struggling to learn to read is a male problem; that the vast majority of low-progress readers are boys,” Professor Wheldall said. “But this is simply not true. There are indeed more boys than girls but not nearly as many more as is commonly believed; perhaps not even twice as many.”

The researchers suggest that this misperception has arisen by focusing only on students identified



by teachers as having reading difficulties. Boys who struggle to learn to read often identify themselves by their behaviour in class – they act up. Girls with reading problems, however, may be more likely to slip through the net because they are less likely to draw attention to themselves in class.

Sources

- Limbrick, L., Wheldall, K., & Madelaine, A. (2010). Estimating gender ratios for poor reading using large-scale assessments. *Australian Journal of Education*, 54, 190-222.
- Wheldall, K., & Limbrick, L. (2010). Do more boys than girls have reading problems? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 43, 418-429.

Reading together

Dianne Mills from PARRASIP (Parramatta Schools Industry Partnership) approached MULTILIT a few months ago to discuss possible ways of working together. PARRASIP is a federal and state funded not-for-profit organisation linking business to schools to enhance literacy and numeracy outcomes. Dianne had experienced the benefits of a MULTILIT program first-hand when her daughter received MULTILIT instruction at school. Having seen the excellent progress her daughter was making, she felt that there must be ways of using MULTILIT in the

schools she was working with. After several discussions and meetings, five schools accepted the offer to take part in a MULTILIT Peer Tutoring program as a first step in helping students with their reading. MTC Work Solutions, working with PARRASIP, have provided the funding for this initiative.

Each school selected five Year 9-11 students to take part in a morning's training in peer-tutoring using our *MULTILIT Reinforced Reading* strategies which are part of the *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program*. Some of

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Specific and contingent teacher praise

Kevin Wheldall, Robyn Beaman and Jennifer Stephenson

Statement of the problem

Teacher praise has long been advocated as a means of motivating and rewarding school students. Some contemporary critics argue, however, that teacher praise may be harmful and may serve to diminish the intrinsic motivation of students.

Proposed solution/intervention

Teachers should employ praise in a consistent way based on what the research evidence has shown to be most effective and should avoid using praise in counterproductive ways.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

The use of teacher praise to influence student classroom behaviour is based on applied behaviour analysis, specifically reinforcement theory. Behaviour that is followed by reinforcing consequences increases in frequency. Teacher praise is known to be a reinforcer for many students. By employing praise as a consequence in a systematic way, contingent upon appropriate student behaviour, teachers may increase the amount of time students

spend behaving appropriately in the classroom. This is sometimes known as 'Positive Teaching'.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

The research on use of teacher praise reveals that whereas teachers typically praise students frequently for academic behaviour (producing good work), they very rarely praise students for appropriate social behaviour in the classroom. Conversely, while they are less likely to reprimand students for poor work, they reprimand students for inappropriate classroom behaviour at very high rates. Numerous experimental studies carried out over many years have demonstrated unequivocally that teachers can increase the amount of time students spend behaving appropriately by reducing their rate of reprimands to inappropriate behaviour and concentrating on praising instances of appropriate social behaviour. Praising students for what they already do well, however, may serve to decrease their intrinsic motivation.

Some simple rules for praising

1. Praise the behaviour, not the person.
2. Praise quickly and consistently.

3. Praise only actual instances of the desired behaviour; that is, praise contingently.
4. Praise specifically and descriptively.
5. Decrease praise for frequent appropriate behaviours.
6. Privately delivered praise may be more effective for older students.

Conclusions

Effective praise is not about making continual positive statements unrelated to behaviour (for example, "Good girl"). Praise delivered non-contingently or directed to the person or product rather than to a specific desired behaviour could be less effective. Similarly, lavishly praising behaviour that is already learned and frequent may also be counterproductive. But praising students contingently for behaving appropriately is a powerful means of increasing appropriate classroom behaviour.

The MUSEC verdict

Recommended.

[MUSEC Briefings are offered in good faith as a service to the community by Macquarie University Special Education Centre.]

MULTILIT success story

It always makes our day here at MULTILIT when we hear from former MULTILIT students. Ben Deacon wrote to us last month telling us how he had got on since attending MULTILIT over 10 years ago.

"I attended the MULTILIT school for two terms during 1999 due to my dyslexia. After my time with MULTILIT, I attained my HSC at Pacific Hills Christian School, Dural.

Since then, I have completed a Bachelor of Medical Science at UTS. Currently, I am pursuing admission into a Bachelor of Medicine. I feel that the education I received at MULTILIT vastly improved my learning."

Congratulations on your outstanding achievements, Ben. We are sure that your story will be an inspiration to many current MULTILIT students.

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their teachers had also attended the one-day *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program* workshop and so had an overall understanding of the MULTILIT approach.

Enthusiasm was the order of the day as the students role-played strategies, discussed the role of a peer tutor and learned about phonics. We were impressed by the maturity and commitment shown by the students.

Each student will now be assigned a Year 7 low-progress reader to read with several times a week using these

new strategies. PARRASIP will continue to encourage the teachers from the various schools involved to support each other in the implementation and logistics. Dianne is also hoping that this model can be replicated and will be monitoring the impact the program has on all the students involved. Peer tutoring has been shown to have a really positive impact on students' reading with both tutor and student benefitting and so we look forward to hearing some good news stories.

Alison McMurtrie

“My child is doing MULTILIT”... But are they really?

We at MULTILIT are always thrilled when a parent mentions to us, “My child is doing MULTILIT ” or, as happens from time to time, makes contact via an email or letter. It is really heartening to know that MULTILIT is being embraced by parents and schools (and some education systems too now) right across the country, in order to help children who are struggling to learn to read. Equally heartening are the success stories and the sharing of personal accounts of how using MULTILIT has transformed, not only the life of the child, but of the whole family. In short, it keeps us all going.

There are times, however, when we are dismayed when we hear just what “my child is doing MULTILIT” actually means in practice. We sometimes hear that students are: “doing MULTILIT” once a week (but we know that regular and frequent sessions are critical to the success of the program); “doing” it on the way to school in the car (if done properly this would be extraordinarily hazardous!); “only doing the phonics bit” (we know that emerging readers need to apply their phonic word attack skills in connected text reading for real and lasting progress to be made); and so on.

The message I want to convey here is that MULTILIT is an integrated approach that has several essential components (*MULTILIT Word Attack Skills*, *MULTILIT Sight Words* and *MULTILIT Reinforced Reading*), all of which are required to ensure that a developing reader learns how to read accurately, fluently and, all importantly, with understanding (reading comprehension is the ultimate goal, of course). It is also a program that requires intensity in terms of delivery. Once a week is simply not frequent enough. Where a piecemeal approach is taken, or the program is not delivered often enough, or with inadequate attention to the process, then the child is unlikely to make the gains we would typically expect.

Some key questions that parents (and teachers) might ask to

ensure the appropriate delivery of MULTILIT are:

1. How often does my child have MULTILIT instruction?

The answer should be ideally at least four times per week for at least 30 minutes each time.

2. Does my child do all three components of the program?

The answer should be yes (*MULTILIT Word Attack Skills*, *MULTILIT Sight Words* and *MULTILIT Reinforced Reading*). [If a child has completed the *MULTILIT Sight Words* program, that is they can recognise all 200 words as a whole and respond within two seconds, then this component will not be necessary.]

3. Does my child do Reinforced Reading session every day when they have a MULTILIT session?

The answer should be yes, and this should occur with a trained tutor (who could be a parent, an aide, a teacher, or a peer tutor under supervision) on each day that the other components of the program are taught.

4. How do I know if my child is reading instructional level text in the Reinforced Reading session?

The answer should be that the text level is checked regularly and is within 90-95% accuracy for this session.

5. How can I help my child with the MULTILIT program?

The answer is by doing Reinforced Reading at home on at least four days a week, and preferably daily, in addition to what is happening at school. Every bit of reading, especially with your support, helps.

I hope you will find these simple questions useful as an easy way to check that your child is getting the MULTILIT program he or she deserves. All the best to you as you help your child become a confident and independent reader.

Robyn Beaman

WHAT'S NEW IN MRU?

News from the MULTILIT Research Unit

Congratulations Dr Reynolds!

Senior MULTILIT Consultant, Meree Reynolds, has been awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Macquarie University for her research on young struggling readers. Meree's program of research, completed with and under the supervision of Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Alison Madelaine (pictured), focused on developing a more effective program of instruction for young children who make only very limited progress in learning to read during their first (Kindergarten) year of schooling.



Visiting experts from UK

Professor Rhona Stainthorp and Dr Johnny Solity, both leading reading researchers from the UK, visited MULTILIT in May, presenting research seminars and holding discussions with MULTILIT staff about developments in the teaching of reading in the UK.

Great reading gains in Cape York

Aboriginal students attending MULTILIT Tutorial Centres based in two Cape York schools have made great gains in reading and related skills, thanks to: our terrific MULTILIT tutors Clare Carpenter, Paulene Rorich, Ruth Bird, Jessica Branch and Melanie Goodman; MULTILIT Cape York Consultant and Project Manager, Helen Ward; and MULTILIT Senior Consultant, Dr Alison Madelaine.

Congratulations Dr Kohnen!

MULTILIT Research Fellow, Dr Saskia Kohnen, has been awarded a highly sought-after Macquarie University Research Fellowship, one of only six awarded this year. Saskia has also been awarded an Australian Research Council Research Grant with Macquarie colleague, Professor Lyndsey Nickels.



Training News

This year has been an exciting and busy one for the MULTILIT Training team. The provision of high quality training continues to ensure effective delivery of both the *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program* and the *Word Attack Skills Extension Program*, and is the key to their success. The Training team thanks all of the participants for their attendance and for the positive feedback they provided. We would also like to welcome Jennifer Smith to the team. Jennifer is an experienced MULTILIT practitioner and is a talented trainer.

We are pleased to announce that the *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program* has been accepted by the WA DET as literacy support for schools who are part of the National Partnerships Program. We strongly encourage that schools purchasing the program send staff responsible for its delivery to the *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program Workshop*. For those overseeing others using the program, we recommend that they attend our three-day accreditation course. This course provides greater understanding of the *Reading Tutor Program* and includes some training on Positive Teaching, additional intervention strategies, monitoring and data collection.

If you would like to find out more about our training activities, please contact our Training Manager on 1300 559 919, or you can visit our website for up-to-date training information.

Kyle Pitt

New Preschool Program

An exciting new interactive program for preschool children is currently under development at MULTILIT. We hope to have it available for release in the second half of next year. The program, known as PreLit, is an emergent literacy skills program, designed to be delivered the year before children start formal schooling. The purpose of the program is to lay the foundations for good phonological awareness and other language skills in preschool children, to facilitate literacy development in the early school years. PreLit is particularly focused on improving the learning outcomes for those children considered at potential risk of long-term reading failure but will provide a good grounding in the key prerequisite skills for literacy for all children about to begin school. PreLit instruction is based on the findings of the accumulated research with this age group and will provide early childhood teachers with research-based teaching strategies and an effective model of delivery for the teaching of phonological awareness and oral language. Preliminary findings of the efficacy of PreLit with preschool children within a play-based curriculum have yielded very encouraging results. PreLit is designed to complement a play-based learning environment through brief periods of daily instruction.

Georgia Callaghan



Chairman and Director
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New to MULTILIT

Hans Wijgh is our newly appointed Director, Business Development. Hans has many years' experience working with innovative small to medium businesses and has a strong focus on modern marketing and building strong and lasting customer relationships. He brings a blend of expertise gained from his work in a variety of different industry sectors, including science and technology, the environment, entertainment, and the internet. We welcome Hans to MULTILIT and look forward to utilising his skills to deliver better products and services to our valued customers.



Hans Wijgh

Arrivals and Departures

Welcome to: Jacki Osmand, Clinic Director; Hans Wijgh, Director of Business Development; Lauren Cowled, Senior Tutor in MULTILIT Clinic; Jordana Elias, also Senior Tutor; Jennifer Smith, Training Officer; and Iris Gonzales, Administrative Assistant.

Farewell to: Irina Zakoshanski, Executive Manager – Business and Corporate Affairs; Donna Fenech, Executive Clinician; and Mischele Cavanagh-Downs, Publications and Marketing Manager.