



moments

Just InitialLit

As many readers will already know, the three-tier Response to Intervention model applied to reading difficulties suggests three stages of increasing intensity of instruction. Children who struggle to learn to read in their first year of schooling (Foundation Year), following regular whole class instruction in reading and related skills, are offered Tier 2 instruction which typically involves more intensive instruction (such as MiniLit, for example) in small groups of 4-5 children. This sort of intervention is usually enough to 'fix' most struggling readers but a small minority will need even more intensive Tier 3 instruction on a one-to-one basis, preferably with a reading specialist.

All well and good, but what is not usually emphasised is that for this model to be effective and workable, it is predicated on exemplary, scientific evidence-based initial instruction in reading being provided to the whole class ie at Tier 1. And there's the rub.

In NSW and in other states, we are still suffering from the hangover (double entendre intended) of whole language literacy instruction in our schools. Today, enthusiasts for this approach tend to use the term 'balanced literacy', but it is much the same failed constructivist approach to literacy instruction as before,

just with a catchier monicker. (And who would argue for being unbalanced?) It is still not based on scientific research into how reading works and how best to teach it.

At MultiLit, our main concerns have been with helping young struggling readers (Years 1-2) and older low-progress readers (Years 3 and above). But this has put us in the position of being the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff picking up the instructional casualties. Far better to maintain a secure fence at the top of the cliff, in the form of effective initial instruction in reading and related skills, so that very few young children slip through the cracks and need additional help.

To this end, the MultiLit development team, led by the estimable Alison McMurtrie and advised by the MultiLit Research Unit, have been developing such a program of scientific evidence-based initial instruction in reading and related skills for the past few years. Branded with the name of InitialLit*, our new program will be released in Term 4 this year, in time for interested schools to get on board for training so that it may be implemented in Foundation Year classrooms from Day 1 of the 2017 school year.

*A tip of the hat to Iain Rothwell, our Executive Director, who came up with such a cute name for our new program for initial literacy instruction. Nice one, Iain.

Minister, reading recovery requires more than Reading Recovery

An open letter to NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli

Kevin Wheldall

Dear Minister,
I have been impressed by your determination to enhance the effectiveness of teaching in NSW schools. Your recent policy initiatives designed to improve teacher quality, by requiring that future teachers meet higher entry standards and can also explicitly demonstrate their proficiency in literacy and numeracy, have much to commend them. The next step is to improve the quality of instruction

provided, especially for those whose needs are greatest – children from Indigenous and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. These students commonly comprise the greater proportion of young students struggling to learn to read. I would like to draw your attention to the needs of these struggling young readers.

Your Department of Education must think that I sound like a broken record because I have been complaining about the Department's continued use of the



Reading Recovery program for well over 20 years now. But I am hopeful that you will decide that it is finally time to take action. Please bear with me while I reiterate a few of the arguments I have raised in the past.

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First, may I point out that my colleagues and I were commissioned by your Department to carry out a thorough evaluation of Reading Recovery as far back as 1991. You may not be aware of this because our research reports have not been formally released by your Department to this day. Fortunately, a clause in our contract permitted us to report our findings in academic research journals and at academic conferences. Consequently, our findings were published in what was then the foremost reading research journal, the *Reading Research Quarterly*, and our study was subsequently reported by international authorities on reading as one of the more “methodologically sophisticated” studies on Reading Recovery, because it was a true experimental, randomised control trial.

So what did we find that your Department (at the time) seemed so reluctant to make public? Our first research report in 1993 was, in some respects, really quite positive about Reading Recovery. We found that, after about 15 weeks of intervention, struggling readers in Year 1 did indeed perform better than their matched peers who did not receive Reading Recovery. In fact, some advocates of Reading Recovery have, over the years, reported our study in support of its continuing use.

But, as always, the devil is in the detail. When we looked more closely at our data, we found that Reading Recovery appeared to be effective for only one in every three students who undertook the program: one student did not ‘recover’, one student would have improved even without the intervention (as our control and comparison groups showed us), and one did ‘recover’. Unfortunately, we also found that the students for whom Reading Recovery was effective tended to be those whose difficulties were less severe, those students who were not so far behind as the others. We concluded that, even if it were shown to be effective, one-to-one individual tutoring in Reading Recovery might be thought to be an expensive way of helping struggling readers; yet it was, in reality, three times more expensive than imagined because it was only effective for one in three struggling readers and

those whose problems were relatively minor.

Over the years, numerous studies on the efficacy of Reading Recovery have been published since then and the arguments have gone back and forth. In 2012, a large group of international reading researchers even went so far as to publish an open plea for Reading Recovery to be dropped in favour of methods supported by scientific research evidence on how reading works and how best to remediate difficulties. It fell on deaf ears. In New South Wales and other states in Australia, as in many other western countries, scarce funding for struggling readers has continued to be directed to an expensive program, the demonstrated efficacy of which is, at the very least, equivocal.

Let’s now jump ahead to the present. Last year two very important reports on Reading Recovery were released. The first was from New Zealand, where the program was originally developed by the late Dame Professor Marie Clay, undoubtedly a formidable and highly regarded reading researcher in her day. The New Zealand research team led by Professors James Chapman and Bill Tunmer analysed NZ Ministry of Education Reading Recovery data covering 10 years, along with data from three PIRLS surveys (2001, 2006, 2011), to assess the impact of Reading Recovery on the reading performance of students in New Zealand. They concluded:

“Our analyses of RR data from annual monitoring reports and from the 2011 PIRLS survey indicate that RR has had little or no impact on reducing New Zealand’s relatively large literacy achievement gap because the programme is of limited benefit to those children who need help the most, especially Maori/Pasifika children and children from low-income backgrounds. We also reported research indicating that positive maintenance effects for large numbers of students successfully discontinued from RR are modest to non-existent.”

The second, more recent, report comes from your own Department’s Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation and was released just before Christmas (2015). Again this study was based on

a very large sample of young struggling readers, all children throughout the state who received Reading Recovery in 2012. The summary of the report (published as *Learning Curve*, Issue 11), reads as follows:

“The results showed some evidence that RR has a modest short-term effect on reading skills among the lowest performing students. However, RR does not appear to be an effective intervention for students that begin Year 1 with more proficient literacy skills. In the longer-term, **there was no evidence of any positive effects of RR on students’ reading performance in Year 3.**” (my emphasis)

So there’s no longer any need to take just my word for it, Minister; your own Department has concluded that Reading Recovery may have only a modest short-term effect but that even this ‘washes out’ by Year 3; in other words a pointless and worthless exercise.

Now, we may argue backwards and forwards about the relative efficacy of Reading Recovery for some students but I put this to you, Minister: If Reading Recovery were so powerful an intervention for young struggling readers as is claimed, would we not expect to find, after 25 or more years of implementation across the western world, strong, positive research findings, reported repeatedly, testifying to the undoubtedly large and long-lasting effects of this program? Should it not clearly have been shown to be earning its keep by now?

Minister, for the sake of the children for whose education you are responsible, I urge you to show regard for these research findings on Reading Recovery, including those from your own Department, and to provide educational leadership by discontinuing the earmarked funding for this program of marginal utility and encouraging schools to try other methods and programs for helping struggling readers based on the best available scientific research evidence.

Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM is Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd and Director of the MultiLit Research Unit (www.multilit.com). Email: kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au

Test review: The Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (WARP)

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Reviewed by Jan Roberts

The WARP is a standardised, curriculum based measurement assessment tool of reading accuracy. The purpose of the series of thirteen 200-word passages of equal difficulty is to track individual progress of low-level readers. Students read aloud for one minute each, the three 'initial passages' and subsequently, the 10 'progress' passages. The tester records the reader's accuracy and stops the reading at one minute and then scores the number of words read correctly. The testing frequency is recommended as weekly for a term.

The boxed pack includes a manual; a presentation booklet that includes one passage per page from which each student reads; 30 copies of the initial assessment passages record form; and 15 copies of the progress monitoring passages record form. (For students reading below the WARP level, the WARL is available.)

Several of my students were well-suited to this assessment tool in age and reading level (around grade 2-3). I found that the benefits of this assessment tool are as follows:

1. Each test is very quick to administer and score.
2. The initial and progress booklets are easy to use.
3. Reading aloud can be very stressful for struggling students but one minute is bearable and becomes easy as students progress.
4. The topics in the passages are easily accessible.
5. Students (and I) appreciated the light humour, which is a rarity in assessment tools.
6. The font is very big so accommodates even those with moderate vision impairments.
7. Progress is easily tracked.



“WARP is an excellent, thoroughly researched, assessment tool”

8. The same reading level is tested over time.
9. Both fluency and accuracy are tested.
10. The passages do not depend on a particular method of teaching reading.

The fact that these tests do not assess comprehension does not preclude asking a student about the meaning. Interestingly, one of my students who read with reasonable accuracy, volunteered at the end, “But I haven’t got a clue what that was about”. Fortunately, as his decoding improved, so did his understanding.

My only criticism is of the plastic packaging box which is very user-unfriendly. However, the whole set can be easily repackaged in a low-cost, soft plastic pack.

WARP is an excellent, thoroughly researched, assessment tool which I highly recommend to classroom teachers and other practitioners working with low level readers.

Jan Roberts is the Immediate Past President of Learning Difficulties Australia.

Who did he get?

Robyn Wheldall

This year my grandson started ‘Big School’. My granddaughter, who is six months younger, was envious of her cousin. Both are as keen as anything to be in school.

My daughter put a picture of my grandson – all smiles – up on Facebook and there were the usual oohs and aahs from all of the grandparents and friends. One comment from a parent friend from his preschool caught my eye. “Who did he get?”

This took me back to the days when my children were in primary school. It was the perennial question of what teacher your

child ‘got’ at the beginning of every school year.

It remains an important question. What teacher your child gets can lead to wildly different outcomes for your child. In those first few critical years when the important business of learning to read is taking place, it is hugely important that your child has a teacher who knows how to teach reading effectively.

Unfortunately it is pretty much a lottery as to whether or not a child will get a teacher in Kindergarten (and in the critical two years that follow) who knows about the scientific research evidence in terms of

teaching reading and knowing how to apply that in the classroom.

It shouldn’t be this way. It shouldn’t be a lottery. Every child in every early years classroom should have a teacher who knows how to teach reading effectively, knows how to assess how each of their students is progressing, and what to do for those who are not.

It shouldn’t be a matter of who. It should be that all teachers who are entrusted with the education of our little ones are adequately trained and are using approaches of proven efficacy to teach reading, from day one of Kindergarten.

Advance Australia Fair

Robyn Wheldall

Kevin and I almost always watch the televised citizenship ceremony that takes place on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin each Australia Day. January 26 has many positive connotations for us as it was on this day in 1994 that Kevin became an Australian citizen, just three and a half years after he settled in this country. It is also the day, in 2011, when he received a great honour; he was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM). For many of our fellow Australians, however, it is a day that signifies loss and mourning and is called 'Invasion Day'; a day when the world's oldest continuous culture was disrupted forever. Clearly there are many conflicting emotions about Australia Day, and rightly so.

When some of the newest Australians at the citizenship ceremony at Lake Burley Griffin are interviewed about why they have chosen Australia as their home, a great many talk about the opportunities that exist in this great country of ours. Most frequently they talk about the educational opportunities that exist for their children. This always makes me feel a bit uncomfortable when I reflect on just how valid this reason is. Our poor performance in the international rankings like PIRLS, for example, arguably would not support such a belief held by these enthusiastic 'volunteers', as Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has called them.

How can it be that one of the most affluent countries in the world appears to be doing such a poor job of educating its children? The recent focus on improving the quality of entrants into the teaching profession is a good first step, as is the requirement in New South Wales that prospective teachers demonstrate that they are adequately literate and numerate to teach our children. That it has come to this is cause for pause, however.

Over recent decades, the universities appear to have shown more concern for their bottom lines than they have for ensuring that the teaching profession is of a high enough standard. Prospective teachers are a 'cash cow' for universities as they are cheap to teach. Many commentators, like Jennifer Buckingham

and Kevin Wheldall, have long been drawing our attention to this predicament and it is heartening that some state Education Ministers, like Adrian Piccoli in New South Wales, are taking the fight up to the universities. But the wheels turn very slowly in this policy area and I fear that many more children will fail to thrive in the education system that we provide in this country.

If we really do want to Advance Australia Fair, we need to move more quickly on this issue. We are really only as good as what we can do for our lowest performing students – those from disadvantaged backgrounds, Indigenous students, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, refugees, and those students with learning difficulties. We need a fair society that acknowledges and meets the needs of those who will struggle to become literate and numerate in our classrooms. We cannot wait for a gradually improving system where teachers are more carefully selected and are properly trained to teach the basic skills that we assume will be covered in the curriculum.

Urgent action is required if we are to do the right thing by those who have placed their hopes in this country. Moreover, we have an absolute moral duty to ensure that we equip our nation's First Peoples to participate in the world they now find themselves in. We cannot turn back the clock and remedy all of the wrongs that were done in the name of colonisation. But what we can do is commit to making our education system a truly great one for all Australians. Only by ensuring equality of opportunity can we advance a fair Australia.

Dr Robyn Wheldall is a Director of MultiLit and the Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit (MRU).



Quality of research acknowledged

An article authored by Jennifer Buckingham, Robyn Beaman (Wheldall) and Kevin Wheldall, entitled "Why poor children are likely to become poor readers: The early years", has been selected as joint-runner up for

the Educational Review Article of the Year Award for 2014. Dr Buckingham completed her doctorate under the supervision of Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Wheldall in 2014.

Media mention

Twelve volunteers from the Youth Educational Support Service (YESS), based on the NSW South Coast, have had a successful first year implementing the MultiLit Reading Tutor Program with 40 Year 7 students. According to a report in the *Bega District News*, students who completed the program said they could now read information from the board and their textbooks, allowing them to participate more fully in their classroom learning. YESS is seeking volunteers for 2016; visit www.yess.org.au to find out more.

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