



# moments

## Vital signs in reading

By Kevin Wheldall

**Anyone who has spent time in hospital or has a long-term illness will be well aware of the importance doctors and nurses attach to the continual monitoring of 'vital signs': body temperature, heart rate (or pulse), and blood pressure (BP). Measurement of these vital signs can also be achieved very quickly, easily and frequently. What is perhaps not so commonly known is that these vital signs can be highly variable and subject to considerable fluctuation as a result of varying circumstances.**

Blood pressure measurement, for example, can fluctuate from one reading to the next and is particularly susceptible to changes in when and where it is taken and by whom. Sometimes simply being examined by a medical professional can make our blood pressure go up: the 'white coat phenomenon'.

But does this variability in BP measurement mean that it is useless for diagnostic or monitoring purposes? The answer is no, of course not; measures do not need to be totally reliable to be very useful; in detecting hypertension, for example. We can also iron out some of the blips by taking several measures and averaging them or by taking repeated regular readings and looking at BP levels over time. Hypertension or high blood pressure is, of course,



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## NAPLAN success at award-winning Raymond Terrace Public School

**In 2010, Macquarie University doctoral student Jennifer Buckingham began her research work at Raymond Terrace Public School, introducing both the MultiLit Reading Tutor Program and MiniLit program into the school. Jennifer enjoyed the warm support of school principal, John Picton, who was determined to raise literacy standards.**

"In its review of literacy attainments at Raymond Terrace Public School (RTPS), it was identified that there was a need to focus on early reading strategies to improve student outcomes. MiniLit and the Reading Tutor Program became a core element of these strategies, providing intervention for those students at risk of not succeeding," John said.

Four years later, the success of Jennifer and John's initiative is reflected in the latest NAPLAN results for reading. Back in 2010, the average NAPLAN reading scores were 376 for Year 3 and 446 for Year 5. By 2013, the average scores had risen to 420 for Year 3, and 481 for Year 5.

"During the past four years that MiniLit and the Reading Tutor Program have been operating, there has been an obvious improvement in reading and writing. Whilst we cannot suggest MultiLit and MiniLit are the sole reasons for our improvements, they have certainly been a major part," said John.



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Even more importantly, the proportion of struggling readers in the school has dropped dramatically. In 2010, 28% of Year 3 students and 38% of Year 5 students scored in the bottom two performance bands for their year. In 2013, these figures had dropped to only 10% (Year 3) and 20% (Year 5), with no student failing to reach the national minimum standard in Year 3 (10% of students in 2010) and only 2% of students in Year 5 (15% students in 2010).

“The steady improvement in Raymond Terrace Public School’s NAPLAN results over the last four years has not occurred by chance. It is the result of strong leadership and hard work by teachers and students,” said Jennifer. “Literacy levels among students at Raymond Terrace Public School are well ahead of like schools, and on par with the average for all schools. This is a fantastic achievement in a relatively short time.”

The wonderful work of the team which implements MiniLit and the MultiLit Reading Tutor Program at Raymond Terrace Public School was recognised with an ‘Outstanding School Program’ award at the Port Stephens and Callaghan Education Week Awards, presented at a ceremony at Hunter River High School in August last year. The program was nominated for the award by the teachers at Raymond Terrace Public School for “contributing to the skills, confidence and learning outcomes of students in literacy”.

MultiLit congratulates Raymond Terrace Public School!



## Preparing students to learn with Positive Teaching

Recent media reports have highlighted that many teachers are struggling with classroom behaviour management. Without a clear strategy to deploy in the classroom, teachers risk losing students before instruction can be delivered.

MultiLit is now introducing a new professional development workshop to help teachers build less stressful and more effective teaching and learning environments, in which students are ready to receive effective instruction.

The Positive Teaching Workshop is based on the extensive research of Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Wheldall of Macquarie University, which has built on the earlier research of Professor Wheldall and Dr Frank Merrett at the Centre for Child Study, University of Birmingham.

This research has included identifying the most troublesome and disruptive classroom behaviour in Australian

primary school classrooms, observing primary teachers’ use of approval and disapproval for academic and social behaviour in the classroom, quantifying the effect of classroom seating arrangements on student time spent ‘on task’, and measuring the effect of implementing the strategies of Positive Teaching on classroom behaviour.

Teachers typically say that they already use a great deal of praise and approval with their students and this is true. But our research shows that teacher praise is mainly directed at students’ academic performance. Positive Teaching emphasises the importance of contingent and explicit praise for appropriate classroom *social* behaviour which increases the time students spend productively ‘on-task’, leading to improved academic performance.

Launching in May 2014, the Positive Teaching Workshop is a one-day

workshop designed for all teachers, learning support staff and teacher aides working in primary schools (Foundation – Year 6), and may prove to be particularly valuable for New Scheme teachers.

It will cover:

- Identifying troublesome classroom behaviour,
- Focusing on appropriate classroom behaviours,
- Setting the classroom context to encourage more appropriate behaviour and increase academic engagement, and
- Understanding the importance of contingent praise and appropriate reprimands in improving classroom behaviour.

To find out more about dates, locations and pricing for the Positive Teaching Workshop, visit [www.multilit.com](http://www.multilit.com) or call 1300 55 99 19.

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not an all or nothing affair since blood pressure is variable across individuals and is on a continuum. The BP levels we refer to as indicating degrees of hypertension are not magic markers but are, in a sense, arbitrary cut-offs that have proved in practice over time to be useful indicators for detecting potential problems.

By the same token, there are 'vital signs' like BP that are very useful to us when teaching reading. We can measure reading performance reliably enough for it to be very useful to us in practice; to help us in determining which of our students need additional help, for example.

There is another parallel here with hypertension. Some people still seem to believe that dyslexia or reading disability is a clearly differentiated specific condition that is either present or it is not; all or nothing. But reading performance, like BP, is on a continuum and where we set the performance bar to indicate a reading disability is essentially arbitrary. Children vary in the extent to which they display difficulties in reading. By changing the performance criterion, we can define reading disability as referring to 5, 10 or 20% of the population, for example. The decision where to place the bar is a judgement call and is likely to be influenced not only by student need but also by the resources available. To take an extreme example, there is little point identifying 50% of students as being dyslexic if we have resources available to meet the needs of only 5%.

The important thing to bear in mind, then, is that reading difficulties may be present to a greater or lesser extent. Many reading researchers and specialists today would argue that defining dyslexia is a largely futile exercise and that we should concentrate instead on helping all struggling readers to perform at a level that can reasonably be considered as being within an acceptable range for their age. To help us in this endeavour, we need good measures of reading performance that are reasonably reliable (like BP they will not be perfect), that are quick and easy to administer, and that we can use to screen for reading problems and to monitor the reading progress of those whose performance is of concern to us frequently, on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, many of the reading tests out there are time-consuming to administer and may only be used reliably at infrequent intervals. Such tests are not very useful to us in monitoring the reading performance of our students.

In recent years, reading researchers have been experimenting with so-called curriculum-based measures of reading that have been shown to be both remarkably reliable



and valid measures of reading performance while being both quick and easy to administer. This new approach to reading assessment also allows teachers and others to test students frequently to monitor progress, by providing numerous different reading passages that have been shown to be of an equal difficulty level. One such reading assessment instrument, the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (or WARP), has recently been released by MultiLit. When such an effective reading assessment tool is available to them, teachers and others can use the data collected to make instructional decisions so as to tailor their teaching strategies to meet individual student needs.

Like hospital patients, low-progress readers must be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that the interventions being employed are working and that they are making real improvements. Educators need to be like doctors to their students, monitoring their vital signs in reading and ensuring that no student is left behind.

*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](http://www.kevinwheldall.com). Email: [kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au)*

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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**.



## Congratulations Dr Buckingham!

Jennifer Buckingham, a doctoral candidate in the Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) supervised by Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Wheldall, recently had her doctoral thesis accepted by the University.

Jennifer's thesis was entitled 'Literacy and social disadvantage: An evaluation of a research-based literacy intervention for low-progress readers in schools with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage'.

Jennifer has also been named the recipient of the Professor Jennifer Bowes Prize for Outstanding Higher Degree Research Publication for 2014, which is the Macquarie University Institute of Early Childhood award for best student publication.

Congratulations to Dr Buckingham from all at MultiLit.



## MultiLit at West Beechboro PS

"We use MultiLit as an identified, research-based literacy program that supports the skill development of our low literacy performing students. Through this program, delivered by education assistants trained in the program delivery, we have seen significant and rapid gains in both the achievement levels of our students and their confidence. This new level of confidence has created a spiral of success within students who are now prepared to engage and more readily tackle their classroom programs. The word attack skills, sight word work and reading reinforcement have all combined to create a highly successful and effective intervention that provides the building blocks that have been missed early in the reading progress."

*Ray Boyd, Principal, West Beechboro Public School*

## Lessons from the nursery...

By Robyn Wheldall



**I had an instructive lesson from my three-year-old grandson recently. I was reminded of the importance of reading to littlies at a variety of times during the day, not just before a daytime nap or bedtime.**

While I was looking after Theodore for the day, I suggested to him that we have a story. He quickly replied, "But I don't want to go to bed, Nanny!".

Clearly, Theodore had associated me reading a book to him with me putting him down for a nap. And of course, this was true. As part of the sleep routine, reading a book or two had been firmly established.

This is a good idea in terms of setting the scene for a nap. But there was an unintended consequence of me using books as an 'antecedent'. I had inadvertently 'paired' reading a story with going to sleep! This had then 'over-generalised' in the head of my little grandson so that one only had a story

when preparing for sleep. This is not the message that I had intended.

This little exchange reminded me of the importance of varying the time and place of reading to little ones (or any other desirable activity that one is trying to establish as a healthy habit), so that it is 'generalised' or takes place in a variety of settings and times.

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, eh?

*Dr Robyn Wheldall is an Honorary Fellow of Macquarie University and is Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit and a director of MultiLit Pty Ltd.*

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