

Vital Signs in Reading

Kevin Wheldall

Anyone who has spent time in hospital will be well aware of the importance doctors and nurses attach to the continual monitoring of 'vital signs': body temperature, heart rate (pulse) and blood pressure. Measurement of these vital signs can be achieved very quickly, easily and frequently. What is perhaps not so commonly known is that these vital signs can be highly variable.

Blood pressure measurement, for example, can fluctuate widely from one reading to the next. Simply being examined by a medical professional is sometimes enough to make our blood pressure go up! But does this variability in BP measurement mean that it is useless for diagnostic or monitoring purposes? The answer is, of course not; measures do not need to be totally reliable to be very useful.

By the same token, there are 'vital signs' like BP that are very useful to us when determining which students in our schools need additional help in literacy.



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 per cent of the student 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 per cent of students as being low-progress if your school only has resources available to meet the needs of just 5 per cent.

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, 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 in monitoring the vital signs in reading of your students.

In recent years, reading researchers have been experimenting with so-called curriculum-based measures of reading that have been shown to be 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 Pty Ltd. When an effective reading assessment tool is used, principals can use the data to better tailor strategies to meet individual student needs and improve classroom delivery of reading instruction.

Like hospital patients, low-progress readers must be monitored to ensure that the interventions you use are working and that they are making real improvements. Principals must be like doctors to their school, monitoring 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".

For more information on the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (WARP) together with MultiLit's new Reading Assessment Professional Development Workshop, please visit www.multilit.com, email us at multilit@multilit.com or call 1300 55 99 19/02 9886 6600