

Why Jaydon still can't read

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Note: This article was originally presented as an address to the MultiLit Twentieth Anniversary Conference in 2015.

It is a great honour to be the first speaker at this symposium to mark the twentieth anniversary of MultiLit. What an incredible achievement. Congratulations especially to Kevin and Robyn Wheldall, of course, but also to all the many hard-working and clever people involved in MultiLit and its progeny.

This year marks some other auspicious but less celebratory anniversaries.

It is now 60 years since Rudolf Flesch published his best-selling book *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955). Flesch explained in plain language why the methods of teaching reading in America in 1955 were not working. In it he wrote, "The teaching of reading – all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks – is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read ... for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how" (p.2). Australian educators went ahead and adopted those same methods anyway.

It is now 15 years since the US National Reading Panel reported its findings based on the overwhelming scientific evidence of the key components of effective reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

In December this year, it will be exactly 10 years since the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia made almost identical recommendations to the National Reading Panel (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

Since then, evidence has continued to accumulate in support of the findings of these reports, as well as the Rose Review in the UK in 2006 (Rose, 2006), that with effective, evidence-based reading instruction and timely intervention, almost all children will learn to read.

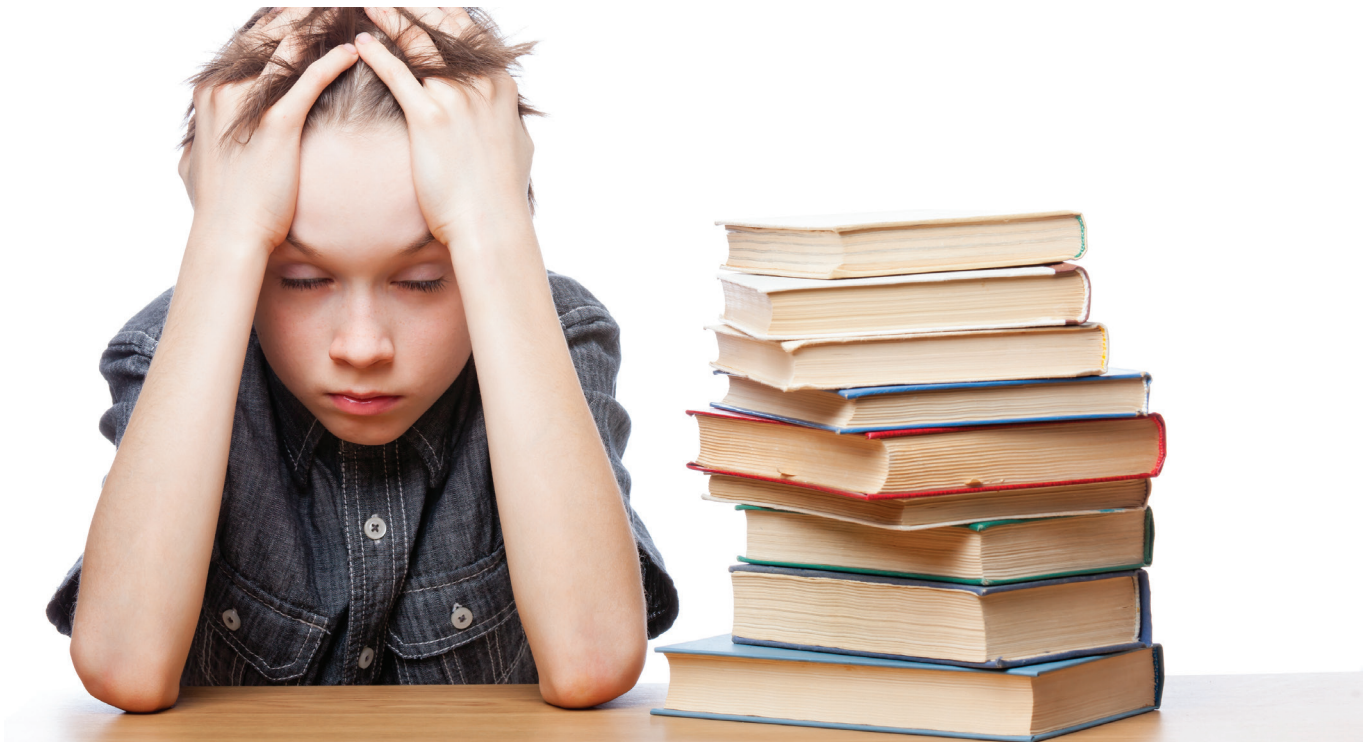
Yet a large number of Australian children and adults – hundreds of thousands, in fact – are either illiterate, or able to read at only the most rudimentary level – after as much as nine or 10 years of school. I don't know how many children and young people MultiLit and MiniLit have saved from that fate, but it would easily be in the thousands.

Almost exactly one year ago today, I gave a presentation at the Centre for Independent Studies to discuss a paper I co-wrote with Kevin and Robyn Wheldall. We called the paper 'Why Jaydon Can't Read' to highlight the fact that while fashions for names had changed, the reading problem had not (Buckingham, Wheldall & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013).

Here, I will discuss why Jaydon still can't read. In the year since then, there has been significant progress in policy, but not all of it good. And unfortunately there is no convincing evidence yet of improvement in outcomes.

Let's start with the statistics.

Table 1 shows the proportions of children who were in the lowest two bands of achievement in the NAPLAN tests in 2013 and 2014. They are classified as being either at or below the national minimum standard for



reading. From 2013 to 2014, the proportions of children in this category increased substantially in the primary school years.

These proportions have changed only marginally since the NAPLAN tests began eight years ago.

Table 1. Percentage of students at or below national minimum standard (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013; 2014).

	2013	2014
Year 3	13.4	15.1
Year 5	13.7	18.3
Year 7	18.5	17.7
Year 9	23.3	24.5

Data from an international assessment is even more damning. It shows that 24% of Australian students in Year 4 are achieving only at the low international benchmark at best. In terms of mean literacy scores on the Progress in Reading Literacy Study, or PIRLS, Australia is ranked lowest among all participating English-speaking countries, as shown in Table 2.

Why, after at least \$100,000 worth of schooling and thousands of hours of instruction, do so many children fail to learn to read?

Table 2. Year 4 students, English speaking countries (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012).

	% at/below 'low' international benchmark	Mean rank / 45 countries
Northern Ireland	13	5
Canada	14	12
United States	14	6
Ireland	15	10
England	17	11
Australia	24	27
New Zealand	25	23

A report released by the Mitchell Institute last week noted the large difference between the NAPLAN benchmark and the PIRLS benchmark, saying that the Australian national benchmarks are low by international standards (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015).

Figure 1. Comparison of Australian and international benchmarks (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015).

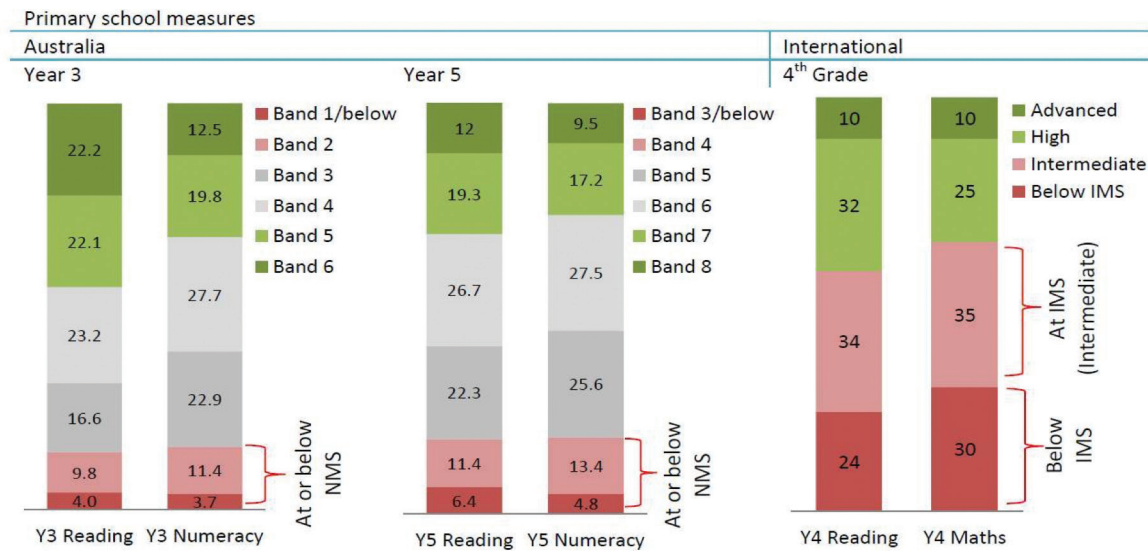


Figure 1 shows the difference between the NAPLAN and PIRLS standards at primary school level. The columns on the left are the NAPLAN achievement bands for Year 3 and Year 5 literacy and numeracy and the two columns on the right are the PIRLS achievement bands for Year 4. The dark and light pink bands represent the proportion of students at or below the minimum standard. The proportions are as much as three times greater in the international study.

The Mitchell Institute report proposed an adjusted NAPLAN benchmark that more closely approximated the international standard to estimate the proportion and the number of students who have literacy levels below the international minimum standards when they begin secondary school.

They found that 28% of Year 7 students did not have sufficient literacy skills to be able to cope with the academic curriculum demands in high school. That is an estimated 73,000 students in Year 7 alone. These children have been in school full-time for over seven years, clocking up as much as 2,800 hours of classroom literacy teaching, and very likely many more hours of reading support.

None of this is a secret. Billions of dollars of public money have been spent trying to improve literacy levels of school students over the last decade. Millions more have been spent privately by families on reading programs, tutoring and specialist services.

Why, after at least \$100,000 worth of schooling and thousands of hours of instruction, do so many children fail to learn to read? A small number have cognitive or congenital disabilities that make learning very difficult. How do we explain the rest?

There are only two plausible explanations. One is that there is something wrong with the children – they are too stupid or too poor or too naughty. The other explanation is that there is something wrong with the way they have been taught.

It is much easier for educators to accept the first explanation. It lets them off the hook. Fortunately, however, it is wrong. Almost all children can learn to read, given the right sort of instruction. Too often, however, that is not what they get.

Decades ago, schools adopted an approach to reading based on a theory that children would learn to read words if exposed to them often

enough. This is the method called ‘Look-Say’ or ‘Whole Word’ – children had to remember each and every word individually.

In 1955, Flesch explained that the whole word method overloads the memory and does not give students the ability to use the alphabetic principles and rules of written language to work out new words. These days, we call this cognitive load theory. It still makes sense, but now there is more evidence to support it.

The whole language method that followed it is just as wrong. It theorises that learning to read is just like learning to speak – if children are read to and exposed to books, their word range will expand. Neither of these assumptions is correct.

As evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker puts it, “Language is a human instinct, but written language is not ... Children are wired for sound, but print is an optional accessory that must be painstakingly bolted on. This basic fact about human nature should be the starting point for any discussion about how to teach our children to read and write” (Pinker, 1997, p.xi).

Effective, evidence-based reading instruction has five elements, all of which are necessary and none of which

is sufficient alone.

The essential components are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It is difficult to state it any more clearly – phonics is one of five essential elements. The three major reports on reading research I mentioned earlier (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rose, 2006) stated unambiguously that an effective and comprehensive reading program has a focus on both decoding strategies and developing comprehension.

If we know this, why isn't classroom reading instruction constructed around this knowledge?

The Jaydon paper (Buckingham, Wheldall & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013) identified two culprits – pre-service teacher education and government policy. Many teachers do not themselves have strong knowledge of the underlying structure of written language to be able to teach it well. Teacher education degrees do not have sufficient emphasis on the specific strategies and techniques that are most effective in the crucial early years of reading instruction. For example, one study (Fielding-Barnsley, 2010) found that only 33% of teacher education students knew that the word 'chop' has three phonemes. In another study, less than half of teacher education students thought they had been adequately prepared to teach phonics, grammar and spelling (Louden & Rohl, 2006).

Government policy did not accurately reflect the research findings on effective reading instruction and was consistently undermined by a reliance on non-expert 'experts,' and misallocation of vital resources into ineffective programs, at least in part because of persistent failure to evaluate programs properly.

This brings us to 2015 and 'why Jaydon still can't read'.

Over the past year, there has been a noticeable shift in government policy and rhetoric about reading, especially in NSW, and I give a lot of credit to Tom Alegounarias, President of BOSTES NSW, for this shift. The Literacy Learning in the Early Years

report published in January this year is the first attempt since the National Inquiry to audit the literacy course content of teaching degrees (Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES] NSW, 2014); new NSW BOSTES pre-requisites for enrolment in teaching degrees will lift the literacy skills of future teaching cohorts (BOSTES, 2016, 'Increased academic standards for studying teaching'). The Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation published an excellent report on evidence-based practices in education (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation [CESE], 2014). And, most recently, the NSW BOSTES produced a phonics guide that has been widely commended by reading specialists.

At the national level, the early years literacy component of the

Teacher education degrees do not have sufficient emphasis on the specific strategies and techniques that are most effective in the crucial early years of reading instruction.

Australian Curriculum has been revised and improved, especially in the areas of phonemic awareness and phonics (ACARA, 2015). The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group report handed down in February 2015 recommended that literacy courses in teaching degrees be required to be more evidence-based (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is developing new accreditation standards that will require universities to explain in detail and prove that their courses meet criteria for effective teaching practices.

All of this is positive. The problem is that these overarching policy recommendations are not yet routinely reflected in reading programs in schools. Since I singled out NSW for bouquets I am also going to throw some metaphorical brick-bats in the same direction.

This year, yet another evaluation of Reading Recovery has shown that it is far less effective than it should be given its cost. Its many flaws are well known. Chief among them is that it is least effective for children that are most in need of intensive reading support. Nonetheless Reading Recovery is still the NSW Department of Education's preferred program for remedial reading instruction. In many schools it is the only funded intervention for struggling readers, of whom there are increasing numbers.

It is bad enough to persist with a program that has been regularly evaluated and found to be wanting. It is arguably worse to inflict upon schools a reading program that had not been evaluated at all, and which does not even meet the criteria for effective, evidence-based reading instruction. The latest issue of the *Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin* contains a damning critique of an early reading program (L3) that was first implemented in 2007 and was used in hundreds of primary schools in 2012 (Neilson & Howell, 2015).

According to the authors of the LDA article, Roslyn Neilson and Sally Howell, there is "no planned sequence to the introduction of

letter-sound correspondences, and no opportunity for children to practise mastering the skills of letter-sound identification, phoneme segmentation and blending”, and the program’s guidelines discourage the use of any other formal phonics instruction. The program is deliberately targeted at socioeconomically disadvantaged schools, making Neilson and Howell’s warning that the program is “potentially a recipe for disaster for at-risk students” even more troubling.

But this is a good day, so I will end on a hopeful note. There are hundreds of schools around Australia making fantastic progress in literacy by making a deliberate decision to seek out and adopt effective teaching strategies and interventions, including MiniLit and the MultiLit Reading Tutor Program. Some of those schools are represented here today. I strongly believe that it is possible to turn back the ‘slow motion disaster’ of low literacy; it just can’t be left to chance.

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