

MultiLit at Raymond Terrace Public School

Established over 150 years ago and the oldest school in the Port Stephens area, Raymond Terrace Public School (38km north of Newcastle), of which I have been Principal for the past 10 years, has a student population of approximately 450 pupils. Of these students, 80% come from low socio-economic backgrounds; 22% identify as indigenous. The school currently has 17 mainstream classes and three Multi-categorical support classes.

Inheritance

Preparing to start my Principalship at the school, I felt it important to look at the positives and what would be required to improve student outcomes. Arriving 10 years ago, as you do when you start at any school, you look at what works.

Raymond Terrace Public School (RTPS) had a very 'traditional' base. We had teachers who had over 30 years service – one with over 30 years at RTPS alone. Teachers were quite 'comfortable' and hesitant to embrace change, as they 'had seen it before' and that the students were 'only Raymond Terrace kids and that is all that could be expected'. That was like a red rag to a bull with me and obviously raised concerns.

Bearing in mind if you keep doing the same thing, you will keep getting the same result, it was necessary to do something as soon as possible. We used what data was available – because 'without data, it's only an opinion' – and began having conversations with staff, parents and the wider school community.

John Fleming, well-known academic and leader, and award winner of successful school programs in Victoria, was engaged to visit RTPS over three days and offer advice as to how the school could move forward. From this, we developed our 'Pillars' and set future directions. We agreed we would develop common practices and common language from K-6, and insist on:

- Explicit teaching;
- High expectations;
- Differentiation; and
- A genuine need for intervention.

We needed to get this message out to the school community. We were serious about lifting student outcomes.

Champion

We needed someone to 'champion the cause', to be our 'champion', and we had that very person in the form of a parent at the school – Jennifer Buckingham (how lucky were we?!).

Jennifer was the mother of two girls at our school at the time. What I did not know then was that Jennifer was also a renowned educational researcher, a conference speaker and highly respected in educational circles. Jennifer was instrumental in getting John Fleming to our school.

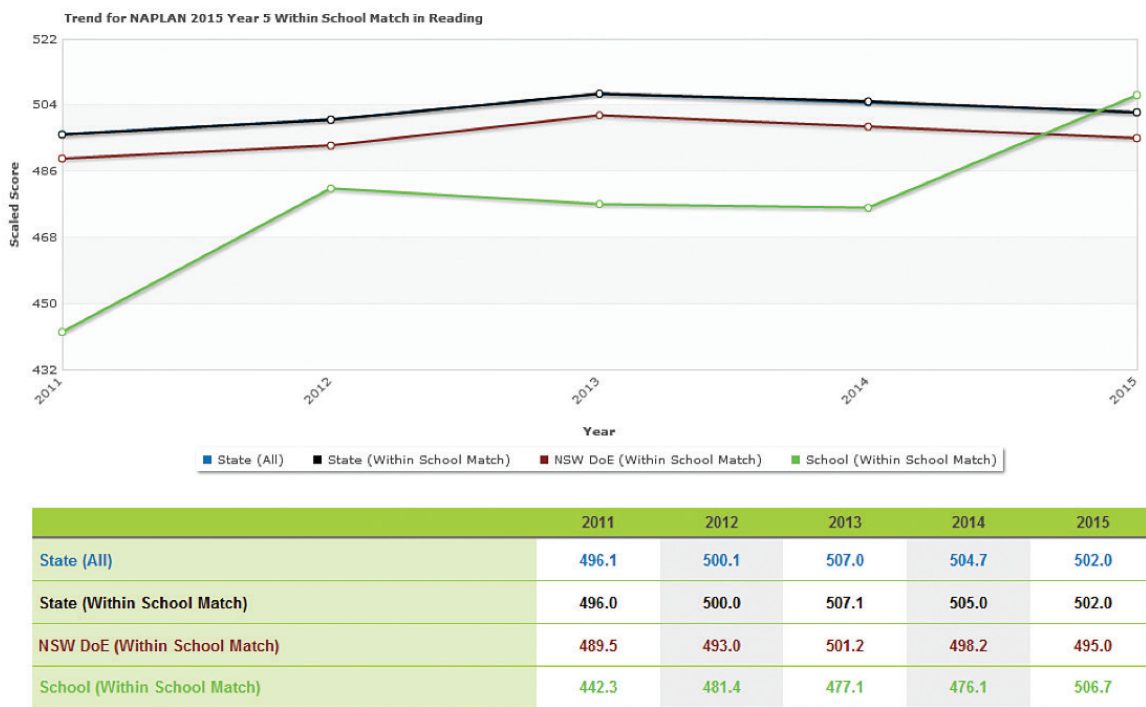
In conversation with Jennifer, I mentioned we were about to receive



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

Figure 1. Year 5 NAPLAN Reading results 2011 to 2015.



a substantial amount of National Partnership money, and asked how she thought we could best spend part of it. With little hesitation, she mentioned MultiLit. Soon I was provided with research on literacy and a brief of the program. It certainly had my attention and interest.

Discovery

Jennifer had arranged for me to visit and meet with the authors, Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Wheldall but, to my surprise, they were willing and very interested in coming to Raymond Terrace to speak about the program with me. Their passion and desire to help our students improve their reading, in particular, was quite overwhelming. There was a genuine interest in our students and a willingness to partner with us. They provided support through training and testing in our endeavours to help especially those ‘falling through the gaps’. We had formed a partnership with MultiLit and Macquarie University.

We chose to introduce the Tier 2 tutoring format to maximise the number of students we could support, while still having close to individual tutoring (one tutor to four students). We also catered for a few specific individuals by including them in a

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Tier 3 format with an individual tutor and/or via the internet with a tutor from Macquarie University.

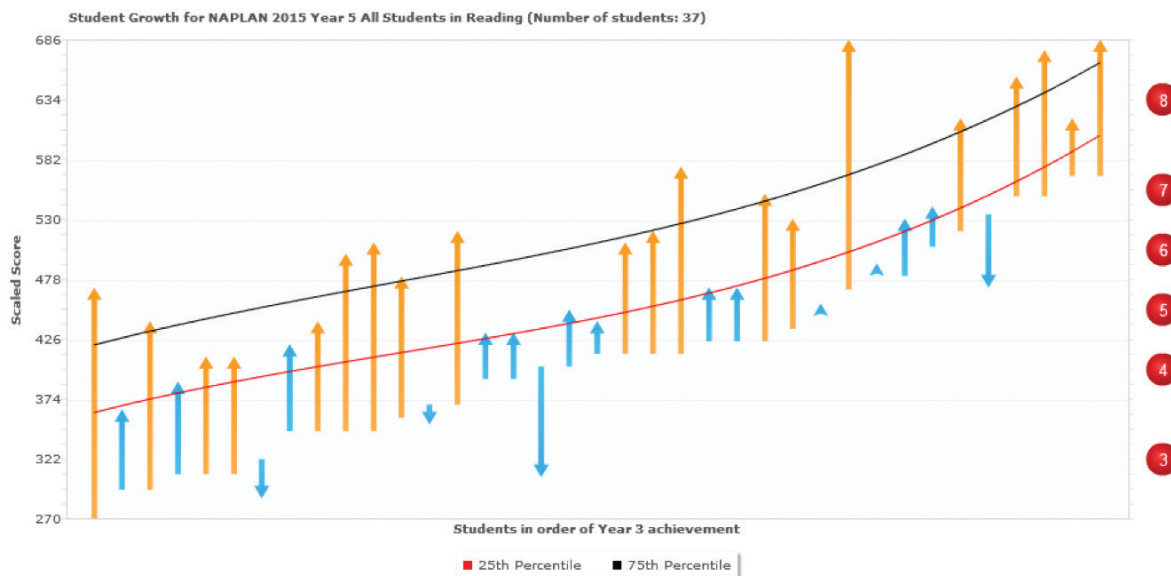
It was important that we gathered around us a strong team. We needed to take time to build strength in that team by sourcing teachers with the skills, passion and genuine interest in making a difference and providing the necessary training. Whilst quality resources were available to support the program, the tutors needed to be trained in the correct use of these resources and confident in implementing them. The ‘team’ also included Kevin, Robyn, Sarah Arakelian and the MultiLit team.

The obstacles

At RTPS we refer to ‘pressure with support’, and with some staff questioning the need for the ‘unheard of’ MultiLit program, it was important to provide evidence to support the program and demonstrate what it could offer. It meant that teachers were being taken out of their comfort zone.

Testing by MultiLit staff provided the necessary data to show the need for intervention. The team approach provided a starting point for conversation among staff and slowly teachers were on side. Professional dialogue was occurring and there was a sense that the importance of the program was building.

Figure 2. Student growth for NAPLAN 2015 all students in reading.



Whilst teachers were reluctant to have their students withdrawn from class, there was now evidence that there was improvement with their reading – and the teachers agreed.

While there were preferred programs recommended to the school, we chose to implement the MultiLit programs fully and continue with the program, as we were now able to provide evidence of improved student outcomes.

Commitment

RTPS was now fully committed to MultiLit. Jennifer Buckingham opted to undertake a PhD research project on literacy and social disadvantage. As part of the research, she tested low-progress readers who were now involved in our small group MiniLit and MultiLit Reading Tutor Programs. The results of this study gave further kudos to the program.

Results

MultiLit for RTPS was now an important part of our school programs. We had invested heavily in MultiLit resources; sourced, trained and employed quality teachers; designated and named rooms in the school with professionally made signage – providing a clear identity which was embraced by the whole school community.

The results were bittersweet – we actually lost North North (government) funding for our Indigenous students because of their improved outcomes. However, it was not just the improved NAPLAN results (where reading has continued a steady incline since 2010, see Figure 1), but also improved attendance (reported by the Regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer to be the best in the Hunter/Central Coast region for Indigenous students in 2011-13). The feedback from students was that they felt more confident. The fact that classroom incidents of misbehaviour had decreased not only had wide-ranging benefits but suggested the students were more engaged in their learning.

Reading results from 2015 NAPLAN continued to show significant increases in learning outcomes, with Year 5 students not only having growth above State average (see Figures 1 and 2), but transferring that to the other NAPLAN tests with Year 5 results above state average in all components in literacy and numeracy.

The future

At RTPS we are proud of the results we are accomplishing and proud to say that MultiLit has played an extremely important part. However, we realise we still have improvements we can make to help our students to continue

to improve their reading, and therefore improve their learning outcomes across all Key Learning Areas.

We also have some challenges ahead of us with seven teachers either on, or returning from, maternity leave, meaning teachers who are not as familiar with our expectations will need to be upskilled. We believe that by ensuring common language and common best practices are in place, we can maintain our improvements. MultiLit plays a large part in ensuring that this happens, for which we are extremely grateful.

John Picton has been the Principal of Raymond Terrace Public School for the past 10 years.