Centre for Smart Business
Case Study

Practical solutions for *business*

WelTec connect

WELLINGTON RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION Inc.

WelTec & Wellington Rugby Union(WRU) Academy

Background

In 2010, Bob Robinson, a WelTec tutor, worked with a WRU Academy Player and a player in the Wellington Lions ITM Cup squad to improve their academic skills. The trial aimed to improve their coachability, confidence and Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) skills.

Following the successful 2010 pilot, a decision was made to assess the literacy and numeracy of the 2011 intake of the WRU Academy players. As part of the entry criteria into the Academy, players are assessed on their –

- Technical skills
- Tactical skills
- Physical ability
- Nutrition knowledge and application
- Mental skills
- Holistic and leadership skills

Adding literacy and numeracy testing to the entry criteria was a logical step.

Reasons for the change

"Rugby is a complex game and young players need thinking, communication, literacy and numeracy abilities to perform at the highest level," says Evan Crawford, High Performance Manager for the Wellington Rugby Union.

"Many people think rugby is a simple game. But a young man of 18 or 19 can be thrust into an environment where he's given a lot of information. And more and more of it is written – the game plan, different plays, opposition analysis, their own analysis. If they can't cope with that, they're going to fail."

"Often we see talented players who don't perform as well as they could in rugby or in life because they haven't got the basics right – they don't understand how they learn and they haven't got the literacy and numeracy."

It was wondering why players make basic mistakes on the field that drove Evan Crawford and Steve Symonds, Professional Development Manager for the Hurricanes and the Wellington Lions, to rethink what and how they taught their Academy players.

They decided to introduce a tuition element as a trial for two players in 2010, and then offered it to all 10 players in the Academy in 2011.

Approach taken - assessment process

Steve Symonds says the rugby union engaged with WelTec for the assessment and tuition because he already had an existing relationship with them. "In rugby, you work with people you can trust. From that good relationship, we have got good design. Everything they have offered up has come to fruition."

Following the initial testing by the WRU Academy, WelTec worked with the Academy to bring the players to WelTec to do the testing on-line in one of their computer labs. We used the on-line National Assessment Tool for reading and numeracy. On-line assessment is adaptive, so that the more correct answers that a person achieves the harder the assessment becomes. The converse applies when someone gives wrong answers. On completion of the assessment the players receive their results immediately. These results can be downloaded and printed out.

After the on-line assessment, players completed a manual writing assessment at their Academy base at Rugby League Park in Newtown. The writing assessment results were then placed on the National Assessment Tool database so feedback is not as immediate as with the on-line assessment. About the mid-point, players completed an on-line vocabulary assessment.

There are six levels of achievement in the Learning Progressions against which adults are assessed. Vocabulary has three levels. For more on the Learning Progressions follow this link http://literacyandnumeracyforadults.com/Learning-progressions

The National Assessment Tool database allows further assessments to be checked against players' achievements and map their progress. A mid-point and end-point assessment was carried out for each player.

The players were apprehensive about being tested but agreed to have their abilities assessed. Each player was set up with a login and the assessment chosen to meet their expected levels. Benchmarking against the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, the players' results for reading and numeracy showed some surprises.

Also a learning styles questionnaire was used to determine how players' best learn. Most players were kinaesthetic and visual learners. One or two were auditory learners. Link for the VARK test is - http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=athletes

Results of all the initial assessments including the learning styles are in the Appendix.

On completion of all the assessments, each player was interviewed by Steve Symonds, PDM and Bob Robinson, WelTec tutor. Their results were reviewed and gaps identified which were linked to their career aspirations. All 10 players volunteered to be part of the learning programme.

Approach taken – learning process

The WelTec tutor analysed the results for each player and selected strategies and a programme to improve their current skills. He then met with players and discussed the strategies. Each player's needs differed depending on whether they are working, studying or looking for work. Ground rules were also established so the player and tutor knew how to best work together.

"The programme provides mainly one-on-one communication, literacy and numeracy tutoring. Sessions are tailored to a player's preferred learning style," Steve said. "Most of the players are action-learners and examples are chosen from mainly rugby situations to which they can relate."

Meetings with players were usually one-to-one with homework given as well. Resources were developed that related directly to rugby wherever possible – so reading, writing and numeracy resources were contextualised.

For reading, topical articles were found and questions developed based on the article. Some questions were straight forward, others asked for opinions and others related to comprehension and critical reading. Writing was based around a 'rugby customised' plain English writing workbook. In addition to the workbook, some of the reading exercises needed structured writing in response to questions. Generic numeracy and a customised exercise were used to develop numeracy skills.

Towards the end of the programme, a challenge project was given to the group. The project involved research, reporting back the findings and presenting the information to their peers and managers. Aspiring players wanting to become professional need to know about any medication drugs they take, so the project allowed them to explore this area. Most of the players responded to the challenge and two were even tested as part of the Junior World Cup squad. Overall the project aimed to boost their confidence with presentation skills. Presentation skills form part of their Academy work so improved skills helped.

WelTec's Learning Common resources were used to supplement other resources when needed. Examples included -

- Time management
- Assertiveness
- Assignment writing
- SQ3R (Reading comprehension strategy)

Problems experienced

Tutors need flexibility to meet the demands of the Academy programme and to link in with the players' work or study programme. The Academy programme is demanding with the focus on not just rugby or training. Players are contracted to the Academy with guidelines for their commitment to training, playing and either study or work. Players who choose to study are helped with their studies and guided to career aspirations by Steve Symonds. With a holistic programme of training, playing, studying or work, the extra LLN demands on players' time can be difficult. Especially when the player is already in a tertiary study programme.

Changes to Academy programmes can occur at short notice which means missed and often lost sessions.

Players are delighted when they are selected for age-group National teams, ITM Cup squads or even Super 15 squads. With selection, players' LLN programme can be put on hold for up to six months. Two players were selected for the Junior World Cup which was held in Italy in May 2011. Prior to selection they were in a training camp away from the Academy. All these disruptions take their toll on players and their learning programme. Selection is outside the control of the Academy.

Academy days start at 7.00 am. To link in with players before they complete their training and go to study or work, tutors need to be there early. With Academy information sessions, especially when players present their Individual Performance Plans, tutors need to attend to form the links to the LLN programme.

According to Steve Symonds, rugby unions move slowly so any dealings require patience and persistence. It takes time to get things moving and make changes to existing systems. Once moving though, some things can happen quite rapidly so providers need to be flexible to keep up.

Things We Would Do Differently

Map and arrange a structured LLN programme linking directly with the Academy programme. Make all arrangements up front with the Academy staff to map out the learning programme. Involve the tutor early so that their programme planning skills are used to the fullest extent. Seek input from the Academy players so that they own the programme.

Start the LLN programme at the start of the Academy programme to gain maximum improvement in the skills with a longer period of tutor-player engagement.

Use the Academy resources to make the LLN programme more customised.

Use players' injury time more wisely. They learn more when injured because of fewer commitments. Injury also brings a realisation that their rugby career could be shortened. So the need to study or work is vital to ensure their future. Depending on the injury there could be other opportunities for them to develop their learning, such as coaching and refereeing junior rugby grades.

Outcomes

Steve Symonds says all the 10 players in this year's programme are tracking upwards in their results. "That's great news but what is a bigger story are the intangibles – greater confidence and better communication that we can see in players' engagement with coaches and managers."

"That's the most exciting part of it – to see the growth of the man. That self-awareness and self-confidence will translate to better rugby."

Players typically spend two years in the academy during which time they can be selected to play professionally. "Players understand that the average number of years they can play professionally is nine – five in New Zealand and four overseas."

"It's a small window in a man's life. The rugby union acknowledges this by stipulating that to be accepted into the academy, young players need to be also engaged in either study or work; they cannot just devote themselves to rugby."

Not only does the tuition give the players better communication skills, and better abilities to process complex information, it provides them with life-skills – skills to manage their nutrition, money and time.

Steve Symonds says while the initial testing of literacy and numeracy was compulsory at the academy, accepting tuition was voluntary. "I thought we'd only have four or five but all 10 put their hands up. It was brave of them. Boys don't normally do this stuff. In fact, I don't know of anyone else in world rugby who is doing this."

Interviewed at a recent training session, Academy players commented favourably on the programme.

- Tomasi Alosio, who is on a pre-police training course, said the WelTec tuition has helped him structure his writing better.
- Joe Latta, who is studying Health Science at university, says the tuition has helped him process information better.
- Christian Lloyd, who is studying Criminology, said the tuition has helped him think more critically and boosted his confidence. This has helped him on the rugby field.
- Eric Sione, who is studying Psychology, said the tuition has helped him write better emails and fill out ACC forms more professionally.
- And Donald Brighouse, who is training to be a builder, said the tuition has helped him with reading and maths - "I wanted to better myself."

The players' WelTec tutor, Bob Robinson, has been tutoring people in industry for the past nine years. All his teaching has been based around their place of work and linked to their own, and their employers, needs.

He says a lot of the tutoring is based on increasing players' confidence. Getting them to realise that they have skills and knowledge that they can build and improve on helps tremendously.

"It's really enjoyable working with them – seeing how they progress in confidence and skills. Giving them feedback is essential so they can also see where they've improved and it gives them a great confidence boost." Bob says.

WelTec Connect's Elizabeth Steer, who manages WelTec's Workplace Communication programme, says the tuition programme is an example of WelTec moving into non-traditional areas.

"The tuition is carefully planned so that what we do has a positive impact on players for the rest of their life. We're introducing a culture of continuous learning."

The mid-point and end-point assessments are in the Appendix.

Individual player's assessments against the Learning Progression Steps are shown in the Appendix. Player's writing skills have made the biggest improvement with many increasing two Steps on the progressions. Players were thrilled to see the gains they had made and being competitive they wanted to compare results with each other. One or two of them re-sat their assessment to ensure they got the maximum gains from the programme.

Future trends

Steve Symonds would like to see the programme evolve to be compulsory for all rugby academies in New Zealand. "If we all assessed for strength, speed and endurance, plus numeracy and literacy, then the academies could have a holistic development plan for each rugby player.

We could also go beyond that to every sports academy at year 13 in college. If we can get this tuition across the rugby landscape, we can start changing communities."

The model we have with the Wellington Rugby Union Academy needs to be rolled out to –

- other rugby provinces and franchises
- school academies, and
- other sport codes.

WelTec has already made links to other provinces and franchises. Connections have already been made with Otago, Waikato and Manawatu Unions. Rugby players are itinerant to ensure they can get as much game time as possible and achieve rugby success. If this means changing province or franchise, they will do that in pursuit of their best rugby career.

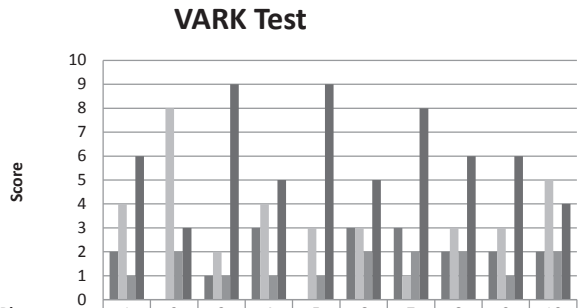
For example, the two 2010 Wellington players who were in the pilot programme, moved to Otago. One is regularly in the ITM Cup starting line-up for 2011, the other is in the ITM squad. WelTec worked with the Otago Rugby Union PDM, Peter Sinclair, to ensure that the LLN training continued in Dunedin. WelTec has contracted another provider to continue the training and assessment.

In Waikato, advice was offered to the PDM to find a suitable provider and then to the provider to explain how the system was working in Wellington and how the programme developed.

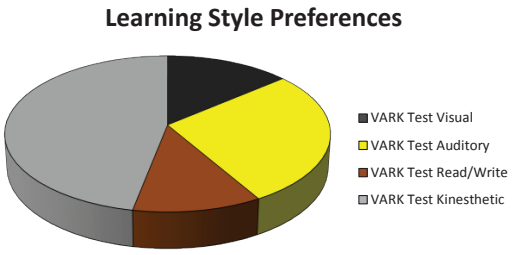
With Manawatu Rugby Academy, WelTec has assessed most of the Academy players and is currently working towards setting up a programme using a contracted tutor. Their Academy is structured differently since some players are not contracted to the Academy and players only meet once a week. All these factors present a different set of challenges.

APPENDIX

All charts refer to the player by number. The player number is the same for every chart; so Player 1 on the VARK Test is the same player as Player 1 on the Reading Assessment and so on.



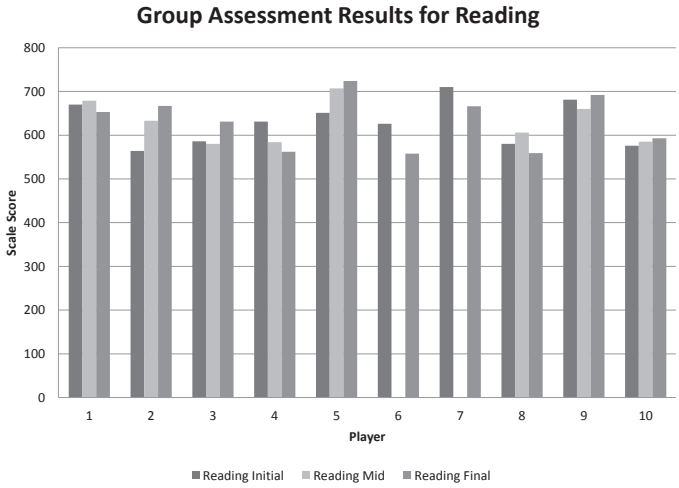
Player -	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
VARK Test Visual	2	0	1	3	0	3	3	2	2	2
VARK Test Auditory	4	8	2	4	3	3	1	3	3	5
VARK Test Read/Write	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2
VARK Test Kinesthetic	6	3	9	5	9	5	8	6	6	4



Charts for the other assessments are graphed against the Scale Scores to show where players' have improved. Alongside the chart is the relationship between the Scale Scores and the Steps in the Learning Progressions. These are shown for the Reading, Numeracy, Writing and Vocabulary.

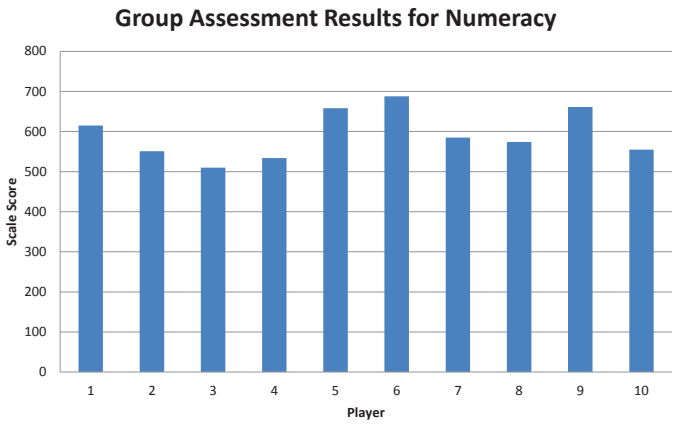
Reading assessment results for all players. The gaps in the chart for Players 6 and 7 mean that they did not sit the mid-point assessment.

Reading	
Step 1	0-431
Step 2	431-523
Step 3	523-608
Step 4	608-681
Step 5	681-738
Step 6	738-1000



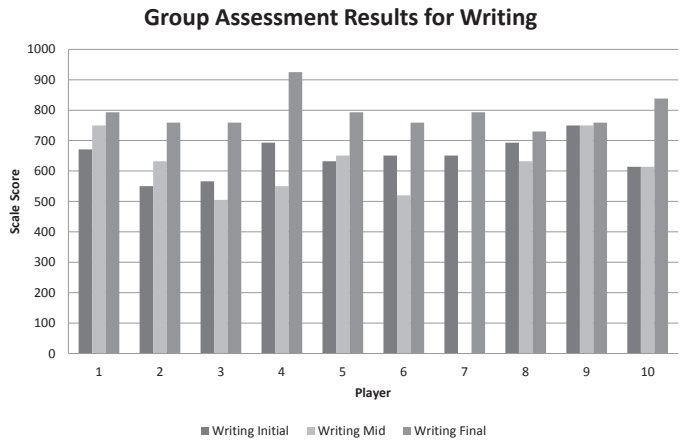
Numeracy assessment results – only the initial assessment was done.

Numeracy	
Step 1	0-396
Step 2	396-450
Step 3	450-528
Step 4	528-596
Step 5	596-689
Step 6	689-1000



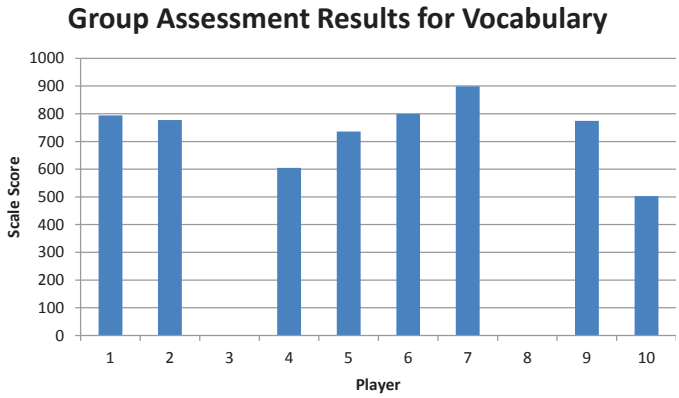
Writing assessment results for all players. The gap in the chart for Player 7 means that he did not sit the mid-point assessment.

Writing	
Step 1	0-296
Step 2	296-411
Step 3	411-571
Step 4	571-719
Step 5	719-764
Step 6	764-1000

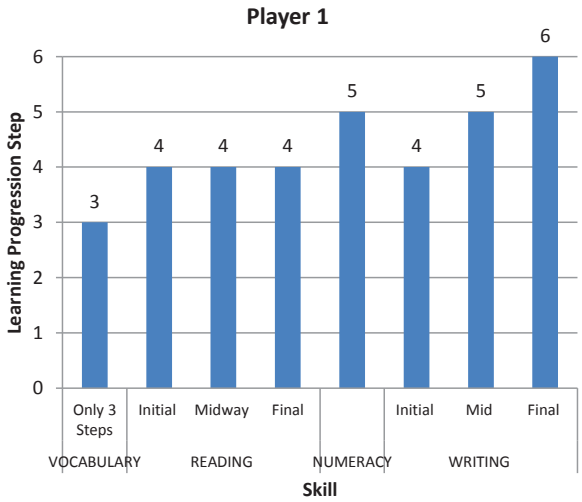


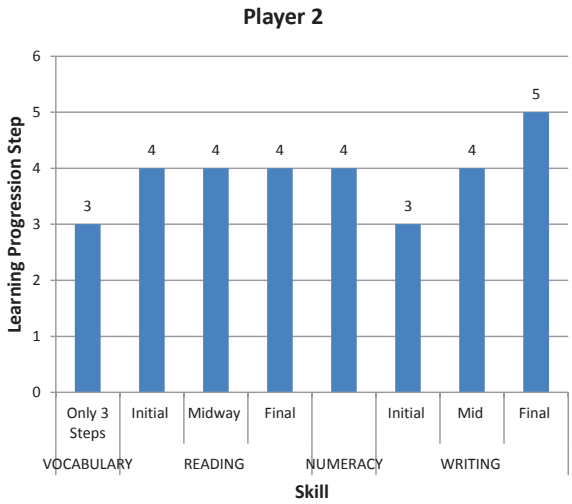
Vocabulary assessment results – note that two players did not sit the assessment.

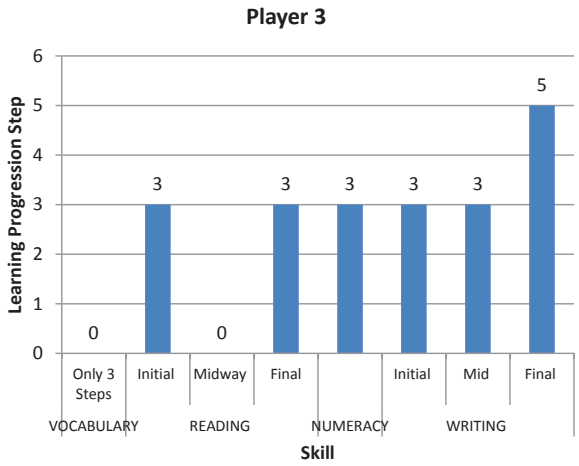
Vocabulary	
Emerging	0-509
Expanding	509-616
Extended	616-1000

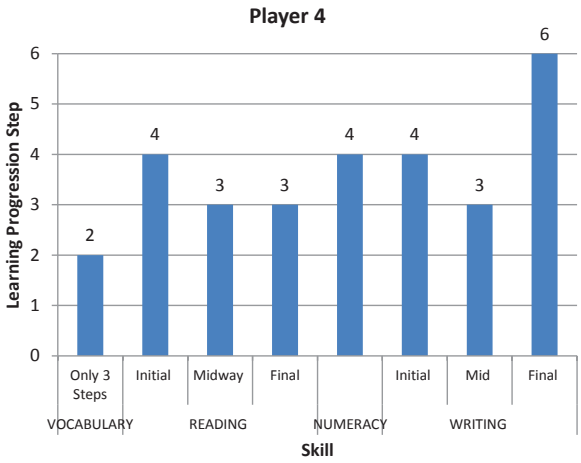


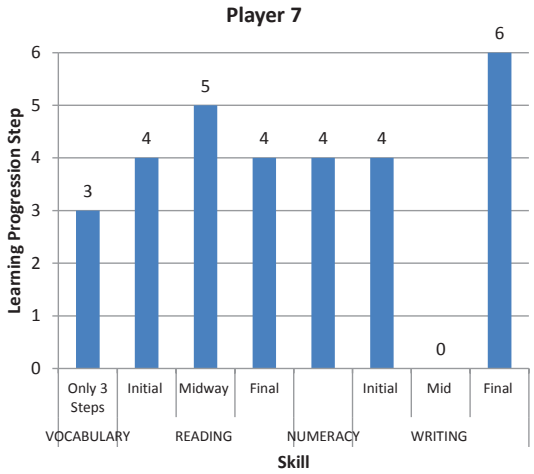
Individual player progress charts show the skills where they improved against the Learning Progression Steps. Where there is a zero and no line, the player did not sit the assessment.

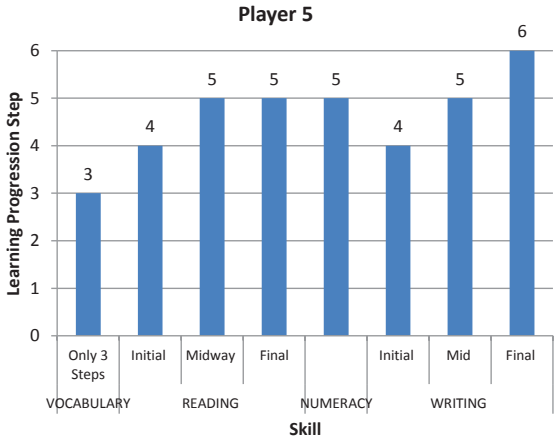


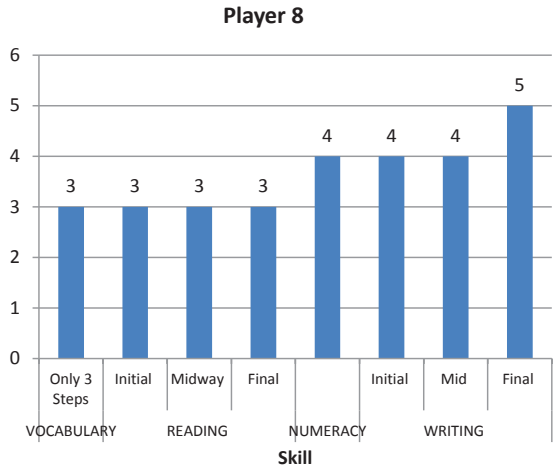


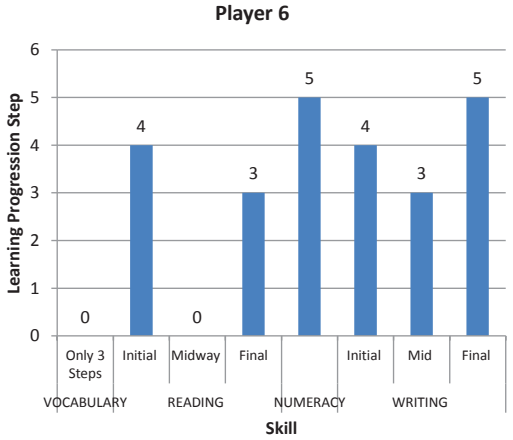


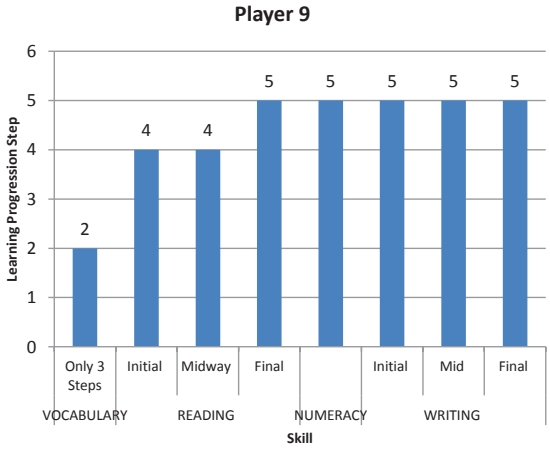

Player 4
Learning Progression Step
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
2 4 3 3 4 4 3 6
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill

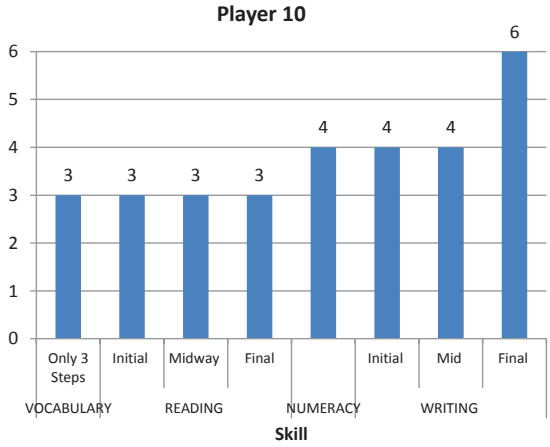

Player 7
Learning Progression Step
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
3 4 5 4 4 4 0 6
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill


Player 5
Learning Progression Step
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
3 4 5 5 5 4 5 6
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill


Player 8
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
3 3 3 3 4 4 4 5
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill


Player 6
Learning Progression Step
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
0 4 0 3 5 4 3 5
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill


Player 9
Learning Progression Step
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
2 4 4 5 5 5 5 5
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill


Player 10
0 1 2 3 4 5 6
3 3 3 3 4 4 4 6
Only 3 Steps
Initial
Midway
Final
Initial
Mid
Final
VOCABULARY
READING
NUMERACY
WRITING
Skill