



# MultiLit

A newsletter for parents and teachers

April 2013

# moments

## PM's 'reading blitz' to include MultiLit

**MultiLit has welcomed the Federal Government's announcement that they will be dedicating more resources to children's literacy. Prime Minister Julia Gillard said that the new focus would see a "reading blitz for 1.1 million children".**

MultiLit, which is already used widely in schools, was mentioned specifically by Federal schools minister Peter Garrett in the announcement as an example of a literacy program that will support the Government in their 'new focus on reading'.

"I am very pleased that Government has highlighted the

importance of childhood literacy and early intervention with this announcement, and that MultiLit has been recognised as a program that is having great success in this area," said MultiLit founder, Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall of Macquarie University.

"We know from our research and our years of experience that what low-progress readers need is good effective instruction. We are delighted to join the Government in their efforts to bring about fundamental change in the educational prospects for low-progress readers," said Wheldall. "But the Prime Minister perhaps underestimates the scale of the problem."

## New! My Spelling Dictionary

**Alison McMurtrie**

***My Spelling Dictionary™* is a new addition to MultiLit's range of high quality literacy publications. English spelling is often perceived to be highly irregular, but *My Spelling Dictionary* will help students discover the many common patterns and conventions that will enable students to spell more accurately.**

Through use of this resource, teachers and students alike will find that the English language is surprisingly regular for spelling! Improved spelling leads to overall improvement in both reading and written work.

*My Spelling Dictionary* is a resource for students in upper primary and secondary school classrooms. It can be used by students in a number of ways:

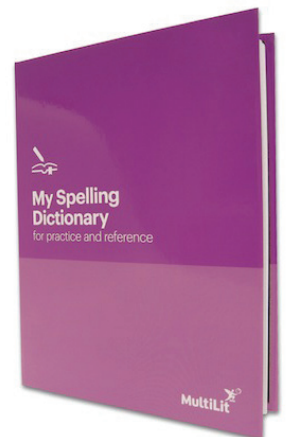
- to look up common and/or academic words that students might use in their writing across all curriculum areas
- to record and define their own words that they might find difficult to spell across all curriculum areas
- to learn more about the conventions and spelling patterns

that make up the complexities of the English language

- to build vocabulary through the understanding of word structures.

It is important to note that *My Spelling Dictionary* is organised and used differently to conventional dictionaries. The words are grouped according to their beginning sound, not their beginning letter. This helps students appreciate that spelling is often about representing sounds in a number of different ways. It also enables students to find a word more easily when they are not sure of the spelling. Students are encouraged to record their own words and definitions for their personal reference.

Useful suffixes, prefixes, rules and conventions are explained at the back of the dictionary as a quick reference tool to aid students' spelling knowledge. This dictionary will complement the use of Spell-It, a spelling program for classroom use which MultiLit will be releasing next year.



## 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**.

# The Al-Faisal College experience: my MiniLit story

**Shazia T. Usman**  
**Teacher, Al-Faisal College**

In late 2012, when my school principal approached me regarding MiniLit, I was quite excited as we had been on the lookout for an intervention program that could be used to support our low progress readers for quite some time.

Early literacy skill development during the infant years has always been an area of priority at Al-Faisal College as it without doubt positions students to become fluent, accurate readers. The school requested I attend the two-day training workshop to become more familiar with the application of the program. The first thing that struck me during the workshop was how the program combined instruction such as phonics, the alphabetic principle and word decoding with sounds and letters, fluency and on-going student assessment to the 'instructional mix'.

When I finally got back to school, I was very eager to get my first group of students. My initial thoughts on the program was that it was very teacher friendly and easy to follow as it had 80 structured lessons which were all scripted, with the resources being provided or easily downloadable from the MultiLit website. At the beginning of each lesson, there was a checklist which told me what I needed for all activities. The manner in which the program was structured ensured I was always well prepared for each lesson, with my time spent on working with students rather than having to spend extensive hours preparing lesson content and resources.

As a trained MiniLit instructor, I welcomed the 2012 school year with new goals and determination to help my students achieve their full learning potential by explicitly teaching them the basics of phonemes, graphemes knowledge and decoding skills along with commonly used digraphs. I took on board my very first group of low progress Year 1 readers, who were motivated to learn but needed that extra support. These students were

chosen according to school data obtained from our internally administered DIBELS reading program, which tests the accuracy and fluency of students within connected texts.

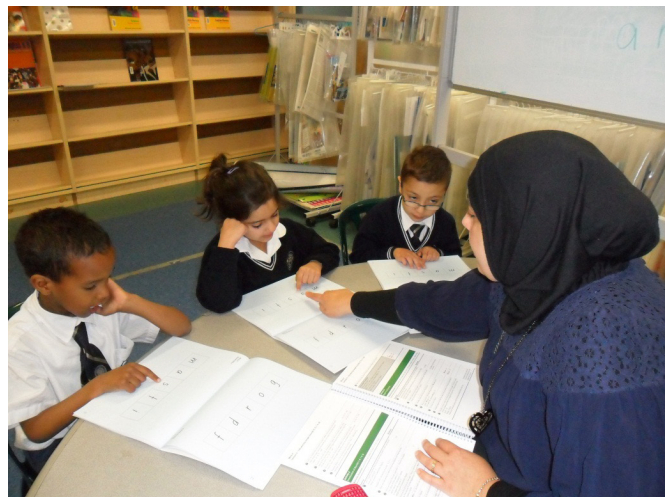
In my MiniLit group, my students quickly gained confidence to ask questions, make mistakes and learn from them, read independently with accuracy and write sentences when dictated to by me using our sight words. The classroom teachers noticed improvements after a few weeks of the implementation of the program and they were pleased to see the engagement levels of these students increase when participating in mainstream classroom activities and discussions.

With the profound impact MiniLit had on our first group of students, it wasn't long before I was talking to my principal again, wanting to add further groups to the program. By year's end we were running seven MiniLit groups that were shared between two staff members!

By December my first group of students were reading fluently, could recognise and read the different digraphs, sight words and write sentences without any help or prompts. Parents also noticed their child's attitude towards their homework shift. Students were now more eager to participate in whole school literacy initiatives such as our home reader program and the Premier's Reading Challenge.

As a teacher, I was very proud of my students who had come a long way and showed immense improvements in their work and attitude towards learning to read and I was even more proud when one of them received the overall most improved in literacy award at our end of the year Presentation Day ceremony.

I believe by implementing the MiniLit Program into our school we are taking a giant leap forward in keeping our students' best interest in mind and catering for students with various learning abilities to achieve their full potential and to acquire life-long knowledge and skills to enhance their future success.



# PIRLS before swine

## Kevin Wheldall

John Lennon was renowned for his sharp, and oft times acidic, wit. When asked if Ringo was the best drummer in the world, he responded that Ringo was not even the best drummer in the Beatles! I was reminded of this when reviewing the latest (2011) results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (or PIRLS). Not only were Australian students not the best readers in the world, they were not even the best readers among the English speaking nations surveyed. They were, in fact, the worst. We can take small comfort from the fact that New Zealand performed only marginally better than Australia.

The PIRLS project essentially assesses reading comprehension by requiring students to read selected texts and then to answer questions about the material read. Year 4 students are assessed because this typically marks the point of transition from learning to read to reading to learn. (Note that 2011 was the first time that Australia had taken part in PIRLS.)

Overall, 45 countries were included in the study. Australia came 27th in the league table of countries below all other English speaking countries and significantly lower than 21 other countries overall, including all other English speaking countries except New Zealand.

To put this in perspective let's look at how some of these other English-speaking countries performed. Singapore for example, came 4th, one of the four top performing countries significantly above the others. Northern Ireland came fifth and the United States came 6th (compared with 14th out of 40 in 2006). England came 11th (compared with 15th out of 40 in 2006) and Canada came 12th. (Note the improvements in performance from 2006 to 2011 by both England and the United States.)

As well as reporting mean (average) scores by country, PIRLS also provides details of performance against four benchmarks: Advanced, High, Intermediate, and Low (and those who fail even to qualify for Low ie Below Low). In Australia, 7% of students failed even to meet the Low benchmark and a further 17% met only the Low benchmark. Both, Australia and New Zealand have over twice as many students failing to meet even the minimal Low standard as Northern Ireland, Singapore, Canada and the United States; and over one and three quarters times as many low-performing students overall (Below Low and Low combined). England falls in the middle of these two groups of countries.

These results may have come as a shock to many educationists who had been blithely arguing that there was no literacy crisis in Australia. But they provided simple confirmation for Australian reading scientists who had been warning of this problem for some time and had argued (remarkably accurately, as it turns out) that a quarter of Australia's students could be regarded as low-progress readers. In 2004, a group of Australian reading scientists and clinicians wrote an open letter to the then Federal Minister of Education, Brendan Nelson, arguing the need for reform regarding the way reading is taught in Australia and the need

for literacy teaching to be based on the available scientific evidence. The subsequent National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy reported at the end of 2005, essentially reiterating these concerns and stating clearly what needed to be done to improve reading standards in Australia. In short, the Report was subsequently simply ignored.

Moreover, following the implementation of the National Assessments Program – Literacy and Numeracy (or NAPLAN) from 2008, we were subsequently assured (annually) that all was well on the reading front. As recently as in 2012, we were reassured that for the performance of Year 3 students in Reading only 4.4% were in Band 1, having failed to meet the National Minimum Standard, and only a further 9.4% were in Band 2 – that is, at the national Minimum Standard (a combined total of 13.8% of students). (Note that the NAPLAN measure of reading is similar to the reading comprehension measure employed by PIRLS.)

Clearly, we have been deluding ourselves by measuring student reading performance against unrealistically low benchmarks that do not withstand international scrutiny. NAPLAN, as a reading performance measure, needs to be recalibrated against international standards so that Bands 1 and 2 combined 'capture' the bottom performing 25% (not the current 14%) of students. (These low-progress readers should subsequently be earmarked for immediate additional instructional support.) Moreover, it should not be beyond the wit of the NAPLAN methodologists to tie the NAPLAN scale to the metric employed by PIRLS so that progress towards achieving the international standards could readily be monitored

Finally, it is interesting to note that two English-speaking countries that have begun to take reading instruction seriously in recent years, and who have urged that reading instruction be based on the best available scientific evidence, namely the US and England, have both improved their international standing substantially in the PIRLS league table from 2006 to 2011. Similarly, the two English-speaking countries that have performed so poorly, namely Australia and New Zealand, are those that have clung most tenaciously to the discredited 'philosophy' of whole language literacy instruction. Can this be simple coincidence? I think not.

*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' at [www.kevinwheldall.com](http://www.kevinwheldall.com).*





## Diocesan Learning Enhancement Strategy: using MiniLit as a regional tool to improve literacy outcomes

**Dale Cain**

**Literacy consultant, Armidale Catholic Education Office**

In 2012, the Armidale Catholic Schools Office has worked to develop a Diocesan-wide approach to Learning Enhancement. Part of our strategy to improve student outcomes in our K-2 students is the use of MiniLit in all of our schools.

Initial MiniLit Training was provided for all Year 1 teachers across the Diocese by early Term 4 2012. This was carried out as we saw MiniLit as a great opportunity for teachers to develop a greater understanding of the various aspects of literacy development and strategies to assist students in their class. It allowed teachers to see how the many aspects of literacy, from phonemic awareness through to reading and writing, all link together. MiniLit provided clear focus to teachers around the importance of phonics and the explicit teaching of sounds to students. Schools then chose a teacher from those trained to be a Project Teacher, who has the role of overseeing the implementation of MiniLit in schools.

The first task of the Project Teacher was to identify, with classroom teachers, students in current Kindergarten, Year 1 and 2 who were not reaching Diocesan Targets in reading. These students were then given a suite of assessments based around Marie Clay's Observation Survey (CSO), to ensure clear baseline data was collected. These children were also given the MiniLit Placement Test.

The baseline data and the placement test results were used by the Catholic Schools Office to identify the number of MiniLit

Groups each school needed. The CSO will be able to fund intervention for students in our current Year 1 and 2, four hours per week for 20 weeks in 2013. The current Kindergarten children, while just as important, will have a teacher who is MiniLit-trained who can use these skills and strategies in their classrooms from the beginning of the year. We worked with staff who have been identified as paraprofessionals to ensure they were ready to start taking groups at the beginning of 2013.

We have also locked in dates in Term 1 2013 for the next round of training for teachers. The goal is that in 2014 all Kindergarten, Year 1 and 2 teachers will be MiniLit trained. We are exploring as many funding sources as possible to see if we can extend the small group intervention for another 20 weeks, as well as including current kindergarten children in the intervention.

Longer term, we are aiming to reduce the need for intervention through improved teacher understanding of literacy development. MiniLit training is a great way to do this. It also provides clear and simple strategies that can be used in small group structures already in place in classrooms, as well as whole class activities. We are looking to ensure that all students in our care are achieving acceptable levels of success in literacy.

The training completed so far has generated great excitement across the schools. Teachers are excited with their learning and the clear and directed assistance; Principals are excited as the Diocese has set a clear direction and consistency across all schools; and paraprofessionals are excited as the intervention is clear, easy to use and will address many needs. We are really looking forward to 2013.

## MultiLit Online Reading Tutor Program

**Vickie Leung and Vanessa Black**

**MultiLit Literacy Centre**

The MultiLit Literacy Centre has been running one-on-one online literacy programs for over a year now, with students achieving some excellent results.

Suitable for students in Year 3 and above, online sessions are directed by a MultiLit tutor providing instruction in reading accuracy, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and spelling. The online program is delivered using live streaming audio and video. Our reach currently extends to country NSW, Canberra, Melbourne and Perth.

Caterina, in Year 6, completed an online initial assessment and presented with difficulties sounding out long words and low confidence in reading and writing tasks. She then participated in the online Reading Tutor Program for three terms, with a specific, additional focus on fluency, spelling and vocabulary.

Caterina's single word reading increased from a reading age of 10 years and 5 months to greater than 12 years and 6 months (the maximum possible on the Burt Word Reading Test) and her spelling age increased from 11 years and 2 months to 12 years and 2 months.

Caterina's fluency also improved, increasing from 128 words read correctly per minute to an incredible 216 words read correctly per minute at the end of three terms. Additionally, her reading book level moved up three levels from M8 (equivalent to 10 years) to M10+ (11+ years) on completion of her program.

Overall, Caterina has shown great improvements in all areas, and no longer requires the intensive instruction the online program provided. Her results demonstrate the effectiveness and benefits of the Online Reading Tutor Program. Caterina's mum was thrilled with her progress and very proud of the effort Caterina put in.

**Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd**  
Professor Kevin Wheldall

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