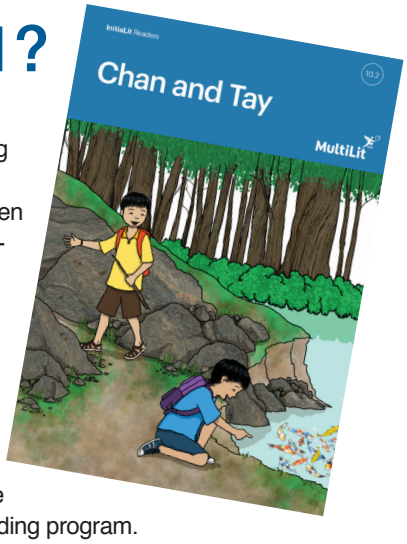
MultiLit
A newsletter for parents and teachers
May 2018

moments

Why use decodable readers for Year 1?

Offering decodable readers in Year 1 is of great benefit to all children. They provide much-needed practice in applying new phonic knowledge to the reading of connected text and ensure that the majority of children become accurate and fluent decoders within the first two to three years of schooling – a vital step to reading independence and later academic success.

Use of decodable readers also allows teachers to identify gaps in reading skills more accurately and, if necessary, respond by providing timely support. It may surprise some teachers to find that children who appear to be reading satisfactorily or even well when exposed to predictable text may struggle when reading a decodable book, indicating underlying reading difficulties that need addressing. As children consolidate their skills, their reading material can broaden considerably to incorporate a mix of decodable and more natural language readers.



MultiLit has published 60 InitiaLit phonic readers for Year 1, focusing on the advanced alphabetic code. These books provide young children with beautifully illustrated and well-written stories, information texts, poems and plays corresponding to the more complex phonic skills they are acquiring in their second year of learning to read. Although matched specifically to the InitiaLit-1 phonic sequence, these books are suitable for use alongside any reading program.

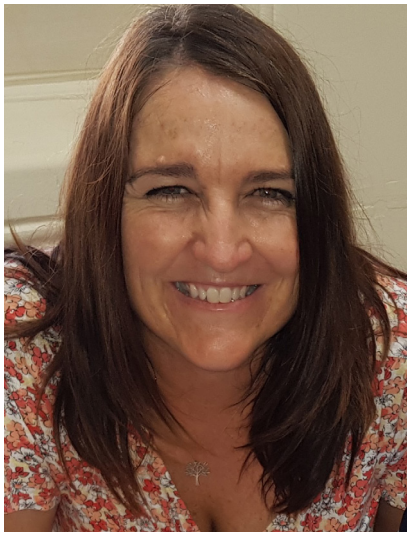
Find out more about InitiaLit – 1 Readers (Levels 10-16) by visiting www.multilit.com/initialit-readers.

Creating change with the Reading Tutor Program

By John Warburton

Bernadette Kelly is one of the Learning Support Teachers at Ballina Public School on the NSW North Coast, and is one of the most enthusiastic and resourceful users of MultiLit programs we've encountered.

We talked to her about her role and about the difference MultiLit – particularly its Reading Tutor Program – has made to literacy at her school.



What is your role at Ballina Public School?

I'm a Learning Support Teacher here, and I work two days a week. My main role is to oversee delivery of the MultiLit Reading Tutor Program (RTP) and MiniLit, although I share the MiniLit role with another teacher. I've been in the role four years, and before that I was a casual classroom teacher. I grew up in Ballina, studied in Brisbane and then moved back to Ballina as quickly as possible. The school continues to fund my role because they can see the results from the Reading Tutor Program and they recognise the importance of continuing that work. Thankfully, they keep asking me back for another year!

What led you to adopt the Reading Tutor Program?

I did a lot of research looking for an effective literacy intervention, and what really impressed me about MultiLit was the independent evidence that supported its approach. When I looked for research supporting other programs, it just wasn't there. We are able to access all low-progress readers with our strong MultiLit focus and the effective management of SLSOs and volunteer tutors to implement it.

How long have you had the RTP at Ballina, and what sort of results has it produced?

We started in mid-2015. The results were immediate and spectacular. There are other ways of measuring reading

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MultiLit moments

Meet the team: **Kyle Pitt**

As MultiLit's training development manager, Kyle Pitt is responsible for managing the development and delivery of professional development workshops all over Australia, and now, in the case of the Reading Tutor Program, online through e-learning. He is also one of MultiLit's longest serving team members.

Can you tell us about your background in education prior to joining MultiLit?
After completing a Psychology degree in the late '90s I was unsure of the direction I wanted to take in terms of further study and career. I have always had a strong desire to work in an area where I can help others. At the time, a friend of mine was working as a teacher at the Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) School and she was looking for reading volunteers, so I offered to help. This experience had a profound impact on me and set the direction for my career in education. The following year, I began my postgraduate studies in Special Education at Macquarie University, and then I began working as a classroom assistant at MUSEC.

While working and studying at MUSEC, I was introduced to a small and dynamic team of educators and researchers who were running an intensive literacy program for children from low socio-economic/disadvantaged backgrounds in inner city Sydney. The Schoolwise Program, based in the Uniting Church in Ashfield (Exodus Foundation), was an exciting project and I was most fortunate to be offered a position with them working as a literacy instructor. The role required implementation of the MultiLit Reading Tutor Program and the delivery of small group programs which were being developed by the team of researchers from Macquarie University. These small group programs later became MiniLit and MacqLit.

In the mid-2000s I was a key member of a team which established the first Redfern Tutorial Centre, replicating the Schoolwise model. Here I managed the day-to-day running of the literacy programs overseeing a small team of administrative and teaching staff. I'm proud to say that through this initiative we helped to improve the lives of the hundreds of students who went through the program.

What does your role at MultiLit now involve?
My experience overseeing the implementation of the MultiLit programs led to my current role as MultiLit training development manager. In 2007, I began working at MultiLit formalising the teacher training in the various MultiLit programs. I am responsible for the creation of training packages and the quality of their delivery, and oversee a small team of dedicated trainers and administrative staff who together ensure the workshops are delivered to a high standard.

How long does it typically take to develop a MultiLit training workshop? What do you hope attendees will take away from all MultiLit training workshops?
It takes around six months to a year to develop a typical workshop and it requires input from the MultiLit Research Unit (MRU) and Product Development team. Quality demonstrations of our programs being delivered is a crucial element of the training so we film and edit all of the video sequences that appear in our workshops.

My goal is to provide workshop attendees with a quality professional development experience. Not only will they have the skills and knowledge they need to effectively deliver the program, they will also be provided with a detailed look at the theoretical underpinnings of our approach and understand the value of a research-based and explicit approach to reading instruction.

How do you keep up with the relevant research in reading and related skills, and how does this inform your work?
I consider it a critical part of my role to keep up to date with latest research. MultiLit ensures we have access to the current research through the MRU, led by Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM. I also attend professional conferences, seminars and lectures when I can.

In terms of teaching practice, I enjoy visiting our trial schools. It is very important that I get to see our programs being implemented in classrooms. Talking to the teachers who use our programs and observing the students responding to the instruction informs many aspects of the professional training we provide.

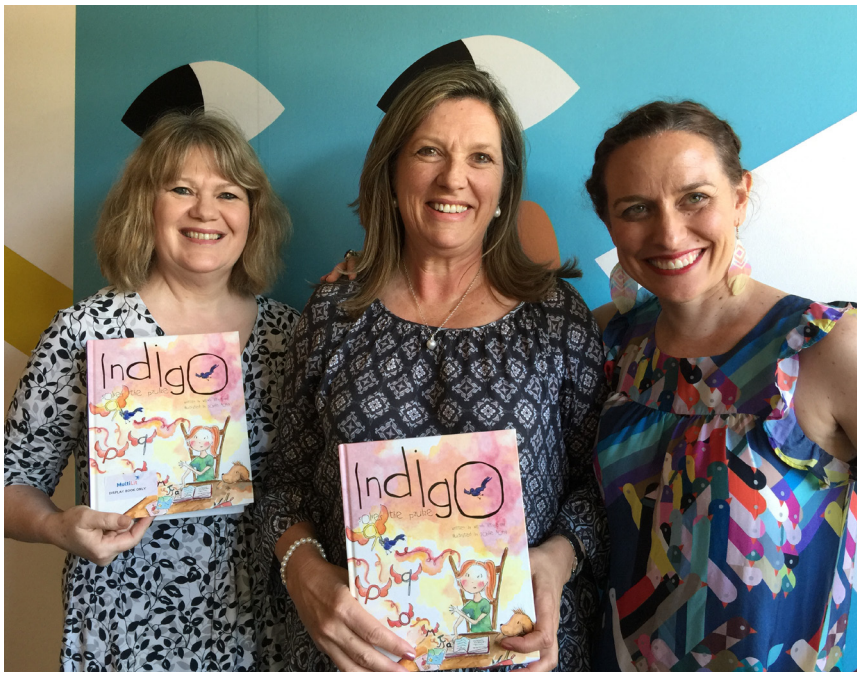
"Although I'm not teaching children directly, I feel that I continue to make a difference through the wonderful teachers who attend our workshops and use our programs to teach our children to read."

What are the most satisfying aspects of your job here?
I enjoy the diversity of my role which involves working with a highly skilled and motivated team, meeting the teachers and school staff who use our programs, and my involvement in the research and development of our programs.

Although I'm not teaching children directly, I feel that I continue to make a difference through the wonderful teachers who attend our workshops and use our programs to teach our children to read. My passion is to see all children provided with an equal opportunity to access an education, and this is made almost impossible for those children who can't read effectively. This is a truly rewarding role.

An interview with Robyn Wheldall about reading and dyslexia

Robyn Wheldall, a director of MultiLit and deputy director of the MultiLit Research Unit, was recently interviewed by Shevonne Hunt, host of Kinderling Conversation, on Kinderling Kids Radio in Sydney. The following is an edited transcript of the interview. You can listen to the full interview by accessing the following link: https://www.kinderling.com.au/kinderling-conversation/learning-to-read-when-the-letters-won-t-sit-still.



Robyn Wheldall (left) with Wendy Fitzgerald (middle) and Shevonne Hunt

Shevonne Hunt: Robyn, how common are reading problems and dyslexia, and are there any gender differences?

Robyn Wheldall: Up to 25% of children struggle to learn to read. We would say that not all of those children have dyslexia. We think that probably around 3% of students actually have dyslexia, because there are other reasons why children struggle to learn to read. And some of those are not necessarily to do with the child but might be to do, for instance, with the instruction they're receiving at school. That doesn't mean, though, that those kids aren't struggling, and we need to deal with all of those children. But the enduring problem is a much lower percentage.

The gender differences are not as great as we sometimes hear. Our research evidence shows that there's just a few more boys than girls who will struggle. It's not a vastly different amount; so there's no real major gender differences in the incidence of dyslexia.

SH: How do you tell if it's enough of a struggle that they need help?

RW: English is a difficult language to master. But if your child is actually taking longer than perhaps their peers to get it, that may be an indication that there are some difficulties. If the child is having problems isolating the individual sounds in language, that's a key marker. A lot of what we talk about with dyslexia is a phonological processing difficulty, which means that it's difficult for the child to actually hear the discrete sounds that make up words.

So, for instance, it's a familiar one that we hear about, cat, C-A-T. A child with dyslexia may not be able to isolate those individual sounds or phonemes. And because reading is about mapping the language sound onto a letter, it's critical that you can do that. That is the fundamental difficulty. Dyslexia really is about having difficulty learning to read and to spell. That's the definition that we prefer.

SH: In terms of picking up dyslexia, is it something that you find the parent identifies before the teacher?

RW: It can be the teacher and the parent. The parent may have some inkling beforehand, if there are some basic things that are happening before the child goes to school. A child with a significant learning difficulty like dyslexia will probably exhibit some of those things before school. So, they might have difficulty hearing the rhymes in words, for instance, in some of the nursery rhymes they hear. They may not be picking things up as easily as, say, another sibling will have done. Having said that, it's a highly heritable condition, so it does run in families and the parent might have seen it before with an older child.

The teacher may also tune into that. But that does depend on the teacher and the way the teacher is teaching. So, it's not an absolutely definite thing that the teacher will necessarily pick it up. Sometimes we hear parents being told, "Just wait. They'll grow into it. Just give them time." And a lot of really valuable intervention time can be lost. So, we would say, "Go in early." I think teachers and parents need to be aware of this difficulty.

SH: Do we actually know what's happening? Is it something neurological? I think about my daughter. At the moment, she's done well with reading, but she always gets d and b the wrong way around, which is quite easy, it's a stick with a circle on the bottom. Is there something happening between brain and mouth for those children who are dyslexic?

RW: As I said before, it's to do with phonological processing. The human brain has not been wired for reading. We've been wired for speech, but reading is a cultural acquisition, and our brains have to do a kind of retrofit to actually get the reading bit. Some children's brains will not do that as readily as others. There will be a slower progression in that. So those kids who struggle with that, need more repetition, more instruction, and they need it frequently so that those pathways, those neural pathways can be built. They can be built over time, but they need a lot more practice, a lot more repetition.

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progress, but one that many people would be familiar with are the PM levels. One Year 6 student went from PM level 12 to level 24 in the space of a term! A Year 5 student went from PM 12 to 20 in two terms. A Year 4 student moved from a PM 9 to a 20 while on the RTP for three terms back in 2016. That student is now in Year 6 and reading at an instructional PM 30 (expected level) with very good comprehension.

These students received various other Learning Support interventions prior to their entry onto the RTP but were still well below the expected reading level for their age. Not all students progress at these rates on the RTP, but it's not at all unusual. Most students who have been placed on the RTP at Ballina Public School have made very significant progress in their reading over a relatively short period of time. We also use MiniLit at Ballina Public School – currently we have eight Year 1 kids on that. It's really interesting that since we started MiniLit, we have fewer kids needing to come onto the RTP, as we're catching those struggling kids early.

Tell us a bit about your school.

We have quite a low SES intake and a lot of Indigenous kids – 40 per cent this year. Transient students moving into our school mid-term are often candidates for the RTP.

Did you face much opposition when you introduced the MultiLit programs? Do you have colleagues who are still sceptical?

There may have been some who were sceptical at first, but I don't believe there are any now. I share the data I collect every semester, and that really helps convince them of the benefits of the program. By generating graphs of a student's reading performance right back to Kindergarten [Foundation], that also helps show them that these are long-term problems that have been turned around by the RTP. We also track the students' progress after they come off the program to make sure that improvement is maintained.

You mentioned you have volunteers involved in helping deliver the Reinforced Reading part of the program.

I make sure everything is very well organised for the volunteers, which is essential for retaining them in the long term. I also make sure the volunteers are well trained, and I monitor the way they're delivering all aspects of the program, including Reinforced Reading, to make sure they're doing it right.

I ensure the volunteers realise they're appreciated by keeping in regular contact with them all and holding a morning tea for them each semester. I invite the local press to that sometimes, and that publicity helps generate more volunteers.

But above all, I find our volunteers are motivated by being kept abreast of student progress and by seeing the students' growing confidence for themselves.

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So it is a brain issue, and it's got nothing to do with intelligence. It's just a specific thing that we're asking kids to do, especially with the English language, which is a complex orthography. B and D reversal is very, very common. It usually passes without too much difficulty but is very common in kids who don't have dyslexia. So it's nothing to worry about. It's about them needing more good instruction.

SH: People with dyslexia, do they often have enhanced spatial and lateral thinking abilities?

RW: We hear a lot about the special gifts that some dyslexic kids have, and while some people may have other strengths, I don't believe that there is a necessary addition that you will have those strengths if you have dyslexia. I think it's great to focus on things that are positive when the child struggles for any reason, but I don't think we should necessarily ascribe special skills or talents to every child who has dyslexia.

SH: Is MultiLit something that's easy for someone to be a part of if they discover that their child has dyslexia? And I'm wondering if it's a nationwide thing, as well, or just New South Wales?

RW: No, it is nationwide. We have two MultiLit Literacy Centres in Sydney and one in Canberra. [It is] a user pays service, which means parents have to be able to afford to do that. Some parents can't. But most of the work we're doing now is actually in schools, across Australia, some in New Zealand, and some parts of Asia.

We develop programs and then offer training in those programs. We like to think that if we can train teachers to deliver our programs, then that instruction is happening in schools. And that's really ideal, because that can happen every day. And with a child with dyslexia, it's that intensity of instruction, the regular exposure, and the gradual building of the skill that's the critical thing for success.

Recommended in SA

We were delighted to see that our MultiLit programs MacqLit, Reading Tutor Program, MiniLit, PreLit and InitiaLit were recommended in the South Australia Government's Department for Education and Child Development Best Advice bulletin on 'Intervention to address literacy and numeracy learning difficulties'.

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