



MultiLit

A newsletter for parents and teachers

December 2019

moments

Star of the show

By Jodie Watson

In August this year, we were thrilled to see Harry Redfern, a student from country Victoria, take centre stage on Channel Nine's *This Time Next Year* to show off his new-found reading skills.

Harry was referred to MultiLit by Channel Nine Sydney back in early 2018 after he applied to be part of the upcoming season of the show, in which participants take on a challenge to achieve over the course of 12 months. In Year 5 at the time, Harry's goal was to be able to read a book independently. "I just want to keep up with my friends. If I could read, it would be a dream come true. I'd feel like a whole person," he said.

As Harry and his mum Kirsten live on a 100-acre cattle farm in Stratford, Victoria, accessing tutoring has been a challenge for them. Initially, Harry was travelling to Melbourne for tutoring support once a week, but this quickly became unsustainable and didn't include the frequency of instruction required for Harry to progress. Instead, Channel Nine contacted the MultiLit Literacy Centre, and he began undertaking lessons online from his school, Stratford Public, four times a week. Both Stratford's principal and Harry's classroom teacher provided ongoing support to give Harry a regular time and space to work in.

Harry has always demonstrated an impressive commitment to his online lessons, continuing instruction throughout the school term and school holidays, supported by consistent home reading. His tutors, Gareth Chandler, Emily Ong and Trudi Burnell, used explicit, research-based instruction in the Reading Tutor Program, MacqLit and positive teaching



(above, from left) Jodie Watson, Gareth Chandler, Harry and Kirsten Redfern, Emily Ong and Trudi Burnell; (below) Harry's star turn

strategies on a one-to-one basis. Staff were impressed by his determination.

The pride Harry had in his achievements was obvious when *This Time Next Year* aired, telling Karl Stefanovic with a big smile, "I can read".

Importantly, according to Harry's mum, his confidence increased as his reading improved: he was able to participate in school activities such as leadership speeches and drama club, and served as both house captain and school captain at school this year. Harry has also started to read street signs and menus independently – something



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Jennifer Buckingham receives Learning Difficulties Australia Award

MultiLit director of strategy and senior research fellow, Dr Jennifer Buckingham, was the 2019 recipient of the Mona Tobias Award presented by Learning Difficulties Australia.

This prestigious award recognises "a person who has made an outstanding contribution to Australian education of people with learning difficulties, through leadership, research, practice, teacher and community education".

It is awarded annually in memory of Mona Tobias, who was a great teacher and pioneer in helping children and adults with learning disabilities.

Dr Buckingham accepted her award at a ceremony in Melbourne in October.

MultiLit chairman, Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM, was awarded the Mona Tobias Award in 2008.



The 2019 LDA and AJLD award winners: Eminent Researcher Award winner Professor William Tunmer, Bruce Wicking Award recipient Steven Capp, Rosemary Carter Award recipient Jan Roberts, and Dr Jennifer Buckingham.

SA's Woodville Gardens School lifts early reading results by 220 per cent with InitialLit

As a new InitialLit school this year, Woodville Gardens School has been excited to share their results with the program.

Located in Adelaide, the 550-student school has a high proportion of EALD students, with 70 different cultures represented in the school, including around 25% indigenous students. It also includes two special options classes and a significant number of students with autism spectrum disorder and associated special needs.

Head of School – Early Years, Chris Stepien, said InitialLit was adopted after an audit of how literacy was being taught, prompted by the implementation of the Phonics Screening Check by the South Australian Department of Education, revealed that there were isolated pockets of practice across the early grades.

“We have a great teaching staff here but we wanted to have consistency and collaborative practice across the whole junior school,” Stepien said. “Our special educator, who was instrumental along with myself in implementing InitialLit, had been wanting to find a vehicle to get everyone on the same page.”

In 2019, the program was implemented in Reception (Foundation) and Year 1, across seven classes in total, including two composite classes.

For the students, Stepien said the sequential way phonics is introduced in the program has been most advantageous, along with consistency in language and delivery.

“The literacy session works in the same way every day. The smart board is there, they have their whiteboard, the lesson plans are similar, so it builds that stamina for kids of knowing where they are at, and that in turn has an impact on their confidence level and their willingness to have a go, because

it is all fairly predictable,” she said.

It has also given teachers a common language, which has opened up new conversations about literacy, according to Stepien.

“They feel more empowered; everyone is delivering the same program so there are common threads of discussion. One of the most beneficial things is that everyone is collecting the same data at around the same time, and they are able to share their success via looking at the data.

“The whole package is organised so that teachers can run with it – they still have a lot of planning to do but they know they have delivered on all parts of the program in that sequential manner. That has been a real bonus for the teachers. I think the success of the program has just spurred the teachers onto thinking about literacy in a much different way – they are really excited about it,” said Stepien.

In addition to the children's growing confidence and skill in reading and writing, Woodville Gardens achieved an amazing outcome in the 2019 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, lifting its scores by 220% from the 2018 test, which they attribute in large part to InitialLit. This dramatic increase even prompted a visit by the South Australian Education Minister, John Gardner, to congratulate the school on its achievements.

The school now plans to implement InitialLit-2 in four classes in 2020.

Stepien's advice for other schools? “Take it on board – it's an amazing program, and all the resources are there and organised for you. The research is showing that synthetic phonics is the way to go, and the support that has been given to us from the MultiLit team has been amazing. That ongoing support is really important when you are implementing something new, so I would say go for it!”

More from our InitialLit Community

A member of our Facebook group asked for advice about implementing InitialLit. Here's what others had to say.

“It is a fantastic program. We have been running [InitialLit-F] for two years now along with InitialLit-1 and will be starting InitialLit-2 next year. Our students have excelled and are all reading at or above benchmarks due to this program. I can't recommend it highly enough. It is a lot of work to set-up, but once it's done, it's fantastic and the children really enjoy it.”

“Highly recommend the program. I had over half my class on level one reading in term 1 and over the terms they have excelled and shown how effective the program can be. You really do see the expected results.”

“We used the program from go to whoa with our Kindy students this year. After using another well-known program

for many years I was a bit suspect at how sloooooow the program seemed to go. But after the whole program has been taught, I would not go back. Instead of having a spread of results, my whole cohort moved forward together and are reading and writing ANY word without fear. Yes ... varying results but the main body of students have all finished the program with fabulous results.”

“Three-quarters of my class have reached benchmark for their reading levels and I attribute this to InitialLit. It gave my students confidence and skills for reading and writing. I love it and can't wait to go again next year with it.”

Are you part of an InitialLit school? Then join our Facebook group, InitialLit Community, to receive regular updates from our Schools Partnership team and share information with other teachers implementing InitialLit.

researchED around the world



Dr Robyn Wheldall and Dr Nicola Bell presenting at researchED Melbourne

By Dr Nicola Bell

Since its inception in 2013, UK-based researchED has worked to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, running research- and teacher-driven conferences in six countries, and publishing a regular magazine (with the fourth edition featuring MultiLit's Dr Jennifer Buckingham on the cover).

In August, Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM, Dr Robyn Wheldall, and Dr Nicola Bell presented to a packed audience at the researchED conference in Melbourne. Their presentation outlined the findings of an evaluation of MiniLit, conducted by a team of independent researchers and funded by Evidence for Learning.

Alongside the results, the MultiLit team provided some commentary

on critical factors to consider when undertaking classroom-based research, such as choosing the right measures. For example, in the MiniLit evaluation, the primary assessment measure of reading comprehension turned out to be too difficult to administer properly for 97.5 per cent of the students tested at the start of the study. There were also some issues related to instructional dosage (i.e., how much of the program students in the 'MiniLit' group received) and fidelity (i.e., how well the program was delivered).

Despite these challenges, the evaluation also turned up some very promising results in support of MiniLit efficacy (see below for more on the findings).

On the other side of the world, another member of the MultiLit Research Unit – Jennifer Buckingham – presented at the researchED conference in Brighton, England on the research base behind the teaching of synthetic phonics, again to a capacity crowd. Both researchED conferences in general were very well-attended, demonstrating the appetite amongst teachers for information about science-backed best practice.

The MultiLit Research Unit looks forward to extending its association with researchED in 2020, with Kevin Wheldall, Robyn Wheldall and Jennifer Buckingham contributing a chapter to the one of the organisation's first books, on literacy.

Independent MiniLit evaluation demonstrates success in building foundational reading skills

By Dr Jennifer Buckingham

MiniLit is a small group reading program for Year 1 children who are struggling to learn to read. It is an explicit and systematic early intervention program developed by MultiLit.

MiniLit is designed to be delivered for one hour every day, for two to three terms, depending on student need. This allows for the full program to be delivered. A reasonable level of attendance, ideally at least four out of five days per week, is necessary for the program to be beneficial to students.

About the evaluation project

In 2017, MultiLit collaborated with Evidence for Learning and the New South Wales Department of Education to undertake a trial of the MiniLit intervention program. MultiLit provided training, resources and limited coaching to schools implementing the program.

The trial was evaluated by an independent team of researchers from the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the University of

Melbourne, with the report released in August 2019.

About the trial

In the trial, MiniLit was delivered for only two terms, and only 55% of children attended lessons for the recommended number of lessons (at least four out of five days on average). Reading outcomes for children who attended MiniLit were compared to children who had not attended MiniLit at two time points: at the end of the intervention period (six months after the trial started) and six months after the intervention ended (12 months after the trial started).

About the findings

The trial found that children who had participated in MiniLit for at least four out of five daily lessons on average had higher scores in four sub-tests of two assessments – the York Assessment of Reading Comprehension Early Reading (YARC-ER) and the Castles and Coltheart 2 (CC-2).

Reading outcomes were significantly higher for the MiniLit students on measures of letter sound knowledge,

phoneme awareness, regular word reading and non-word reading. These are essential sub-skills for word reading development and subsequent reading comprehension that are targeted in the MiniLit program.

These results were strong even though the MiniLit tutors in the trial had never delivered the program before. Results were not as strong for children with lower attendance, confirming its importance. Another measure was also used in the trial – the YARC Passage Reading test. This was determined to be an inappropriate measure for the young struggling readers in the trial because only a very small proportion were able to complete required tasks at the baseline assessment.

The results were therefore considered unreliable by the independent evaluators and assigned low security ratings by Evidence for Learning. The YARC-ER is the companion test created for children with this reading profile.

An extended discussion of the trial's findings is available from www.multilit.com under 'MiniLit Evaluation'.

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most of us take for granted in our daily lives. As he said, he is now well and truly “taking on the world”.

Harry is currently in his seventh term of online instruction at our Macquarie Park Literacy Centre and is continuing to work hard to further improve his reading. Harry and Kirsten are to be congratulated for their ongoing commitment to the program. We are thrilled to be part of Harry’s journey toward independent reading, as we are with all our students in our Literacy Centre programs.

Our Literacy Centres at Macquarie Park and Bella Vista

currently deliver programs for over 100 students aged between six and 16 years each term. Approximately 30% of Literacy Centre lessons are delivered online for students in Year 3 and above. Online instruction allows students who are unable to attend our centre face-to-face (including interstate families and schools) to receive explicit, research-based instruction. Delivery of these programs can take place before or after school or during school hours. Either parents or schools can access these services for low-progress readers.

For more information about our Literacy Centre programs please visit literacycentres.multilit.com.

Jodie Watson is manager of the MultiLit Literacy Centre at Macquarie Park.

Some recent publications from the MultiLit Research Unit

- Buckingham, J., Wheldall, R., & Wheldall, K. (2019). Systematic and explicit phonics instruction: A scientific, evidence-based approach to teaching the alphabetic principle. In R. Cox, S. Feez & L. Beveridge (Eds.), *The alphabetic principle and beyond* (pp. 49-67). Primary English Teaching Association Australia. http://www.petaa.edu.au/imis_prod/w/Store/Item_Detail.aspx?iProductCode=PET119E&Category=DIGITAL
- Wheldall, K., Wheldall, R., & Buckingham, J. (2019). A non-categorical approach to teaching low-progress readers in the primary school. In J. Murphy (Ed.), *The researchED Guide to Literacy: An Evidence-informed Guide for Teachers*. John Catt Educational.
- Wheldall, K., Wheldall, R., Madelaine, A., Reynolds, M., Arakelian, S., & Kohnen, S. (2019). ‘Just teach our kids to read’: Efficacy of intensive reading interventions for both younger and older low-progress readers in schools serving remote Aboriginal communities. In J. Rennie & H. Harper (Eds.), *Literacy Education and Indigenous Australians: Theory, Research and Practice* (Vol. 19, pp. 221-246). Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8629-9>
- Wheldall, K., Bell, N., Wheldall, R., Madelaine, A., Reynolds, M., & Arakelian, S. (2019). A small group intervention for older primary school-aged low-progress readers: Further evidence for efficacy. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2019.15>
- Wheldall, K., Bell, N., Wheldall, R., Madelaine, A., & Reynolds, M. (2019). Performance of Australian children on the English Phonics Screening Check following systematic synthetic phonics instruction in the first two years of schooling. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 24(2), 131-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2019.1635500>



A packed training room for the first InitialLit-F/1/2 PD Workshop at MultiLit HQ in November

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