

Closing the Gap Case Study



OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART, THURSDAY ISLAND, QLD

Closing literacy gaps key to unlocking student potential

At a glance

PROGRAMS ADOPTED:	PreLit (2015) RTP (2015) InitialLit (2020) MacqLit (2022) SpellEx (2023) LanguageLift (2023) MiniLit Sage (2023)
SECTOR:	Non-government primary school
LOCATION:	Very remote
ICSEA:	923
STUDENTS:	149
INDIGENOUS STUDENTS:	53%
EAL/D:	52%
IMPACT:	• Some Year 3 students saw more than one year's growth on standardised tests • Knowledge and skills increased along with students' enthusiasm for learning

The context

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart is located off the tip of Cape York on Kaurareg country in the islands of Zenedth Kes (Torres Strait).

One of the oldest schools in the Catholic Education Diocese of Cairns, Sacred Heart has a diverse enrolment of approximately 150 students. Of those, over 60% identify as First Nations and count English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D).

The school employs a diversity team to support students with additional learning needs, while visiting specialists include a guidance counsellor, speech pathologist, occupational therapist and psychologist.

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart joined the MultiLit Closing the Gap Initiative in 2021, which seeks to boost English literacy achievement in schools with a majority Indigenous enrolment.

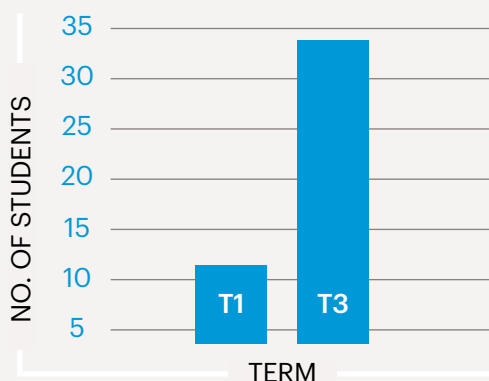
Why MultiLit?

In 2021, the federal government contracted MultiLit to provide reading and spelling programs for students in majority Indigenous schools as part of the education measures outlined in the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.

While Indigenous students make similar progress at school to their non-Indigenous peers, they are more likely to start behind them, especially in remote schools.

The multi-year initiative aims to have all students in participating schools reading at a minimum level within the average range for their age and year cohort.

**AVERAGE NUMBER OF STUDENTS
CORRECTLY IDENTIFYING
LETTER-SOUND CORRESPONDENCES**



Prior to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart joining the program in 2021, the school had identified a significant proportion of students with gaps in their foundational literacy skills, which was negatively impacting their learning progress.

“At the time, we had been looking into ways that we could enhance the school curriculum to ensure that it was best meeting the needs of our students,” said Curriculum Co-ordinator Karen Zabel.

“However, it also enabled us to stream them into ability groups so that everyone could access instruction at the level they were at, and no one was left behind.”

The impact

The school has implemented several MultiLit programs, including the InitialLit classroom program and MiniLit for small group intervention. It has also rolled out LanguageLift, which provides intensive support to develop students’ speaking and story comprehension abilities. The school also recently implemented SpellEx, a whole-class spelling program for mid-primary students.

The advantages of the programs have been particularly evident in the 2024 cohort of Year 3 students, who had benefitted from systematic phonics instruction from their first day of school.

“Combined with our English writing initiatives, EAL/D strategies and strong teacher-student relationships, the MultiLit programs are producing outstanding results,” Ms Zabel said.

“Some students are showing more than a year’s growth on standardised tests, reflecting their perseverance and the effectiveness of these approaches.

“The skills and knowledge they are gaining through these programs are not only accelerating their literacy development but also empowering them with confidence and a love for learning across other subject areas too.”

“When we heard about the MultiLit program, we liked that it was grounded in evidence in that it provided the systematic phonics instruction that our students needed.”

– Curriculum Co-ordinator,
Karen Zabel

Key insights

Joining the Closing the Gap Initiative represented a significant shift in the way the school taught literacy, with most teachers previously trained in ‘whole language’ approaches.

Ms Zabel said that some teachers had not delivered a systematic synthetic phonics program before and expressed concerns that it might be ‘boring’ students.

However, the opposite turned out to be the case.

“We found that as students’ knowledge and skills increased, they started to demonstrate increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning,” she said.

“By providing targeted instruction tailored to each student’s level, the programs ensured that all learners, including our EAL/D students, progressed at their own pace, developed confidence in their abilities and were thriving in a supportive and inclusive environment.”

To support the transition, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart also worked closely with MultiLit to ensure that staff received the necessary professional development to enable them to deliver the programs effectively.

“One of the challenges that we face is that we don’t have relief staff on the island so it can be difficult to keep classes running,” Ms Zabel said.

“It’s been great to have staff from MultiLit come to visit and provide professional development that also considers our unique context.

“We’re so thankful for the program and believe its success is a testament to the dedication of our teachers to run the literacy sessions with fidelity but also the strength of our school community.”