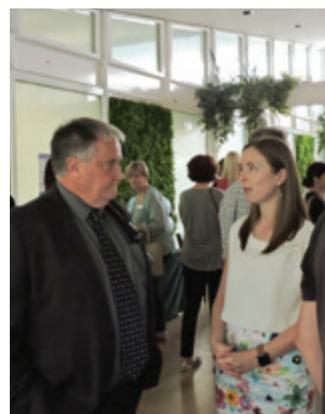


moments

Initialit is launched!

The first component of our three-part Initialit whole-class program of initial instruction, Initialit–Foundation was formally launched on Thursday, November 16. An enthusiastic crowd of well-wishers joined us in wetting our new baby’s head at the Eden Gardens conference venue in Macquarie Park following our first-ever training course for the new program. Initialit for Years 1 and 2 will be launched successively over the next two years. To find out more about Initialit, visit www.multilit.com/initialit.



“All good things ...”: The end of an era

Primary school students in some of Sydney’s poorest suburbs will lose access to the highly successful MultiLit-BCCT literacy centres after funding from the State government to our supporting charity for these centres, the Bill Crews Charitable Trust (BCCT), runs out at the end of 2017.

The first centre was launched in 1996 on the site of Rev Bill Crews’s Exodus Foundation in Ashfield. Known initially as the Schoolwise Program, our centres focused on helping low progress readers in Years 4-6 from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recently, the program has been operating in four primary schools in some of Sydney’s lowest socio-economic areas. Rev Crews said he was devastated to have to close the centres:

“The goal has been to help kids from low socio-economic areas who are at the bottom of their peer groups in terms of reading ability. These kids desperately need that help to prepare them for starting high school.

“It’s never ceased to amaze me, not just how much these kids’ reading ability improves in such a relatively short period of time but how much it helped raise their confidence and increase their desire to go on and learn.”

The instruction delivered by MultiLit has been our Tier 2 group instruction literacy program, MacqLit, designed to help improve the reading and spelling skills of older low-progress readers. The use of volunteers, provided by BCCT and trained by MultiLit, to hear students read daily, was a key feature of the program.

Expressing his sadness at the closure of the program, chairman and founder of MultiLit, Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM, said:

“Our relationship with Rev Crews goes back more than 20 years and has seen us provide reading intervention to more than 3000 struggling readers.

“Our goal has been to demonstrate what could be done for low-progress readers in schools when intervention programs are provided based on scientific research evidence.

“Supporting community based literacy projects has, and always will be, important for MultiLit and aligns with our organisation’s mission to ensure that all children learn to read.”

Meet the Team: Robyn Wheldall

No small part of the success of MultiLit has been due not only to our fabulous team but also to the dynamism and management skills of its directors in driving our mission. This applies in spades to founding Company Director and Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit, Dr Robyn Wheldall. We hear enough about Kevin and so we thought we'd find out more about Robyn!

Robyn, tell us a bit about how you came to be involved in MultiLit?

Very much a local, I was born in Epping, and educated at Epping North Public School and Cheltenham Girls High School. Onto Macquarie University after finishing school, I started out doing a BA DipEd in Secondary Teaching on a scholarship from the New South Wales Department of Education. In the end, I finished a Bachelor's degree in History when I became a mother for the first time at 21 years of age and did not pursue my teaching career further.

When my third child was young, I needed to return to work to bolster the family income. A friend who was working at the Special Education Centre at Macquarie University (MUSEC) knew I was looking for work and teed up a job as a research assistant for Dr Yola Center. This six-week job commenced in 1988 and I remained employed at MUSEC continuously until my retirement from the University in 2011. Macquarie has been very good to me and I am proud to continue as an Honorary Fellow of the University.

I was aware of the Special Education Centre when I first went to Macquarie as an undergraduate in 1975; but that was as far as my experience of special education had gone until I went to work there. I quickly developed a passion for the area. When the new Professor and Director of the Special Education Centre, Kevin Wheldall, arrived in mid-1990, the place underwent a major transformation. When I first saw my new boss dash past the office in pink socks and a white suit, I turned to one of my colleagues and said, "This will be interesting." Kevin claims that I was the only one of the many research assistants who was prepared to work for him. I was engaged on the Reading Recovery evaluation that was being carried out by Yola and Kevin and others at the time and, being rather tired of testing young children in broom cupboards in schools all over Sydney, I jumped at the opportunity.

The idea of MultiLit formed over a few years in Kevin's early years at MUSEC and in 1995 he launched the 'Making Up Lost Time in Literacy (MULTILIT)

Initiative'. For sentimental reasons, I keep a file from 1994 marked MULTILIT with a few sheets of paper in it.

Robyn, you have a doctorate in special education. How did that come about? And what was your topic?

I had commenced a law degree part-time in 1990 but decided to add a unit called An Introduction to Special Education to my schedule to be better informed in my current work at MUSEC. After slogging through half of the law degree I changed tack, and enrolled in the Master of Education by research. That morphed into Honours and then into the PhD. Having started working for Kevin, I naturally got to work on the areas of research that were his specialisms, one of which was classroom behaviour management. Kevin and his research colleague Dr Frank Merrett in the UK had done a lot of influential work on effective behavioural approaches to classroom behaviour management. We replicated a lot of that work in Australian schools and some of this formed the basis of my doctoral work. The work involved both teacher and student behaviour, explored the influence of gender, teacher praise and reprimands, classroom environment and teacher stress and the interactions among these. My thesis was titled, *Behavioural interactions between teachers and students in secondary classrooms: what they say, what they do* and was supervised by Dr Coral Kemp. The PhD enabled me to move into a Research Fellow role in MUSEC in 2006.

What do you see as your central role in MultiLit?

My role has obviously changed over the 20-plus years that MultiLit has been in existence. In the early days, I was the Research and Development Manager at MUSEC. This is still a key part of my role. The research imperative is very strong for us as this is where our roots lie and where we believe good practice comes from. With the advent of MultiLit as a university 'spin off' company in 2006, some of my roles became more formalised.

I see my role in MultiLit now as working with my fellow directors to create a robust



and sustainable company that serves our mission of ensuring that all children learn to read. My role in the MRU is to continue to help set and achieve the research and development agenda of the company. I am also interested in the life of the company itself. We have a busy and demanding workplace and so a focus is those cultural aspects that help to build a supportive and caring workplace for the fabulous people who make up our team.

We hear a lot about work/life balance, what's your take on how to achieve this?

If you were to take a look at my bookshelves, you would probably think that I am a firm believer in the concept of work/life balance. After years, not to say decades, of trying to achieve this I have to say that I now don't believe there is such a thing. A couple of years ago, I was relieved to read a piece by Alain de Botton, making the case that work is an important part of our lives and to create this dichotomy between work and 'life' is actually pretty unhelpful. I found this liberating. Raising a family has been very important to me and family life continues to be extremely rewarding with the arrival of several grandchildren over the past few years. I now always advise the women in my life who are mothers and who are thinking of doing a PhD to do it full-time on a scholarship or not at all – and to protect sleep. We certainly need to have things in our lives other than work, but we also should recognise that some of this will ebb and flow with the seasons of life and we should relax about not having everything in perfect balance all the time.

Prevention is better than cure

Introducing InitialLit–Foundation

Robyn Wheldall

[An edited version of a speech given by Dr Robyn Wheldall at the launch of InitialLit–Foundation, November 16, 2017.]

InitialLit has been many years in the making and we are proud, finally, to be launching the first in a three part series of programs covering the first three years of schooling. This new program, InitialLit–Foundation, marks a departure from our usual practice of working in the literacy intervention space. Our commitment to a Response to Intervention framework highlighted to us that while we have arguably covered the necessary Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention programs for struggling readers, we did not offer that most important component of all – a universal Tier 1 program for all children starting school and learning to read. In this program our aim is *prevention* rather than intervention.

We send our five-year-olds off to school, with their oversized uniforms, their broad-brimmed hats and huge backpacks, looking like little turtles. They are faced with so many new experiences and challenges but the greatest of these is to conquer that most remarkable cultural achievement – becoming literate. The size of this achievement in English is not inconsiderable. Our written language is complex and sometimes quite opaque. In Finland, where the orthography is transparent and there are no exceptions – each letter always standing for the same sound – children take only a few months to learn to decode. Learning to read in English is much, much harder and takes two to three years, on average, to learn to crack our alphabetic writing system.

The teaching of reading *IS* rocket science according to the fabulous Louisa Moats. While there are some teachers who are great at teaching beginning reading, there are many who are not. (And this is not the fault of teachers. As we and many others have often said, the initial teacher education many teachers receive is simply not adequate for the job.) This is a task that can't be left to chance. It is far too important. For if we get it wrong, the consequences for some children will be dire. We need to be able to ensure that *all* children get the start in reading that they deserve. By the end of Year 2, if we do this well, the vast majority of children will be making the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. They will be children who understand about the English language, they will be good spellers and will be developing into good writers.

What's more, if we do the early work well, there will be far fewer children needing intensive support at the Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels. This is great news for all those children who will now *not* struggle with learning to read. It doesn't take long for young children to tune into the fact that they are finding acquiring a skill difficult and they quickly learn to avoid an aversive situation. We can turn kids off reading really quickly! It's also good news for schools and school systems who will be able to focus learning support on the very small percentage of students who have an actual learning impairment rather than the much larger number of instructional casualties.

Our children and young people spend a great many years in school. We think about the school experience building to a finale with the Higher School Certificate (or similar) but actually the really critical and important work is done in these first few years. The first three years of schooling must be seen as laying the foundation for all other learning in all other subject areas – indeed laying the foundations for life-long learning.

We sincerely hope that InitialLit will help lay this firm foundation. In this first year of school, we are asking for 90 minutes a day, on at least four days a week, for this work to be done over the course of four school terms. With explicit and systematic whole-class teaching of the alphabetic code, small group work including reading practice, and a dedicated literature and language component, we believe we are teaching the essential components of an effective early reading program – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency,



vocabulary, comprehension, as well as oral language skills.

But does it do the job? To put some numbers around the answer to this question, let's look at findings from our most recent trial of InitialLit that show a considerable shift of students out of the bottom 25%, or quartile, of students between the beginning and the middle of the Kindergarten year. At the beginning of the year 76% of students scored in the bottom quartile for letter sound knowledge and only 6% scored in the top quartile. At mid-year testing, however, only 12% of students remained in the bottom quartile and 39% of students now scored in the top quartile, the top 25% of students. Similarly, on the measure of word reading, 24% of students scored in the bottom quartile and only 9% scored in the top quartile at the beginning of the year. By mid-year, only 9% remained in the bottom quartile and 42% scored in the top quartile. We are delighted to find that we are scooping so many children out of that bottom quartile – through great classroom instruction.

We have said many times in MultiLit that our aim is to make ourselves redundant. Part of this goal will be achieved if InitialLit–Foundation, and then InitialLit–1 and InitialLit–2, are adopted widely by schools. Our aim is to help build a nation of readers because, as Dr Seuss says:

“The more that you read the more you will know.

The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.”

Mea culpa ... Neale Analysis resurrected!

Some 18 months ago, we announced in *MultiLit Moments* our intention to discontinue our use of the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA) for evaluating the effectiveness of our programs in favour of the more recent York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC). The YARC is very similar in many respects to the Neale and, after some pilot work using both tests, we determined that it was time to switch to the YARC.

We were wrong!

The MultiLit Research Unit (MRU) has spent considerable time carefully examining the data collected on the new measure and arguing the pros and cons of the two tests. While the YARC reading passages are arguably more contemporary and the test norms are certainly more recent, we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that, in our view, the YARC is not sufficiently robust for our purposes. The YARC, like the NARA, provides information on reading accuracy, reading rate, and reading comprehension. It is the last of these, reading comprehension,

that is the focus for our decision to abandon our use of this test because of its unacceptably low reliability. A reliable reading test should deliver roughly the same result when repeated. Moreover, the correlations between the test results for groups of children when tested on two occasions should be high if we are to have faith in the reliability of the measure. Sadly, this is not the case for the YARC comprehension measure. Nor is this a mere technical issue. The effects of low reliability in practice, when assessing children, can lead to faulty conclusions being drawn about the progress children are making and the instruction they need.

So, reluctantly, we have discarded the YARC and have decided to go back to using the Neale from the beginning of next year, while we examine other tests of reading. The Neale is a bit old now but it is reliable and the norms, while arguably a bit dated, are unlikely to have changed much given the sad fact that NAPLAN and other studies of reading performance show that Australian children appear to have made little progress in reading performance over the past decade.

Some light relief

Many of you will know of Hilaire Belloc's 'Cautionary Tales', perhaps the most famous of which is entitled, 'Jim, who ran away from his nurse and was eaten by a lion'. But few will have heard of another recently discovered poem in the same genre by Kevin Belloc, Hilaire's sadly misunderstood and much under-rated younger brother. In the spirit of Christmas, we offer it here as a little light relief.

Tim

Who was denied phonics and was eaten by whole language

There was a boy whose name was Tim
His parents were so good to him
Not only Mum and Dad but Gran
And Auntie Rose and Uncle Dan
They read and read to him each night
'Till they had almost lost their sight
They read 'cos Mem Fox told them this
Was how to give Tim reading bliss

Now it's a fact, if strange to tell,
Tim's reading did not seem to gel
At first it seemed he'd made a start
He'd learned his readers off by heart

By using picture cues to guess
Some words and memorise the rest

Alas that fateful day did fall
When teacher gave our Tim the WARL*
Tim thought that this was quite absurd
He could not read a single word
'Where are the pics?' he cried in vain
His teacher blanched to cause such pain
And rang his parents' home that night
To tell them of Tim's awful plight
'Have you been reading to young Tim?'
She asked, and feared the worst for him
'Of course we have', Tim's parents cried
'No child of ours would be denied!'
'In that case' was her quick retort,
'Then phonics is our last resort'

And so, my friends, it came to pass
That Tim was given help at last
He learned his letter sounds and blends
And soon was reading like his friends
Tim's parents were relieved but sad
At what had happened to their lad
No need for this we must admit
If he'd just had InitialLit.

CODA

The moral of this story rules
That we must take care in our schools
And always learn our phonics first
For fear of learning something worse.

* *The Wheldall Assessment of Reading Lists*



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