

Building the fence

In Australia, as in so many western countries, we adopt a ‘wait to fail’ approach to reading instruction. We typically provide a so-called ‘balanced’ approach to initial instruction in literacy in the first year of schooling, with very little by way of overt, explicit, systematic instruction in the key elements of effective reading instruction, especially phonemic awareness, phonics and reading fluency practice. Then we wait for at least a year (the Foundation Year) and at the beginning of Year 1, we attempt to identify the struggling readers and provide them, at best, with the type of instruction they should have had in the first place! Small wonder that we see as many as 25% of young students in Year 1 as ‘struggling readers’.

But this need not be the case. We may not need ambulances at the bottom of the cliff (or, at least, not so many), if we provide adequate fencing and safety measures at the top. By this we mean that if all children were to receive effective, exemplary initial literacy instruction, based on sound, scientific evidence-based research, in the first place, from the word go, we would have far less need to provide so much remedial support for struggling readers. Instead of addressing the needs of the bottom 25% of young struggling readers, we may well only need to provide for less than 5% of young students.

As a research and development initiative, and now a company, geared towards addressing the needs of low-progress readers, it might sound strange that we are now trying to do ourselves out of business. But we have long been on the record as having the goal of making ourselves redundant! More seriously, we see the need for effective initial literacy instruction as critical for several reasons. First, we would not wish to see any child experience the misery of struggling to learn to read when many of their peers seem to be mastering the task with ease. Second, the sooner children master the basics of learning to read, the sooner they can experience the joys of reading to learn. And third, if we can reduce the apparent need for remedial instruction to the small minority who, for whatever reasons, may still struggle in spite of exemplary instruction, then we can meet the needs of those relatively few children more adequately: we can offer them more time and professional support.

For all of these reasons, we turned our attention at MultiLit to initial literacy instruction and over the past few years we have been developing InitialLit, a whole class program of literacy instruction predicated on best practice inspired by the best available scientific evidence base regarding how reading works and how best to teach it. In our first program, we focus on teaching the reading and related skills appropriate for the first year of schooling, the Foundation Year. Subsequent programs will address the curriculum for Years 1 and 2.

InitialLit – Foundation, MultiLit’s program for initial literacy instruction for whole classes, has been developed to provide teachers with a carefully sequenced and structured program of instruction geared towards meeting the needs of young children in their Foundation Year of schooling. As always, it has been the product of a continuing program of research and development by a specialist team of academic researchers and special educators that we have had the pleasure of leading.



**Kevin
Wheldall**



**Robyn
Wheldall**

*Dr Robyn Wheldall is a Director of MultiLit and the Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit (MRU) (www.multilit.com).
Email: robyn.wheldall@pecas.com.au*

*Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM is Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd and Director of the MultiLit Research Unit (www.multilit.com).
Email: kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au*