

Senate Committee
Submission to the *Inquiry into Teaching and Learning – maximising our investment in Australian schools*

*This submission on behalf of MultiLit Pty Ltd to the **Inquiry into Teaching and Learning** relates to terms of reference:*

a) the effectiveness of current practices in assisting children to realize their potential in Australian schools; and,

b) factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system.

The recent and alarming results of the Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS) assessment (released in December 2012) showed that Australian children in Year 4 are the lowest performing students of all English-speaking countries in terms of their reading ability. Quite rightly, this result was met with both concern and dismay. How is it that such an affluent and privileged country as Australia could fare so poorly? Given that the ability to read is *the* core basic skill that underpins all other learning, and is required for children to realize their full potential, this situation must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Our contention in MultiLit (a view shared by our colleagues in the reading scientist community, see Supplementary Submission 51 to this Inquiry by Kevin Wheldall) is that *the core reason* for the poor performance of our children is that most of the teachers in our schools have been inadequately prepared by universities to teach reading to the children in their care.

It appears to be a matter of chance as to whether a child in the early years of schooling is taught the basic building blocks required for learning to read. This is not new news. The findings of the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL, 2005) clearly found that the content of university teacher training courses was inadequate and did not teach prospective teachers the ‘tools of their trade’ they needed to teach young children to learn to read. Notwithstanding the fact that this was laid out clearly in 2005, there has been virtually no progress in addressing this *crucial core deficit*.

If the children in our schools do not have teachers who are able to teach them to read in those first few years at school they fall further and further behind, being deprived of the opportunities to acquire new knowledge through reading. This is a travesty for the children concerned, but also a great loss to this nation’s capacity. The significant investment in education in Australia is currently not being maximized, as evidenced by our relative poor performance in PIRLS.

We are rightly concerned with productivity issues in this country. If we do not reverse the downward trend in literacy performance we should expect that the success of our

rich and prosperous nation will not be sustained. This situation must be addressed immediately so that the present and future generations have the literacy skills (and the knowledge being able to read enables) to make their vital contributions to this country and to Australia's standing in the world.

By way of background, I am a founding director of MultiLit Pty Ltd, a Macquarie University spin-off company that was incorporated in 2006. MultiLit comprises research and development into more effective ways of teaching low-progress students experiencing difficulties in learning literacy skills. The MultiLit (Making Up Lost Time In Literacy) Initiative, out of which the MultiLit company emerged, was established by Professor Kevin Wheldall AM in 1995 at the Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) [for more information about the early work of MultiLit see Wheldall & Beaman (2000) <http://www.multilit.com/wp-content/uploads/ExecutiveSummary-Making-up-for-lost-time-in-literacy.pdf>]. MultiLit continues as a research initiative of Macquarie University with a dedicated research unit (MultiLit Research Unit – MRU) being the generative hub of further research and development. Professor Wheldall is the Director, and I am the Deputy Director, of the MRU.

MultiLit currently:

- provides direct services to children who are struggling to learn to read, for whatever reason, in our Literacy Centre (including on-line delivery)
- provides consultancy to community-based programs (e.g., The Exodus Foundation – see Submission 29)
- develops and disseminates research-based, explicit programs of instruction for use by teachers in schools, and
- provides (accredited) professional development courses to teachers across Australia and in New Zealand.

We consider the latter two functions of our organization to be the most crucial ones as we strive to equip teachers with the necessary skills and resources to ensure that every child learns to read (see Submission 59 – Kevin Wheldall).

Our remit in the early years of MultiLit was to provide research-based strategies to help *older* low-progress readers, typically students in Years 3 and above. Our goal was to provide intensive, systematic instruction to students who had failed to make adequate progress in learning to read in the early years of school so that they could 'make up lost time in literacy' and be prepared for their secondary schooling.

We were delighted in 2008 (and continuing) when the *MultiLit Reading Tutor Program* (RTP) was selected as a reading intervention for education systems in both New South Wales and Western Australia under the *Smarter Schools National Partnerships for Literacy and Numeracy* strategy. We witnessed a broad take up of not only the teaching resource nominated for students in primary school (RTP) but also the professional development workshops that accompany it. This is providing an important opportunity to pass on some of the expertise we have developed in MultiLit to school leaders and classroom teachers alike.

While our initial focus in MultiLit was on older low-progress readers, more recently (over the last 7 years or so) we have extended our focus to *younger at-risk* children so that we can 'get in early' and stop major delays in reading acquisition from developing in the first place. Our response has been to develop programs based on the available scientific evidence and designed for use in schools, thereby mitigating

the need for costly remediation for older low-progress readers. Our intention was that not only would we provide the means of *effective instruction* in early reading skills, but that this would also be more *cost-effective* for schools and education systems to deliver.

The *MiniLit* (Meeting initial needs in literacy) *early literacy intervention program* was released for use in schools in November 2011. We have been very encouraged by the enthusiastic response to this program and to the professional development course that accompanies it. Designed as a small group intervention program for children who were not making adequate progress in learning to read after a year at school, this program provides intensive, explicit and systematic instruction in the building blocks of reading.

Informed by our MultiLit work with Indigenous students in Cape York (See Wheldall & Beaman, 2011), we were also prompted to develop an early years *preparation* program for children in the year prior to them entering their formal schooling. Our experience in Cape York taught us that we desperately needed to intervene *before* these children entered school as they were already 'behind the eight ball' in vital prerequisite skills when entering the school system. The *PreLit early literacy preparation program* (released in October 2012) is our response to the serious disadvantage experienced by young children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. *PreLit* is intended as a whole class program in preschools in the year prior to school entry (or for the first six months of formal schooling for those children who lack the prerequisite skills needed for learning to read). Our hope is that this program will help reverse the downward trend in performance for marginalised children.

I refer to the Submission to this Inquiry made by The Exodus Foundation (Submission 29) as an example of the successful implementation of our MultiLit programs. Since 1996 The Exodus Foundation has continuously offered the MultiLit program to older low-progress readers from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (see Wheldall, 2009 http://www.lidaustralia.org/mona_tobias_2008_article_1_1.pdf; and, Wheldall, Beaman, Madelaine, & McMurtry <http://www.multilit.com/wp-content/uploads/Exodus-Final-Report-on-all-students.pdf>). For the first 13 years, the educational programs in the Exodus Tutorial (Literacy) Centres were run by Professor Kevin Wheldall and me as projects via the research and consultancy arm of Macquarie University, Access Macquarie (formerly Macquarie Research Ltd), including the provision of all of the staff. Since 2009, the Exodus Foundation has used the MultiLit programs *under licence* directly from MultiLit Pty Ltd.

We are proud of the successful continuous implementation of our MultiLit programs for, and by, The Exodus Foundation for the past 17 years in this outstanding community-based program. It bears repeating, however, that The Exodus Foundation uses our MultiLit and MiniLit programs *under licence* and their application in Exodus Literacy Centres constitutes only one form of operationalisation. When we started working with the Rev Bill Crews our goal was to provide a *demonstration* of what could be achieved with effective and systematic instruction. But how many demonstrations does it need to make this point? Over the past 17 years, 34 successive intakes in the Ashfield Centre alone have consistently and repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of our programs.

Our contention is that it should not be necessary to have such remediation work taking place outside of the regular school context. As important as community-based work (like that of the Exodus Foundation) is, our goal is to have the effective instructional approaches used in our programs *taking place in schools*. It is in

schools that this work should and must be done. Instruction in basic skills should not be left to charitable institutions.

By way of summary, after 18 years of MultiLit's existence our central brief is to provide *effective* and *cost effective* research-based instructional programs for use by teachers in schools and to assist in the development of the *capacity* of our teachers to meet the needs of the nation's most valuable resource – its children.

As we often say to our team in MultiLit – our goal is to make ourselves redundant.

Professor Kevin Wheldall AM and I would welcome the opportunity to provide further information to the Committee. For more information about MultiLit, visit <http://www.multilit.com/>

Dr Robyn Beaman-Wheldall, for MultiLit Pty Ltd
Honorary Fellow, Macquarie University
Deputy Director, MultiLit Research Unit
Founding Director, MultiLit Pty Ltd

MultiLit References used in this Submission

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