Case Study

GRACE LUTHERAN PRIMARY SCHOOL, QLD

A comprehensive school-wide evaluation to select a new literacy program

At a glance

SECTOR: Non-government primary school

LOCATION: Major city

ICSEA: 1094

STUDENTS: 449 *(co-educational)*

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS: 3%

EAL/D: 20%

The context

Grace Lutheran Primary School is located in Clontarf, on the Redcliffe Peninsula. It is a Lutheran Christian Primary School dedicated to providing the best primary education to prepare students for their secondary schooling. Established in 1971, they have a proud history of guiding young children to develop strong moral characters and the life skills essential for being productive, resilient and capable adults.

Grace Lutheran Primary School is owned and operated by the Lutheran Church of Australia, Queensland District, and works in partnership with the Grace Lutheran Church Redcliffe. It is governed by a School Council. The school also works closely with Grace Lutheran Creche and Kindergarten, and Grace Lutheran College, a co-educational secondary school, providing a seamless education from early childhood through to Year 12.
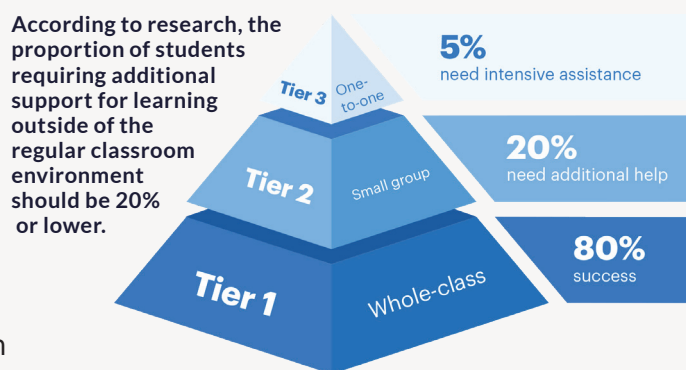
Grace Lutheran Deputy Principal (Teaching and Learning), Jasmine Deighton, shares the decision-making process the school employed to select a new literacy program, involving many stakeholders with the evaluation.

Why change the existing approach to teaching literacy?

The school faced the challenge where a range of literacy programs were being implemented across the different early years' classes, based on personal teacher preference. With three classes in each year level across the school, there was no consistency from one classroom to another.

A program had been selected by the school for trialling, however it only involved a few teachers and hadn't included all staff. This resulted in limited awareness of the program and low program buy-in. Furthermore, student literacy results across the school were inconsistent, and the desired progress in the early years wasn't being achieved.

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MultiLit

Upon reviewing the student data through the Response to Intervention (RtI) model, it became clear that the majority of students required intervention, far exceeding those who were meeting literacy benchmarks – a situation resembling an inverted triangle when visualised across RtI Tiers 1, 2 and 3. The Deputy Principal (Teaching and Learning) identified this as a critical issue, shedding light on why staff viewed the situation primarily as an intervention problem.

According to research, the proportion of students requiring additional support for learning outside of the regular classroom environment should be 20% or lower.

Tier 3 One-to-one
Tier 2 Small group
Tier 1 Whole-class

5% need intensive assistance
20% need additional help
80% success

> A 2024 survey by MultiLit of more than 600 teachers and teacher aides found that 4 out of 5 (78%) say their school isn't achieving the RtI target of 20% or less students in need of Tier 2 intervention in the early primary years (Foundation to Year 2).

The high number of students needing literacy intervention created significant challenges in managing classrooms and ensuring learning progression, particularly for less experienced teachers. While staff were aware of the concerning literacy data, it wasn't translating into changes in teaching practices. The school initially believed that the issue was an intervention problem that required external support for the students most in need.

Staff recognised the need for a change in the school's approach to literacy, but there was no consensus on why change was necessary or which program to adopt. Although the school had begun exploring evidence-based literacy instruction, program selection was often influenced by personal preferences or recommendations from colleagues. Overall, there was a lack of a compelling, unified rationale for making a change.

The Deputy Principal (Teaching & Learning) decided to conduct a collaborative action research project for motivated staff to opt into. To her surprise, 60% of class teachers put their hand up to be part of the working party, consisting of mainly teachers in the lower-primary years. It was the aim of the Deputy Principal that the group first come to a shared understanding of the evidence base so they could identify key criteria to use as a guide to make a more unified and confident decision for the school's new literacy program. The Deputy Principal was determined to find a program that staff could depend on for delivering a systematic and evidence-based approach to teaching students, reducing the risk of children falling behind.

How did the staff collaborate to come to a more unified decision for an evidence-based approach to teaching literacy?

The working party conducted the action-learning process over six months, so they could better understand the evidence base and use this learning to select the best program for their students' needs. The Deputy Principal was also aware that staff had different preferences for literacy programs and may be unwilling to give these up if there was a unilateral top-down decision made by the school leadership. Staff buy-in to the process and commitment to embedding the chosen program was essential, so an action-learning process was deemed the best path forward.

The Deputy Principal led the process with the volunteer staff, by providing some key readings that highlighted critical components within the literature of the Science of Reading evidence base. Readings were distributed and processed via a professional learning community approach, where an ever-deepening understanding was developed.

After initial group discussions, the team agreed that synthetic phonics should be a foundational element of their future program selection. They then delved deeper into resources focused on the Science of Reading and effective reading instruction. This included professional learning seminars from Five from Five, Australian Government reports on reading instruction, and *Nomanis* articles on the Science of Reading sourced from Australian and international authors. These resources significantly enhanced the group's understanding of the evidence base, fostering a shared perspective within the working party and enabling a more informed decision-making process (see appendix for a full list).

The working party reviewed their findings from the readings and collaborated to design a matrix of essential components that aligned with the evidence base and would best address their students' needs. Drawing from their teaching experience, they developed criteria to evaluate and assess several recommended programs.

Table 1: Criteria for program evaluation

School-based criteria	Guiding questions
Authenticated	• Is the program **endorsed by a reputable organisation** in the field of effective reading? • Is the program **supported by published evidence** of its effectiveness (this is not schools recommending the program)? Please share the research links below. • Does the program include **links to ACARA's Australian Curriculum**?
Science of Reading Alignment/ Five Keys	• Does the program explicitly teach and develop **phonemic awareness**? If so, how? • Does the program explicitly teach through a **systematic synthetics approach to phonics**? If so, how? • Does the program explicitly teach and develop **vocabulary**? If so, how? • Does the program explicitly teach and develop **comprehension skills**? If so, how? • Does the program explicitly teach and develop reading **fluency**? If so, how? • Is **oral language** embedded within each of the five keys? If so, how?
Consistency of program from Prep–Year 6 *(ability to stretch up into middle and upper primary for those that still need phonics and early reading development)*	• What **years of schooling** is the program targeting (for whole-class instruction)? • Are there provisions built into the program for **extending beyond Junior Primary** (for those that need this level of instruction)? • **Could the program be easily adapted** for older students? Would it be **engaging** for older students?

Ease of Teaching Use/ Resourcing	**TRAINING** • Is training readily available for teachers? What training is available for teachers? What **modes of training** are provided (face to face/online/webinars etc.)? Is there a **cost to training**? • Is **whole-school training** available? • Is training **readily accessible throughout the year** (for any staff changes throughout the year)? **RESOURCES** • Is the program **simple and accessible to students**? Are there student resources (e.g. phonics cards)? • Is the program accessible to teachers? Is there a t**eaching guide**? Does the program include **explicit teaching instruction** (lesson plans for each day)? What does this look like? • Are **tricky words/sight words/high frequency words** included in the program? • Is the program supported by **technology**? Is technology embedded in the program for teacher delivery? Is technology embedded for student use? • Are there any student **textbooks** within this phonics program? **ASSESSMENT** • Does the program include **assessment and data tracking**? If so, what does this look like?
Differentiation	• Does the program include a **multisensory** approach to learning? • Does the program include a targeted **intervention** program (already created for teachers / EAs to follow)? What does this look like (individual/small group, what age groups etc.)? • Does the program include a targeted **extension** program (already created for teachers / EAs to follow)? What does this look like (individual/small group, what age groups etc.)?
Australian	• Does the program use Australian **spelling**? • Is the **training** Australian-based? • Is there an Australian **supplier** for the program?
Links to other English/ Literacy areas	• Are there clear links within the program to **reading and literacy** (not just phonics/phonemic awareness)? • Are there clear links within the program to **writing**? • Are there clear links to **handwriting**? Does the program include letter formation?

The working party compiled a list of programs to review and used a scoring system based on the established criteria to evaluate each one. Group members assessed all the programs and presented their findings and scores to the entire team for discussion. From this process, an overall scorecard was developed (see Table 2), revealing that two programs – Program B and Program F – emerged as the top choices, both receiving the highest scores based on the criteria.

Table 2: Program evaluation scorecard

Scores (in relation to criteria questions)

	PROGRAM A	PROGRAM B	PROGRAM C	PROGRAM D	PROGRAM E	PROGRAM F	PROGRAM G	PROGRAM H	PROGRAM I	PROGRAM J	PROGRAM K
Authenticated (/3)	2	3	0	2	0	3	1	2	0	2	1
SoR Alignment/ 5 Keys (/6)	2	6	1	3	1	6	1	6	3	2	2
Prep - Year 6 Consistency (/2)	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0
Ease of Teaching Use/ Resourcing (/9)	5	9	4	7	3	9	6	9	7	5	9
Differentiation (/3)	1	2	1	0	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
Australian (/3)	3	3	1	3	0	3	0	0	2	3	3
Links to other English/Literacy areas (/3)	2	3	0	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	0
Total (/29)	15	27	7	17	6	27	13	22	18	15	16

Source: Grace Lutheran Primary School

Further analysis was necessary, so the working party decided to send a delegation to visit schools currently using each of the two shortlisted programs for additional validation. Recognising that their initial scoring was based on perceptions, they aimed to observe the programs in action to see how they truly measured up.

Representatives from the working party – comprising the Deputy Principal, Literacy Coordinator and a teacher – visited four schools that had implemented the shortlisted programs: two using Program B and two using Program F. To gain a deeper understanding of each program, they:

- observed teachers delivering lessons and noted student engagement levels
- spoke with school leaders about the implementation process
- reviewed and discussed the resources provided with each program
- investigated the professional development required for staff
- inquired about the program's impact on student outcomes.

Equipped with this firsthand information, they re-evaluated the scores they had originally assigned.

Table 3: Re-evaluating the program evaluation scorecard

Scores (in relation to criteria questions)

	PROGRAM A	PROGRAM B	PROGRAM C	PROGRAM D	PROGRAM E	PROGRAM F	PROGRAM F (after school visit)	PROGRAM G	PROGRAM H	PROGRAM I	PROGRAM J	PROGRAM K
Authenticated (/3)	2	3	0	2	0	3	3	1	2	0	2	1
SoR Alignment/ 5 Keys (/6)	2	6	1	3	1	6	2	1	6	3	2	2
Prep - Year 6 Consistency (/2)	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	0
Ease of Teaching Use/ Resourcing (/9)	5	9	4	7	3	9	6	6	9	7	5	9
Differentiation (/3)	1	2	1	0	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	1
Australian (/3)	3	3	1	3	0	3	3	0	0	2	3	3
Links to other English/Literacy areas (/3)	2	3	0	2	1	3	0	2	1	3	2	0
Total (/29)	15	27	7	17	6	27	16	13	22	18	15	16

Source: Grace Lutheran Primary School

After visiting the schools, it became evident that Program F did not fully meet the criteria the group had established. While the program strongly emphasised phonics instruction, it lacked sufficient focus on the other key components aligned with the Science of Reading and had no integration with other English/Literacy areas. Additionally, the group decided to downgrade the score for 'Ease of Teaching Use/Resourcing' due to the program's lack of a clear instructional structure. Despite the abundance of resources, the time teachers needed to plan and organise lessons and materials was counterproductive to their goals.

The working party was relieved they had taken the initiative to visit the schools to get a deeper understanding of the lived reality of each program. A key insight was their shift from initial perceptions of each program to a more accurate understanding of their practical application in a school setting. As the Deputy Principal remarked, they moved from what they "thought each program was" to a clear view of "what each program truly is in reality".

At one of the schools implementing Program B, staff shared that their previous data had also reflected the 'inverted triangle' pattern noticed at Grace Lutheran Primary School. The school then highlighted the remarkable transformation in student outcomes since adopting the program. Over the 18 months of using Program B, they focused on using data as formative feedback, incorporating screening, progress monitoring and cumulative review data to guide instruction. This data-informed approach led to a significant reduction in the number of students needing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.
This real-life example provided the team with a powerful illustration of the potential transformation that Grace Lutheran could achieve by adopting a similar approach.

Working party delegates presented their final findings to the team, resulting in strong buy-in and a solid commitment to the selected program. The strategic process, guided by the Deputy Principal, ensured that everyone had a voice in confirming the program choice.

After a thorough six-month process, the decision was made to implement Program B – MultiLit's InitiaLit program – beginning in the 2024 school year. InitiaLit was chosen as the school's Tier 1 whole-class program for Prep to Year 2, providing an ideal foundation for students in their first three years of school. When taught with fidelity across all three years, InitiaLit offers a comprehensive and systematic literacy program, ensuring that every child receives the best possible start to their education.

Covering the Five Big Ideas of reading, InitiaLit is a comprehensive three-year program that aligns with the curriculum and lays a solid foundation for an effective Response to Intervention (RtI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, proactively reducing the need for future interventions. The school was reassured that the program is based on scientifically validated methods, with rigorous testing and trials in Australian classrooms confirming its practical use and proven effectiveness.

Program implementation

Initially, the school sought **professional learning** for the three teachers who would be directly involved in delivering InitiaLit to the Prep, Year 1 and Year 2 classes. These teachers accessed face-to-face professional learning at the Brisbane MultiLit Centre for the required two-day workshop. This was a critical first step to maximise the impact and success of the program and ensure that the teachers were well prepared and confident to deliver the lessons effectively.

Following the professional learning, the school received a full suite of InitiaLit **resources** including a comprehensive kit for teachers, decodable readers, downloadable items and optional consumables that support and strengthen classroom teaching.

To ensure the program is delivered with fidelity and achieves maximum effectiveness, a full set of teacher materials includes scripted lessons and prepared PowerPoint slide decks for teaching reading and related skills. This support is crucial for easing the cognitive load on teachers as they adapt to new practices and strategies. The Deputy Principal overseeing the implementation observed that while staff faced a steep learning curve due to the shift in practice, they were enthusiastic about the process, bolstered by comprehensive InitiaLit professional development and **extensive curriculum materials**.

This structured literacy approach fosters consistent instruction across Prep to Year 2, providing a **unified language and teaching pedagogy** for staff. The working party recognised the benefit of supplying a full set of program resources to streamline planning and make the workload manageable, which is vital when introducing a new program across multiple year levels.

All staff, including teachers and education assistants, participated in ongoing education on the Science of Reading and InitiaLit, as well as **Tier 2 intervention programs** MiniLit Sage and MacqLit. These in-house training sessions utilised resources from Five from Five, key literacy reports (e.g. The Rose Report – UK, National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy – Australia; see appendix for full list), *Nomanis* articles, and relevant readings. The sessions also incorporated insights from the text *Effective Instruction in Reading and Spelling*, edited by Kevin Wheldall, Robyn Wheldall and Jennifer Buckingham.

MultiLit

What are the results of implementing a high-quality, low-variation literacy program?

STAFF IMPACT: Early in the implementation of InitiaLit, there was evident buy-in and commitment from the staff. The program established a shared language among teachers and education assistants, enhancing their ability to deliver effective instruction. Selected student groups received Tier 2 intervention through either MiniLit Sage or MacqLit, with education assistants reporting rapid improvements in student outcomes. The combined effect of whole-class instruction using InitiaLit, and targeted small-group interventions ensured that everyone was aligned with common goals and witnessed positive results.

STUDENT DATA: Before the implementation of InitiaLit and MiniLit Sage across Prep to Year 2, a significant percentage of students were not meeting expected literacy levels. However, in the six months following implementation, the school has already observed a marked improvement in reading data, particularly in Prep and Year 1, where the number of students needing intervention has decreased significantly. Additionally, teacher concerns about skill retention over holiday breaks have been alleviated, with feedback and progress monitoring indicating that students are retaining their skills despite extended breaks from school.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOME: The school also decided to implement the new MultiLit program, SpellEx, which is designed to improve spelling skills through a structured, whole-class approach, for Year 3 students (and soon to be Year 4 with the release of SpellEx Part B). Staff not involved in the InitiaLit rollout expressed a desire for similar support structures, highlighting the effectiveness and efficiency of well-supported whole-class instruction. SpellEx's carefully scripted lessons ensure students acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to master English spelling.

Where to from here? Next steps

As part of the shift from predictable text home reading to a focus on decodable texts, the school has purchased over 2000 decodable home readers from various brands, including the InitiaLit Readers, using the Decodable Book Selector by SPELD NSW to ensure alignment with the InitiaLit program scope and sequence. All old whole-language home readers have been removed and are no longer used as they do not align to an evidence-based approach to literacy. To support this transition, the school provided information and training for parents, explaining the benefits of decodable texts and how they align with the new literacy approach commencing with phonics. Decodable readers support students' systematic learning of the alphabetic code by following a set scope and sequence of letter and sound combinations.

Appendix

Resources that have been useful at Grace Lutheran Primary School
Staff at Grace Lutheran Primary School have found the following materials invaluable for deepening their understanding of evidence-based reading science. These resources have fostered a shared perspective within the working party and facilitated a more informed decision-making process when selecting evidence-based literacy programs.

Videos:

What is the Science of Reading? *UFLI*. [Video]. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnkJ6VvDr2M

Five from Five webinars:

Five from Five. (2024). *Seminar 1 – The Science of Reading: Essential knowledge for teachers* [Webinar].
Five from Five. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://fivefromfive.com.au/presentations/professional-learning-seminar-series/seminar-1-the-science-of-reading-essential-knowledge-for-teachers/

Five from Five. (2024). *Seminar 2 – Deep dive into systematic synthetic phonics* [Webinar]. Five from Five. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://fivefromfive.com.au/presentations/professional-learning-seminar-series/seminar-2-deep-dive-into-systematic-synthetic-phonics/

Five from Five. (2024). *Seminar 3 – Reading fluency: Evidence-based instruction, assessment, and intervention* [Webinar]. Five from Five. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://fivefromfive.com.au/presentations/professional-learning-seminar-series/seminar-3-reading-fluency-evidence-based-instruction-assessment-and-intervention/

Five from Five. (2024). *Seminar 5 – Teaching reading comprehension in primary school* [Webinar].
Five from Five. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://fivefromfive.com.au/presentations/professional-learning-seminar-series/seminar-5-teaching-reading-comprehension-in-primary-school/

Reports/journal articles:

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). *Introduction to the science of reading*.
Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/AERO-Introduction-to-the-science-of-reading.pdf

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2017). *Effective reading instruction in the early years of school.* New South Wales Department of Education.
https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/educational-data/cese/2017-effective-reading-instruction-in-the-early-years-of-school.pdf

Cunningham, J. W. (2001). The National Reading Panel report. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *36*(3), 326–335.
https://doi.org/10.1598/rrq.36.3.5

Duke, N. K., & Cartwright, K. B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *56*(S1), S25–S44.
https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.411

National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. (December 2005). *Report and Recommendations Teaching Reading*. Retrieved September 28, 2023, from
https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=tll_misc#:~:text=The%20Committee%20 recommends%20that%20all

Rose, J. (2006). *Independent review of the teaching of early reading*. Department for Education and Skills. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5551/2/report.pdf?ref=quillette.com

The Reading League. (n.d.). *Science of Reading: Defining guide*. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from
https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/defining-guide-ebook/

Nomanis articles:

Buckingham, J. (2021). **On porcupines and predictable text: On porcupines and predictable text: What are predictable texts and why are they a problem?** *Nomanis*, 12, 19–21.

Buckingham, J. (2022). **Benchmarking assessments and levelling should be consigned to history.** *Nomanis*, 14, 32–34.

Dobson, J. (2022). **We interrupt your regularly scheduled program.** *Nomanis*, 13, 10–12.

Dobson, J. (2022). **Just to clarify: Three-cueing causes devastation, heartbreak and illiteracy.** *Nomanis*, 14, 13–14.

Pogorzelski, S., Main, S., & Hunter, J. (2021). **Decodable or predictable: Why reading curriculum developers must seize one.** *Nomanis*, 12, 35–37.

Shanahan, T. (2023). **What is the Science of Reading?** *Nomanis*, 15, 10–11.