A structured literacy approach for majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools: The MultiLit Closing the Gap Initiative

Evidence-based instruction can make a huge difference in the reading outcomes of majority Indigenous schools.

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In August 2021, MultiLit was invited by the Australian Government to provide literacy programs for students in at least 40 majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools as part of the school education measures outlined in the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan. MultiLit entered into an agreement with the Commonwealth in November 2021. Under this agreement, MultiLit provided a structured approach to literacy instruction that included offering its programs and resources, professional development for teachers and learning support staff, the provision of ongoing educational support, and direct Tier 3 tutoring for students via trained MultiLit tutors operating on a tailored tutoring platform (the Initiative).

MultiLit successfully recruited 42 schools into its Initiative from across Australia, including 18 from New South Wales, 10 from South Australia, 9 from Western Australia, 4 from Queensland and 1 from the Northern Territory. Most of these schools are classified as either regional, remote or very remote schools. Currently, all 42 schools remain in the Initiative.

The importance of effective early literacy instruction

The most foundational building block in a child's education is literacy. We know that failure to become a competent reader and writer will impede all other educational pursuits. In turn, this will limit employment prospects, income capacity and potentially many other social outcomes. There are few more important issues in the field of education than ensuring every child becomes literate.

Not only is literacy education important in the early years, but it must also be effective. The Science of Reading and the Science of Instruction have informed what effective teaching should look like. Research shows that the best reading instruction will systematically develop skills in the Five Big Ideas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. This will be applied via a tiered approach that recognises that some children will require more support, either in a small-group setting or on an individual basis – a Response to Intervention framework or Multi-tiered Systems of Support.

Researchers also know that commencing education from a point of social disadvantage impacts literacy and, more broadly, overall education outcomes. Social disadvantage and poverty have a huge, well-known and negative impact on literacy achievement in all English-speaking countries (Kinnane, 2020). For example, in 2009, 13.9% of Australian children in the lowest socioeconomic quintile were assessed as 'developmentally vulnerable' in language and cognitive skills, compared to 4.7% of children in the highest quintile. Effective early reading instruction is critical to help 'close the gap'

between children from high-SES and low-SES backgrounds.

Rural, remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are among the most disadvantaged groups in Australia. Consequently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are under-represented in attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, and this flows on to an under-representation in higher education and employment. While there have been many policy initiatives implemented seeking to address this under-representation, it remains a persistent issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Invariably, pathway and transition programs implemented later in life struggle to reverse generational disadvantage. By focusing on the foundational building block of effective early literacy instruction, we can best place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve their full learning potential and meet the ambitions of Closing the Gap Target 5:

> by 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20–24) attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96%.

This benchmark currently stands at 68%.

Impacts on Initiative delivery
The rollout of the Initiative has been impacted by a range of factors, some of which were expected and some that were much harder to predict. The Initiative was launched in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools were in a distressed state with volatility in teacher staffing, school leadership and student attendance. This meant embedding programs and training staff took much longer than originally anticipated.

The extreme remoteness of some of the schools cannot be overemphasised. This impacts many operational components, such as the delivery of programs and resources to the school, the attraction and retention of staff and the ability to undertake site visits. Fourteen of the schools are classified as very remote and two are situated on small islands – Thursday Island and Bathurst Island.

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The level of entrenched social disadvantage as measured by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is, for most of the Initiative schools, very high (corresponding to a low ICSEA score). The Grattan Institute found that ICSEA is a powerful predictor of student progress, and at a school level, ICSEA explains much of the variation in student progress (Goss & Emslie, 2018). When the Initiative was first planned, one criterion for inclusion was to select schools with an ICSEA score of 900 or lower – that is, one standard deviation below the mean or lower. The Initiative partnership schools have an average ICSEA score of 686, noting that eight of the schools do not have an ICSEA score. Twenty-five of the schools have an ICSEA below 720, representing approximately the bottom 0.5% of socio-educational advantage.

School attendances for the partnership schools are typically very low by Australian standards. School attendance is a critical factor in progressing educational outcomes. Simply put, the less time available for instruction, the lower the opportunity to teach the essential knowledge and skills to allow children to become competent readers. In the partnership schools, the majority of students have attendance rates below 80% – that is, absent more than one day each week. Only nine of the schools have attendance rates higher than 80%, and 10 schools have attendance rates at circa 50% or lower. While attendance is an issue for most low-SES schools, this has also been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with school attendances still below pre-pandemic levels.
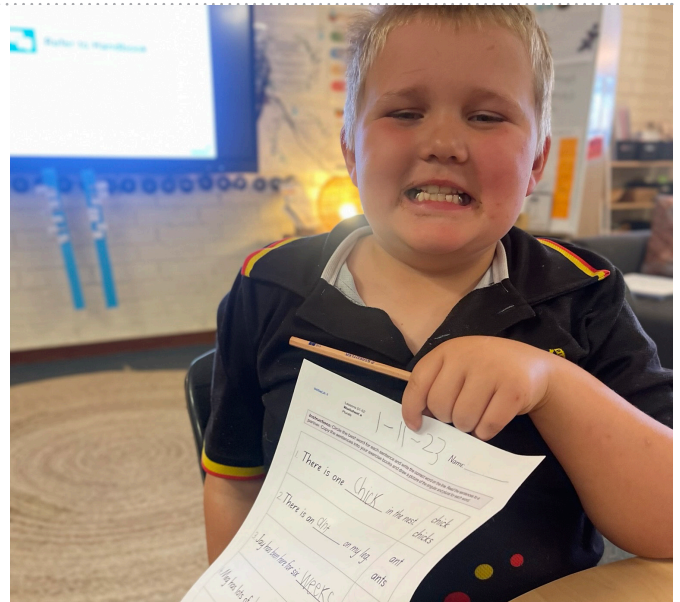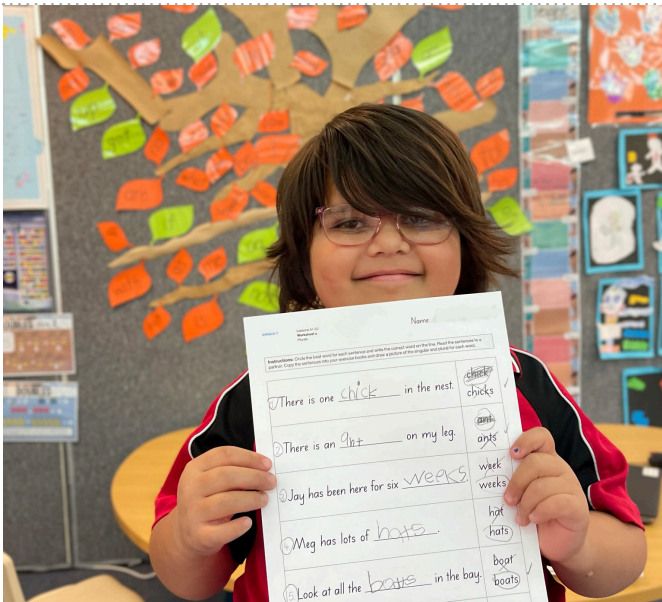
The schools in the Initiative are in communities that can be highly itinerant. This impacts not only school attendance but also the consistency of teaching. In the APY Lands, for example, families often move between communities. A school population can more than double overnight. One benefit of the Initiative has been that there is consistency in literacy instruction across the seven participating APY Land schools. Students can move between schools and receive consistent literacy instruction.

Rather than allow these factors to negatively impact the instructional model, MultiLit has sought to adapt instruction for each school community to be responsive to the individual needs of students. This has seen a greater emphasis on grouping based on current skill level and more flexible approaches to small group work, enabling more positive student engagement and allowing students' literacy skills to progress even if they commence at the beginning of the foundational literacy continuum.

Meeting all students' needs
Utilising a suite of MultiLit programs, the Initiative is an evidence-based, structured and explicit instructional model. To be most effective for as many students as possible, there needed to be adaptations, working with schools in different contexts to make the program effective for each setting while maintaining fidelity. Regular site visits as well as extensive online support allows for a continuity of training and

support for teachers as they face the challenges in the classroom. Given all the factors impacting partnership schools, the greatest challenge is the level of differentiation in each cohort. While student numbers may be low, often less than 10 per class, the equivalent age range for a typical classroom can span many years – three to five, or more.

To enable flexibility, the Initiative emphasised using data to group like students, irrespective of age or year level. For most schools, this was a significant change to historical practice. Teachers were trained to screen students on entry allowing for the placement of students in a program exactly where the student 'needed to be'. Whilst MultiLit programs inherently have a cadence in delivery, this has been adapted to align to the progress of the class. A continual message to teachers has been to avoid rushing or being driven by non-pedagogical timelines such as school calendars.

The use of data has been critical both in establishing the flexibility but also ensuring effective instruction. With the use of data, instruction can be targeted more specifically to the requirements of each student and under a Response to Intervention approach, target additional support where needed. This may also require reteaching and retesting as the data informs practice. It has been important to emphasise to all teachers that they should seek to meet students at their point of need.

A unique feature of the Initiative is access to Tier 3 tutoring via an online tutoring platform for low-progress readers. This provides essential literacy support for those students in the most need. It also helps to reduce the complexity for the teacher, effectively streaming these students away from the main classroom until they have caught up with their peers. In addition, the online tutoring platform has been extended to support whole-class instruction at a very remote school in need. This has provided both necessary classroom teaching but also exemplar explicit instruction for teachers.

The pedagogical approach applied in the Initiative has built a predictable, consistent routine for students. In turn, this has created a safe, trauma-informed learning environment, an essential condition for effective teaching in these communities. This has a positive impact on student engagement over time and ultimately student attendance and behaviour. Schools have reported fewer instances of disruptive behaviour as students experience learning success.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the Initiative is to have all students in participating schools reading at a minimum level that is within the average range for their age and year cohort – effectively, closing the gap on the reading performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students. Although it has taken longer to establish an effective instructional model across the 42 partnership schools, as schools are reporting their data we can now see the success of the Initiative. Important literacy gains are being demonstrated.

The Initiative is subject to an independent evaluation by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) which will report to the Commonwealth in 2026. MultiLit is in the process of collating a vast amount of data from each school in preparation for this evaluation. An extract of the results will be published in a future edition of *Nomanis*.

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Chloe Allen is a proud Awabakal and Dunghutti woman and is the Project Director of the Closing the Gap Initiative at MultiLit. Chloe has previously worked as Head Teacher at Pacific Gulgangali Jarjums and saw the positive impact that direct, explicit instruction had on students requiring extensive support. She currently works to support staff in 42 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander majority schools across Australia. The motivation behind her work is to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have every opportunity of success.

Iain Rothwell has 28 years' experience in the education sector with a particular focus on the commercial interface. Between November 2009 and July 2020, he held a range of executive roles with Navitas Ltd, including Chief Commercial Officer. He has held executive roles with two public universities as CFO and Director Business Development with the University of Western Sydney and Managing Director of the commercial arm (Access MQ Ltd) and Assistant Vice-Chancellor with Macquarie University. His relationship with MultiLit began in 2002 being responsible for its operations as a university commercial project and in 2006 with his fellow founders, Robyn and Kevin Wheldall, facilitated the establishment of MultiLit as a spin-off company of Macquarie University. From January 2021 Iain became more active in leading MultiLit as its Managing Director.