

Finding the fundamentals of reading



Debate over how to teach children to read has raged over the past 40 years. But what is the best practice for those children who are struggling with reading and how should we intervene?

Literacy skills – our ability to read, spell and write – are fundamental not only for educational achievement, but also for a range of future life skills. In the earlier years of education, if children experience difficulties with reading, they are also likely to experience poor outcomes in a wide range of areas, such as loss of confidence, lower school engagement and higher risk of anxiety symptoms. These are all areas which can further affect student’s learning.

The Melbourne Graduate School of Education and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute recently independently *evaluated* a privately owned Australian reading intervention program called *MiniLit*, which involves an intensive phonics-based targeted reading intervention to improve the ability of students to learn and retain the foundational skills required for reading.

For researchers it was an opportunity for the first time to robustly assess the effectiveness of an intensive focused, phonics-based, approach across a large number of schools. *Evidence for Learning*, which is funded by the not-for-profit group *Social Ventures Australia*, is an independent organisation that aims to improve education by looking at the evidence of what works and why. The organisation had identified MiniLit as a program worth evaluating and put out a competitive tender for the research work that our team was awarded. Evidence for Learning has no affiliation with MiniLit. [Editor’s note: MiniLit is published by MultiLit Pty Ltd, which is also the publisher of *Nomanis*.]

The MiniLit program is currently available in every state and territory in Australia and focuses on students struggling with reading; that is, the bottom 25 per cent of readers who’ve completed one year of formal reading instruction in school. But these students are also disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The program involves 80 structured lessons that take approximately two to three school terms to complete, with four to five lessons of up to one hour each week. For this study, schools provided the intervention across two school terms. Despite the fact that MiniLit is widely available, up until now, there hadn’t been any independent evaluations of this program.

The debate over the importance of early intervention really focuses on what is actually best practice when it comes to teaching children how to read and spell, and how we can best intervene to help those students struggling to learn these skills. This debate is often referred to as *the Reading Wars*.

At its simplest, this debate pits advocates of phonics, a method of teaching people to read by correlating sounds with symbols in an alphabetic writing system, against those who support a Whole Language approach, which emphasises the discovery of meaning through experience of a literacy-rich environment.



Although the empirical evidence supports the importance of incorporating *systematic and synthetic* phonics teaching for all children who are learning to read, and critically, a more intensively delivered program for those students who fail to make a strong start in reading, there are surprisingly few robust trials examining these interventions in a large number of schools.

Our *study* aimed to find out whether MiniLit does improve reading outcomes for Grade 1 students. We worked in nine primary schools in New South Wales with 232 Grade 1 students who were identified as requiring additional support for their reading. The students were split into two groups; one group participated in the intensive MiniLit program, while the other group continued to receive whole class approaches and/or support programs for struggling readers.

Through this method, we were able to examine whether an intensive focused program like this has benefits over the less intensive current approaches used by schools. But establishing whether programs like this are effective is not easy. It requires expert evaluators with a range of skills to produce high-quality research, while working in partnership with the program developer, the wider education system and its schools.

At the conclusion of our study, the students in the MiniLit group had better foundational skills required for reading compared to their peers who received the usual classroom instruction for reading.

We saw these differences in:

- **phonemic awareness:** identifying and manipulating individual sounds in words

- **letter-sound knowledge:** how letters and their combinations map to sounds
- **decoding:** using sound-letter relationships to sound out words

For students who participated in MiniLit for at least four days per week, the benefits of the program's intervention continued up to six months later when the students started Grade 2. This tells us that MiniLit can help improve the foundational skills students need to build on their literacy skills as they move up through the school system.

While we did not see better outcomes on reading whole passages of text (this covers accuracy, reading rate and comprehension), this finding should be treated with caution as reading can be *difficult to measure in younger students* who are struggling with the basic reading skills.

It may be that these students require more time to *consolidate their foundational skills* – reading, spelling and writing – before they can apply more advanced skills, like the ability to clearly comprehend and answer questions about a detailed passage of text they have just read. The significant advantage of the MiniLit program is that it builds the foundational skills that are needed for literacy, which strongly suggests that students will make the natural transition into reading comprehension.

Crucially, there now needs to be further research to determine how successful the intervention is in terms of reading comprehension. This would include a longer follow-up period to determine whether these students build upon the skills they develop as a result of the MiniLit program and whether

these skills lead to better student literacy in the long-term.

Understanding how struggling students can learn to read confidently sets them up for a stronger, brighter future.

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