

# Adult Reading Teachers' Beliefs about How Less-Skilled Adult Readers can be Taught to Read

JANET MCHARDY and ELAINE CHAPMAN

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## Abstract

Despite large-scale interventions, significant numbers of adults worldwide continue to have problems with basic literacy, in particular in the area of reading. To be effective, adult reading teachers need expert knowledge at practitioner level. However, practices in adult reading education vary widely, often reflecting the individual beliefs of each teacher about how an adult can learn to read. In this study, phenomenographic analysis was used to identify categories of approaches to teaching adult reading, used by a group of 60 teachers in Western Australia and New Zealand. Four approaches were identified: reassurance, task-based, theory-based and responsive. It is argued that for teachers to become effective and consistent in responding to learner needs, they must understand their own beliefs and the consequences of these. The identification of different approaches in adult reading education is an important step in this process.

## Introduction

Full participation in 21st century society and the labour market requires the capacity to accumulate knowledge and to develop and maintain a broad range of skills (Australian Industry Group 2013, Satherley and Lawes 2007). Literacy skills are fundamental in this process. There are numerous social and economic benefits, both for individuals and communities, associated with possessing strong literacy skills (e.g. National Research Council 2012, Perkins 2009, Tertiary Education Commission 2010). Low adult literacy levels have been linked to unemployment, social isolation, poverty and broader health issues (Chesters, Ryan and Sinning 2013, Miller, McCardle and Hernandez 2010, Perkins 2009).

Reading is a key literacy component. Difficulties in reading persist through the lifespan, contributing to ongoing low literacy levels (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, National Research Council 2012). The importance of reading has prompted various efforts to address low reading skills across many countries, and various large-scale, organised, and funded national projects have been established (e.g. Australian Industry Group 2013, McShane 2005, National Research Council 2012). Despite considerable investments in adult reading programs reports of insufficient impact and progress appear consistently within the literature (Australian Industry Group 2013, Palameta, Myers and Conte 2013).

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Explanations for the limited impact of these adult reading programs are multi-layered and complex. Reading is an intricate cognitive skill (Binder and Borecki 2008). Large-scale programs rely heavily on teachers who often receive minimal training to enable them to respond to the assortment of reading difficulties which may present (Sabatini, Sawaki, Shore and Scarborough 2010). While no theory or model of cognitive processing is complex enough to account for all that is occurring when someone reads, there is agreement that skilled reading involves competent co-ordination of the reading components of decoding, word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, fluency and reading comprehension (National Research Council 2012, Sabatini et al. 2010).

Given the complexity of the reading process, to be effective, adult reading teachers must be informed about the reading process and be able to respond to specific reading-skill needs in their teaching (Condelli, Kirshstein, Silver-Pacuilla, Reder and Spruck Wrigley 2010, National Research Council 2012). Despite this, with generic, minimal training often provided, adult reading teachers' practices vary substantially (Kendall and McGrath 2014), commonly reflecting their own idiosyncratic beliefs about how adults learn to read (Beder, Lipnevich and Robinson-Geller 2007, Belzer 2006, Greenberg et al. 2011, Van Kan, Ponte and Verloop 2013). In the teaching context, and for the purposes of this paper, belief is taken to be 'an attitude consistently applied to an activity' (Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding and Cuthbert 1988:54). Teacher beliefs are generally seen as precursors to teacher action (Fives and Buehl 2012) and teachers teach, receive, and respond to new ideas about teaching, in ways that relate to their existing beliefs and practices (Abernathy-Dyer, Ortlieb and Cheek 2013, Bandura 1995, Gove 1983, Kuzborska 2011, Pajares 1992).

The way something is taught and the beliefs behind why it is taught in that way are fundamental to understanding the impact of the teaching on learners (Benseman 2013, Bliuc, Casey, Bachfischer, Goodyear and Ellis 2012). Teachers, unlike other professional groups, have been immersed in the education profession for most of their lives (not just during their time as teachers) and draw on this experience to inform their own opinions and beliefs; they often teach the way they were taught (Barnyak and Paquette 2010). However, it is likely that teachers of less-skilled readers have had, in the main, learning journeys very different from the learners that they teach. Further, teachers respond to new ideas and attempts to change teaching programs, based on their beliefs about how something should be taught (Abernathy-Dyer et al. 2013). Multiple studies, largely with teachers at school level, have demonstrated the crucial role beliefs and values of individual teachers play in determining what happens in the program (Fives and Buehl 2012).

In a recent example of such a study, questionnaires were used to explore literacy-related beliefs of 581 kindergarten and school teachers in the USA (Bingham and Hall-Kenyon 2013). Among the beliefs explored were those about the relative importance of key skill components for literacy learning and the instructional strategies necessary to be effective in developing them. The self-reported practices of teachers appeared to endorse an approach to instruction consistent with their belief in a component-based understanding of literacy. The beliefs of these teachers about literacy skills determined

what happened in their programs. Similarly, Gaitas and Martins (2015) explored the beliefs of 255 Portuguese primary school teachers on preferred teaching activities in relation to writing instruction and identified a significant association between beliefs and teaching activities.

Longitudinal studies have also confirmed the role of beliefs in teacher practice. The impact of previously held beliefs was found to be enduring when four school teachers were observed over a two-year period implementing a new and specific method of teaching reading (Stephens et al. 2000). Despite the teachers receiving special training, new practice was not comprehensively sustained, with one teacher reverting to practice based on prior-held beliefs at the end of the training period.

Similar reliance on earlier beliefs has been observed in studies of preservice teachers. In a two year study on development of professional belief systems about reading instruction the teachers appeared to create fictive images of themselves as teachers consistent with their prior knowledge of teachers and reading and the experiences they had on teaching practicum (Stoube 2009). These factors seemed more important in forming these teachers' notions about teaching reading, than formal reading courses undertaken as part of teacher training. In a similar fashion, research with preservice teachers at two American universities found that previous, personal experience and beliefs continued to influence content and instructional choices of these participants (Barnyak and Paquette 2010).

Comparatively few studies exist on beliefs of adult literacy teachers and the role beliefs of teachers play in determining what happens in adult programs. In the few studies which exist, beliefs tend to be implicit in the issues being studied rather than the focus. For example, Beder et al. (2007), using an on-line survey, examined instructional approaches used by 598 teachers of adult literacy in the USA. Beliefs about appropriate ways to teach influenced the organisational culture of the workplace and were observable in instructional practices used by teachers. Teachers organised their practice and taught in ways consistent with their beliefs.

Fewer studies still have focused on beliefs about teaching adult reading. In a recent British study involving eight teachers of adult reading, Kendall and McGrath (2014) used semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' conceptions, including teachers' ideas about reading and teaching reading. From a critical discourse analysis, the researchers suggested the teachers had fixed views of reading linked back to their own literacy education with notions of what to teach only partially referenced to curriculum. Beliefs influenced practice in spite of training. Little reflection appeared to occur on the teaching of reading. One participant when asked 'what we do when we read' replied 'that is a very strange question'. Despite the fact that adult literacy learners have frequently had limited success in 'school-learning', teachers in this study appeared to conform to limited notions of how reading is learned in schools (Kendall and McGrath 2014:69).

Practice in adult reading programs has insufficient impact. Central to our understanding of the impact of teaching, is understanding about how and why teachers teach the way they do (Benseman 2013). Given the link between practice and beliefs, and the lack of

existing research, more needs to be known about beliefs of the teachers who teach adult reading. A useful starting point in understanding the limited impact of existing adult reading programs is to unpack the approaches teachers currently use and the beliefs that underlie them. The aim of this study is to do this. Understanding personal beliefs and the consequences for teaching practice must become a necessary addition in training and professional development in the adult literacy sector.

## **Method**

### **Design**

Phenomenography was used as an analytic framework for this study. It is a relatively new approach to educational research with the first descriptions of the approach appearing in journals in the early 1980s (Akerlind 2012). In phenomenography, description and understanding is a focus of the research rather than generation of theory (Ireland, Tambyah, Neofa and Harding 2009). The object of phenomenographic research is variation in human meaning, understanding and conceptions, and the research is designed to identify the qualitatively different ways in which people perceive and understand a phenomenon. To do this, phenomenography seeks to distinguish the variations in the ways humans experience reality and build understanding from the participant's perspective. It is about different ways of understanding. A 'second order perspective' is a key difference in the phenomenographic approach. 'First order' research involves a researcher making statements about phenomena while 'second order' involves the researcher making statements about other people's experiences of the world, attempting to arrive at a 'valid and rich understanding of the meaning the phenomenon holds' for the respondents (Ireland et al. 2009:12). That is, it enables an interpretation of the phenomenon (in this case, adult reading) from the participants' perspectives (adult reading teachers), instead of from the researcher's position (Ireland et al. 2009). There is a focus in this approach on capturing diversity in conceptions across a collective of individuals, rather than a focus on any individual experiences. In other words, the aim is to delve into the range of meanings present within a group, as a group (Akerlind 2012).

### **Survey**

A survey was delivered online, with a focus on instructional approaches and practices adopted for a specific learner. The development of the survey consisted of several steps. First, a scenario of a typical less-skilled reader was created based on observations and results from actual less-skilled readers (see Figure 1). Phenomenography seeks to reveal the variations in which a phenomenon is experienced. Getting all participants to focus on a specific learner with specific reading difficulties ensured clear boundaries for the phenomenon being experienced (the specific reading skills of the specific learner). Second, questions were developed related to instructional practices which might be employed in a reading program with the learner depicted within the survey. Third, the survey went through reviews (both from people experienced in developing surveys, and

from those with expertise in adult literacy), and minor changes were made to the wording in response to this feedback.

*You are to start working with John, who has joined a year-long literacy programme with a learning goal of wanting to "be a better reader and to be able to read about his hobby which is sport, especially basketball and cricket". John is 45 years old and speaks English as his only language.*

*An initial interview has been conducted with John by the programme coordinator and you are given the following information:*

*Regular word reading 29/40*

*Irregular word reading 22/40*

*Non-word reading 2/40*

*Phoneme deletion task 5/18*

*In addition, John has read a piece he chose from the sports section of the newspaper about basketball: THE NEWSPAPER STATES: If the Breakers could play Cairns at home every week their long shot at the playoffs would become a sure thing. The defending champions started their unlikely quest for a finals berth in dominant fashion tonight, taming the Taipans 96-78 at Vector Arena.*

*JOHN READ (ERRORS SHOWN IN CAPITALS): If the Breakers could play Cairns at home every week their long SHOOT at the playoffs would become a sure thing. The DEFEATED CHAMPS started their UNLIKE QUESTION for a finals BID in "I DON'T KNOW THAT WORD" FAST tonight, TELLING the Taipans 96-78 at Vector Arena.*

*When questioned, John said that it means that the Breakers are doing well and he knows they beat the Taipans because he saw it on T.V.*

***Given the information you already have, what further information might you seek from John? What would you do with John in the next session and why?***

Figure 1. Details of the scenario and sample of learner information presented in the survey

The survey included the following:

- *Basic demographics* were gathered including age group, gender, years of experience, and employment status.
- *Teacher beliefs* about teaching reading were explored through open-ended questions about approaches to reading instruction (e.g. 'given this information... what would you do with John in the next session and why?'). Respondents were asked to consider the specific learner profiled in the survey. Using supplied diagnostic assessment information about the specified learner, respondents were asked to report on the approach they would use with this learner for specific sessions.
- *Beliefs about the reading process* were further explored through a rating exercise, in which teachers' beliefs on the relative importance of teaching different reading components were gathered. Teachers indicated the priority they assigned in their own instructional approaches to each of eight factors: building rapport, confidence, specific phonological skills,

decoding, fluency and comprehension (one being the highest priority; eight being the lowest).

### **Participants**

Respondents who teach less-skilled adult readers were recruited through the primary author's networks in Western Australia and New Zealand. To capture a variety of beliefs, the survey was sent to adult reading teachers with varying years of experience, employment status, and teaching contexts ranging from community volunteers to formal tertiary settings. In some cases, the survey was sent directly to the respondents by the primary author, and in other cases, forwarded to the respondents by an adult literacy organisation or tertiary institution. Exact numbers of those who received the request to participate are therefore unavailable but the organisations each have networks numbering hundreds of literacy teachers.

Of the 96 prospective participants who entered and viewed the survey, 60 gave consent and provided responses to all questions. Forty-seven of the 60 participants were female and 13 were male. Three participants were aged 20-29 years, six were 30-39 years, ten were 40-49 years, 14 were 50-59 years, and 27 were aged over 60 years. Thirty-three participants were volunteers, six were casual, 11 worked part-time and ten were full-time employees. Six of the 60 participants had less than one year of experience, 13 had one-two years, another 13 had two-five years, 15 had five-ten years, and 12 participants had over ten years' experience. One participant did not list their years of experience.

### **Data collection**

A request explaining the topic was sent via email to participants and included a link to the survey through the online survey tool. The survey was made available for six months. The survey began with a contextualising statement designed to explain the study, and to stress that there are no wrong responses: 'There is no single correct answer to the questions below. I am interested in getting alternative view points and would like you to answer as fully and honestly as you can'. The introductory statement also addressed ethical issues and obtained informed consent.

### **Analysis**

Analysis of the survey responses was done as recommended in phenomenographic methodology using several iterations (e.g. Parisio 2011). First, all survey responses were read line by line, several times to gain familiarity with the content, to gather 'pools of meaning' (Parisio 2011), and to identify utterances with insights into the phenomenon being investigated. The aim was to go beyond the words and rankings in survey responses to search for meaning and variation in the teachers' beliefs in regard to approaches each teacher might use with a profiled learner, to teach reading skills. One question framed this step in the analysis: What did respondents believe was the most suitable approach to build the skills of the learner depicted in the survey? Each reading and rereading of the responses began with silent questions to provide a focus: 'what does this teacher believe should occur for this learner to learn to read?' and 'how does

this teacher believe this learner can be taught to read?' This focus on the *what* and *how* aspects of reading and reading instruction provided an approach to managing the large amount of data (Bliuc et al. 2012).

Second, as recommended by Akerlind (2012) both the similarities and differences of ideas and meanings within these 'pools' were brought together into groups of conceptions. These conceptions were considered within the context of the survey scenario. Some conceptions were merged as they described similar experiences. Third, categories were constructed. Categories are a concrete way of describing the abstract experience and give a structured description of the different ways approaches to teaching can be understood. In this case a set of categories which represented the qualitatively different ways of conceiving the phenomenon of adult reading teaching were constructed from the conceptions (Ireland et al. 2009). Category construction was done by arranging, rearranging and narrowing, and testing against the original data until the 'system of meanings was stabilised' (Parisio 2011:3). The logical relationships between the categories was considered allowing arrangement in hierarchical order. Each category in the hierarchy is distinct, and includes but extends the previous category in the hierarchy.

## **Results and discussion**

Four different categories of approach exemplifying the beliefs of these adult reading teachers about how a less-skilled adult reader can be taught to read were revealed: the reassurance approach, the task-based approach, the theory-based approach and the responsive approach (see Figure 2). The categories are on a continuum of increasing complexity from reassurance through to responsive. Each category includes elements of the previous, less complex category, but provides an increasingly more detailed description of how these teachers believe they can teach reading to a less-skilled adult reader.

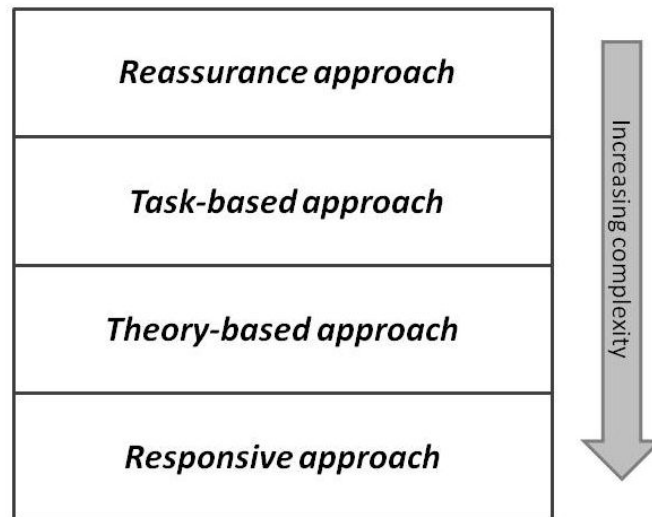


Figure 2. Four categories of description

### **The reassurance approach**

Teachers adopting the reassurance approach believed the adult reader learns if a suitable environment is provided, with many opportunities to read but with limited focus put on what specific reading skills are required and taught. A positive relationship between teacher and learner was a key focus, and content learner-determined, with the teacher acting as a support. Encouragement of reading efforts builds confidence, and reading skill develops over time. The learner learns by being given both opportunities and support to read. Responses typifying this approach included:

*Allow oneself to get close, one needs to understand or have some feeling as to why he is in this situation. Sit down with him when he arrives and have a cuppa with a snack to eat. Talk about what we could be doing today from a choice of options to meet with curriculum requirements.*

*My approach is to make the student as comfortable as possible. Ensure they realise that they already have skills and knowledge that can be utilised to strengthen their reading abilities.*

### **The task-based approach**

In this approach there was a focus on teacher-directed activities and tasks to instruct the learner who then acquires reading skills and is able to apply them. If knowledge is provided then reading skills will develop. The teacher with a 'task' focus may have only partial knowledge of the reading process, depend on their own ideas about what the learner requires, and may rely on a limited selection of tasks. The task-based approach



was typified by comments such as this, in reply to the question: *What would you do with John in the next session and why?*

I'd bring in a short text on a topic of his interest (eg basketball.) I'd discuss the topic with him first, then get him to silently read the text and underline any words he isn't sure of. We'd then discuss these words, break them into syllables, make sure he can hear and repeat each syllable as we say the words. I'd write them out, /sound them out with him etc. Then I'd get him to read the text with support. Afterwards I'd give several activities using those words, eg cloze of the text, letter cloze of the words, missing out a particular syllable, getting him to write in the missing syllable, look at word families of any of the difficult words.

### **The theory-based approach**

The theory-based approach to the reading session was informed by, and may be restricted by, a particular understanding of how reading skills develop. The approach may reflect an adherence to an understanding of reading as a set of skills that must be mastered (bottom-up models e.g. Gough and Tunmer 1986), and planning and teaching conducted accordingly. Alternatively, reading may be viewed as a practice where meaning and context are the focus for teaching sessions, and skills instruction may be seen as secondary or unnecessary (top-down models e.g. Goodman 1976). The approach chosen draws on aspects of theoretical perspectives and content is taught accordingly. Theory-based approach was evident in references such as: '*go back to basics*', '*explicitly teach*'. Specific approaches, such as phonics or whole language, which reflect a particular theoretical perspective were discussed.

*I'd get John to set his priority list and work with that but I'd stress phonic recognition, essential 'look and say' words he needs for his work/interests so that he sees the benefit of improving his reading.*

*...maybe get him to read out the sentence again and see which bits make sense with the words he has put in, and if they don't, which words he thinks might go there. Reiterate that reading is based a lot on expectation of which words will appear.*

*...I would ask him to read it and then tell me what he thought of what the journalist had written, if he agreed, and what he thought about the match as a whole, and how the current team performed as a whole. I would be looking for opportunities to make him aware of how much he knows about the subject matter, how that contributes to his ability to read about it, and that that knowledge will support his reading skills development.*

### **The responsive approach**

This was the most complex and comprehensive category to emerge, and included elements of all other categories. Practitioners demonstrating this approach used reassurance, were task-based, were informed about theories, and able to be flexible and respond to each specific learner profile (*'Informed by the results begin to...'*). Practice in this category was typified by discussion of *'many approaches... [that] may need to be adapted...to suit the needs of the student'* and of working *'with the most effective options for [the learner's] particular area of need'*. In the responsive approach there are two-way interactions with the learners demonstrated by terms such as *'discuss'*, *'explain'*, and *'look for opportunities'*.

*I might get him to write a little report on a game if he is comfortable enough to do that, or do some activities, play some games to find out what word attack skills he has. This may help add to the picture of his basic word knowledge, his phonetic knowledge and ability to combine sounds. I would probably give him a piece of "levelled" reading to get a more specific picture about strategies he is using to read. Over the next couple of sessions I would be assessing specific phonic knowledge and ability to use, e.g what blends does he know...what high frequency words can he read and write automatically*

Each category of description represents one way of experiencing the phenomenon and within each category are aspects of the phenomenon common to all, yet which vary in some way across each category. The distinction between categories was determined from themes and variations in the ways of experiencing, which emerged from the data. This determination was done in a manner consistent with the phenomenographic methodology described in Beutel (2010). This determination aimed at identifying the overarching themes (unifying ideas) with the distinct differences (the variations) in approaches (the categories) to teaching adult reading.

### **Themes**


Two key themes of philosophy (individual ideas: *'I think that ...'*) and knowledge (understanding of information: *'I would investigate ...'*) previously identified in other studies of adult literacy teachers (e.g. Belzer 2007) unify the variations between the four distinct categories described above. These categories represent adult reading teachers' approaches based on beliefs about how an adult can learn to read. The categories of reassurance, task-based, theory-based and responsive are characterised to varying degrees by these two themes: (i) philosophy about reading and how we learn to read, and (ii) knowledge of the components of reading and how they can be taught and learned. The adult reading teachers' stance and competence, and the interaction of these, inform qualitatively different approaches to teaching adult readers. These variations are discussed below.

### **Variation between Categories**

The four categories of description were distinguished from each other through variations that emerged from the data. Two distinct themes underpin the four variations. The themes and variations are summarized in Table 1.

The philosophy theme (individual ideas) encompasses the two variations of 'understanding of the role of the adult literacy teacher', and of 'teacher perceptions about the needs of the less-skilled adult reader'. The later includes teachers' attention to assessment data when planning and teaching. The knowledge theme (understanding of information) contains the variations of 'teacher knowledge of the components of reading', and 'teacher knowledge and use of instructional best-practices'. The four variations are discussed below.

**Table 1.** Distinguishing themes and variations underpinning the categories of description of approaches of adult reading teachers when teaching adult reading.

		Categories of description (increasing complexity) 			
Theme	Variations between categories	1.	2. Task-based approach	3. Theory-based approach	4. Responsive approach
Philosophy	Understanding of the role of the adult reading teacher	Reassurance Approach guide & support, solve problems	direct & instruct, provide tasks	integrate teaching & learning informed by specific theoretical perspective	integrate teaching & learning informed by range of approaches, flexible, holistic
Philosophy	Perspectives about the reading needs of the learner	needs confidence & encouragement, let learner decide. Assessment data not necessary to understanding needs	needs directing, one-way teaching. Attention to assessment data partial, not a key focus, depend on own ideas	needs directing, informed by specific theoretical perspective, attentive to goals. Selective attention to assessment data	two-way relationship, specific to the individual, informed by context & goals & needs. Assessment data strongly informs practice, and is an ongoing process
Knowledge	Knowledge of the components of reading	learn to read by reading	Partial, selective	Informed, with particular emphasis	Knowledgeable and targeted to need
Knowledge	Knowledge and use of instructional best-practices	depend on own ideas	Partial, depend on own ideas, rely on limited selection	Informed, with particular emphasis	targeted and varied with focus on learner need

Adapted from Beutel (2010)

***Understanding the role of the adult reading teacher:*** Noticeably different understandings of the role of the adult reading teacher emerged. This is to be expected as perception of the role is linked to individual philosophy about adult literacy in general, and explanations of what comprises adult literacy are contentious and confused (Perkins 2009). In addition, Kendall and McGrath (2014) found adult literacy teachers framing of their work was intertwined with their own learning experiences rather than any training about literacy.

In this study, building rapport with the learner and developing supportive relationships was important to the role across all hierarchical categories exemplified in comments such as *'build a relationship so he feels comfortable'*. There was a pattern of strong empathy for less-skilled readers. The desire to help learners build reading skills emerged as intrinsic to the role: *'Develop a safe non-threatening environment and assist the adult to learn'*. This emphasis on relationships, encouragement, and praise is reported elsewhere (Burton, Davey, Lewis, Ritchie and Brooks 2008, McShane, 2005). Adult reading teachers bring high levels of commitment, interest and passion to their roles (Belzer 2006, 2007).

However, the role of the adult reading teacher requires much more than building rapport and feelings of security. The theory-based approach is distinguished from the two previous categories of reassurance and task-based by a shift to a belief that the adult reading teacher is responsible for teaching and learning, (*'explicitly teach'*), not just for creating the environment in which this can happen. Understanding of the role is extended in the responsive approach with acknowledgement of the need to remain flexible to be able to respond to individual needs: *'It would depend on ... [progress]... whether we address these as we go', 'always modifying my ideas'*.

***Teacher perceptions about the needs of the less-skilled adult reader:*** Previous research found adult literacy teachers' concepts about their teaching are informed by their own education and experiences rather than by the realities of individual learners' contexts or practices. In addition, there is evidence of fixed understandings of what constitutes literacy needs (Kendall and McGrath 2014). This approach emerged in this study with assumptions made about learners:

*I would tell John the word. This is because he will become stressed/frustrated/discouraged if forced to continue.*

*Get to know a little more about John. Find out more about how his illiteracy is affecting his life.*

In this current study variations identified in teacher perceptions suggested some teachers tended to focus their understanding of a learner's needs around meeting practical and emotional needs (*'get him to relax and chat', '...make him comfortable'*), and also around what the teacher thought should happen. This is demonstrated in response to the question:

*(The fictional learner, John, in the survey has a stated learning goal of wanting to "be a better reader and to be able to read about his hobby which is sport, especially basketball and*

cricket"). *If you only have 6 hour-long sessions to work with John what would be the focus of the sessions (list up to 5 priorities, in order of importance)?*

*1. literacy required to find work. 2. literacy for enjoyment. 3. informal learning through games and applications - both hands on and technology. 4. writing/saying the word - similar to that of a spelling test but in a real life context; written in a sentence; saying it in a sentence (conversational). 5. text exploration - identify texts that he is interested in that have unfamiliar words that he can explore and put into a real life context*

The reassurance and task-based approaches pay scant attention to diagnostic assessment results ('...follow what the student perceives to be the most useful thing to learn'). Indeed, limited understanding of how to interpret and use assessment results was directly discussed:

*I would seek information first from my program coordinator asking for clarification on what the initial interview results mean, as I am not myself familiar with the grading system*

Confusion about how to analyse and use diagnostic assessment results was evident in responses. Despite the information already been supplied in the survey teachers indicated they would:

*Begin a basic phonics assessment to see if basic knowledge is there to use "sounding out" strategy.*

*...test his letter names and sounds level....follow with double letter recognition progressing as quickly and as far as is necessary to get a clearer picture of his ability...ie is it lack of knowledge or confidence or laziness or a combination of some or all of the above.*

It is only in the theory-based approach that the specific reading needs were linked to the goals of the learner ... 'I'd get [the learner] to set his priority list and work with that but I'd also introduce...' The responsive approach meets the specific targeted needs and wants of the learner choosing a program that is informed from the assessment data: 'Informed by the phonemic awareness results begin ...'

**Knowledge of the components of reading:** Earlier studies of adult reading teachers found most participants had no working definition of reading (Kendall and McGrath 2014), and a lack of awareness of what they actually knew about the components of reading and the reading process, and what they thought they knew (Bell, Ziegler and McCallum 2004). Adult reading teachers in the present study were influenced by their knowledge about teaching reading. This individual knowledge contributed to individual teachers' beliefs about how a less-skilled adult reader can be taught to build reading skill.

The reading processes of less-skilled adult readers involve a range of separate reading components (Mellard, Fall and Woods 2010) which can be identified by assessment and be targeted in instruction (National Research Council 2012). This knowledge was evident in the theory-based category, albeit, with a particular focus. For example: *'Start with his ability to decode...'* reflecting attention to word-level components of reading or a skills based approach (bottom-up models), as opposed to *'First, encourage him to ... get a general idea of what was written'* reflecting a meaning based approach (top-down models). Knowledge of the reading process was limited in the two previous categories of task-based and reassurance, where there is an ad hoc, untargeted approach to reading components (*'Choose some big words ... break them up, make little words from big words, start lists of ...'*). Selected components of reading are drawn on in the first three categories, but the responsive approach reflects knowledge about the reading process and employs a balanced program taking account of all key components (*'needs to stop using context to decode words (to check comprehension yes)...so I would have him use letter-sound knowledge to decode the word'*). The responsive approach is informed, flexible and focused on learner needs (*'Informed by ... begin to develop these skills. But first of course explain ... and get agreement on the plan'*).

**Knowledge and use of instructional best practices:** The range of approaches evident in this study supports existing evidence that teachers in the adult literacy sector view best-practice in different ways (Greenberg et al. 2011, McShane 2005, National Research Council 2012). There was no shared, clear vision of what is understood by good teaching. The reassurance approach has a focus on practical and emotional concerns that although important are only part of the learning process for the less-skilled adult reader. The task-based approach relies largely on teachers' own ideas of what works' (*'I have always found...'*). This experience factor is valid but must be balanced with evidence-based practice (Biesta 2010). As the categories become more complex so do instructional practices and the range of practices utilised. Previous work (Belzer 2006) has found that reading teachers may be knowledgeable about a range of strategies to use to build skill but rely on only a limited number of these in their teaching. A characteristic of the responsive approach is that teachers do draw on their knowledge and select appropriate strategies responding to specific learner need. The responsive approach reflects teacher confidence in analysing assessment results, drawing on knowledge of reading and effective adult instruction, and planning and teaching sessions accordingly.

## Conclusion

Adult reading programs to date have had limited impact in building reading skill (Australian Industry Group 2013, Palameta et al. 2013). Central to understanding the impact of programs is knowing how and why teachers teach the way they do (Benseman 2013). It is established that beliefs about what is being taught and how to teach it affect the learning experience (Bliuc et al. 2012) but greater awareness of the beliefs which inform teachers and teaching is required (Bingham and Hall-Kenyon 2013). A useful first step in the process of understanding the impact of programs is to know about the

beliefs of those teaching the programs. This study examined the beliefs of a group of adult reading teachers on how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read. Reading and how it can be taught, can be viewed through different lenses and there is no one way to teach it (Greenberg et al. 2011, Tracey and Morrow 2012) but utterances of adult reading teachers in this study clearly revealed that, at times, teacher practice was largely informed by adherence to an approach or perceived learner need, regardless of the learner who presents, or their goals or diagnostic assessment results. The goals and existing skills of the fictional learner 'John' in the survey did not always inform the teaching described. Practices of some adult teachers in this group relied on existing personal beliefs about how an adult can learn to read rather than on informed knowledge about the reading process and effective practice.

Four hierarchical categories were revealed from utterances of the adult reading teachers to give a structured description of different ways the approaches to teaching can be understood. The categories of approaches to teaching adult reading which emerged were: the reassurance approach, the task-based, the theory-based, and the responsive approach. These categories may serve at least three key functions in efforts to enhance the efficacy of adult reading teachers. First, the descriptions provide a common language for extending discussions about teaching adult reading towards achieving shared understanding of what adult reading is, and how to achieve quality teaching and learning. A common language and shared understanding is important; what has been discussed and shared is more likely to be applied. Second, the existence of distinct approaches serves to challenge adult reading teachers' current notions about how they teach and why they teach in this way. Among other things, reflection on existing beliefs and practices serves to make teachers more receptive to new practices (Kuzborska 2011). Self-awareness, being able to reflect on their own beliefs, enables teachers to focus on key aspects of their teaching and teachers are more likely to implement new, more complex approaches. Third, the persistence of approaches, despite training, has clear implications for teacher training and on-going professional development. Teachers must be led to challenge their initial beliefs and explore alternative views on teaching and learning.

For this challenge to explore alternative views to be effective and produce results, and for a teacher to be able to make informed judgements about what and how to teach, personal understanding about individual beliefs and practices must be underpinned by knowledge of recommended practices and why they are effective (Fives and Buehl 2012). Analysis of the categories and the variations which distinguish them, described in this study, suggests that adult reading teachers who employ a responsive approach are more likely to make the most of knowledge and use approaches conducive to effective and meaningful reading skill development, providing learners with experiences of reading enabling them to cope better with the complexity of reading.

A good starting point in building more self-aware and responsive adult-reading teachers is for teachers to be encouraged, and led, to take an active role in increasing the connection between their beliefs and practices. Understanding their own beliefs and the consequences of these is a key step in the process of teachers becoming consistent in



adopting a responsive approach in their practice. The identification, in this study, of adult reading teachers' beliefs about how learners can be taught is an important action in building our understanding of how teachers currently approach the teaching of adult reading. Until the adult reading teachers become aware of the approaches they adopt and the beliefs which drive these approaches, practices will continue with the variable results currently reported.

### Limitations

The information on teacher practices was collected through self-report and although every attempt was made to limit the impact of social desirability by collecting these data through an anonymous survey, teachers may have provided answers different from their practice. Therefore, it is important to interpret the findings from this study with caution.

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