

## University–school partnerships: literacy and students with additional learning needs

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## Abstract

The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy promoted debate about the teaching of reading in primary schools. The use of evidence-based research to inform the teaching of reading in schools and in the preparation of teachers was one of the report's main recommendations. This paper will highlight the outcomes of a collaborative, school-based research project for pre-service teacher education students who undertook a five-week tutoring program with children in local schools identified as having literacy difficulties.

Throughout the school-based tutoring program, university students were engaged in professional debate about evidence-based practices in the teaching of reading. These issues were the focus of their studies on campus, tutorials in schools, and linked to the planning and preparation they undertook for tutoring. Learning support staff based in schools fostered debate and guided evidence-based practices as the students worked with children.

Outcomes of the program provided evidence that the level of student professional knowledge had been enhanced. Students showed evidence through their planning, reflective journals and interviews that they were more aware of the intricacies of planning to teach reading, yet were still unsure of how this transferred into a whole class program. Further, there was strong support for the program for schools, administrators and parents. Future directions for the program was also set following discussion with students, school-base staff and reviews of the research literature.

The reception of the *Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) in Australia illustrated that the debate over the teaching of reading continues to be a sensitive issue in Australian education and academic circles. While the inquiry focused on the development of literacy in Australian schools, the political debate of the day focused on issues such as how reading is taught in schools, what to do about those 15 to 20 per cent of students who fail to achieve minimum standards after four years of school, what teachers are doing in their classrooms to teach reading, and how new teachers are equipped to teach reading.

As the debate focused narrowly on the teaching of reading, it regressed to the age-old 'reading wars' duality – whole-language versus phonics, or code emphasis versus meaning emphasis. This debate is not new in Australia or in other countries. Further, the report on the *Inquiry in the Teaching of Literacy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) was not unique; other significant reports addressing the same issue have been released over the years (e.g. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, 1998; *Report of the National Reading Panel*, 2000).

The disappointing aspect of the debate that raged over the teaching of reading was the apparent failure of the differing 'camps' and the media to acknowledge the wealth of research that clearly indicates that it is not an 'either/or' debate, nor is this debate about simply combining the two approaches. (See the *Report of the National Reading Panel* for a comprehensive review of the literature.) The teaching of reading is about helping young children bring together the central elements of decoding and comprehension so they become skilled readers. This requires

teachers to have expert knowledge about how students achieve this (Moats & Foorman, 2003; Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005).

The *Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) made 20 recommendations about how literacy outcomes in schools could be enhanced. Four of the recommendations and accompanying discussion focused on the preparation of teachers. These recommendations were reached after the Inquiry had conducted surveys and a series of focus group interviews across the 34 teacher education institutions in Australia offering pre-service degrees and preparing teachers to teach reading and literacy skills in primary schools. Responses to a national survey of preparation courses found that “less than 10 per cent of time in compulsory subjects/units is devoted to preparing student teachers to teach reading.” (p20). Further, that in half of all courses, “less than five per cent of total instructional time is devoted to this task.” (p20).

In its final report, the Inquiry recommended further investigation and research into how best to prepare pre-service teachers to teach literacy, in particular, reading. This recommendation specifically made reference to pre-service teachers being knowledgeable about how to instruct beginning readers in the skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and text comprehension.

The preparation of teachers to teach effective reading is central to the success of children learning to read (*Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching Literacy*, 2005; Courtheart & Prior, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; *National Reading Panel Report*, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 2005; *Teaching Children to Read*, 2005). Effective teachers of reading have a rich understanding of the how children become skilled readers. It therefore requires “teacher educators to provide teachers with opportunities to gain pedagogical expertise based on a much a wider range of psychological, social, and cultural knowledge, dispositions, and practical skills for working effectively in the classroom” (Snow et al., 2005, p17).

Despite the importance of learning to read, the research about how to prepare teachers to teach reading so all children reach basic goals or

outcomes in a timely manner is not abundant (Rohl & Greaves, 2005). In a study of Australian pre-service teachers, Rohl and Greaves found many pre-service teachers thought that they were “not well prepared to teach literacy and numeracy to students who find it hardest to learn” (p7). Further, Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski and Chard (2001) found that pre-service teachers had “limited knowledge of phonological awareness or terminology related to language structure and phonics” (p98).

This paper will report on research undertaken within a university pre-service teacher subject. The primary focus of the subject was to prepare pre-service teachers to cater for students with difficulties learning. It provided students an opportunity to apply knowledge gained from the previous three and a half years of the program, along side specific knowledge and skills developed about the teaching of reading to children with reading difficulties. In particular, this project will identify the challenges faced by university students in developing their knowledge of the key elements of reading and the instructional pedagogy that will assist children to acquire early reading skills. In the conclusion, the nature of the program will be evaluated from the perspectives of the university students and their in-school mentors, and recommendations made for future research.

## Method

### **Participants**

Participants were students from a pre-service teacher education (primary education) course at a major research and teaching university who volunteered to be part of this project. A total of 63 students (49 female, 14 male) were enrolled in the subject. From this total enrolment, 46 students (33 female, 13 male) returned both the initial and final questionnaire and consented to be part of this project.

All students were enrolled in a compulsory Special Education subject requiring them to undertake a 15-hour fieldwork placement where they observed and/or worked with a student/s with a disability or learning difficulty (i.e. students with special education needs). This placement provides students with an opportunity to examine different education

programs, facilities and support services, and the attitudes and beliefs of those persons who work with students with special education needs. As part of the course, students also complete work on-campus focusing on how to adjust programs to accommodate students with special education needs (e.g. literacy, numeracy).

In order to streamline the course (e.g. time efficiency, grounding theory in practice), plans were made to integrate the fieldwork and theoretical elements. Through links with a local learning support team, the students were able to work with children with identified difficulties in literacy, in particular, in learning to read.

## **Schools**

Students visited one of four schools during the six-week tutoring program. The schools were located within five kilometres of the university, and enrolled students from lower to middle income families. Each of the schools was receiving services from the regional support team to assist in catering for students experiencing difficulties in reading. The support team provided assistance to the school through a range of professional learning activities (e.g. an in-class model of explicit teaching strategies, discussions about professional literature).

The tutoring program was conducted in schools where members of the learning support team were currently working as part of their caseload. Each member of the learning support team had demonstrated experience in working with students with special education needs. During the tutoring program, they scheduled their time to be in these schools so they could provide guidance to university students, and oversee the implementation of programs for targeted students with learning difficulties.

## **Tutoring program**

Students participated in two seminars on campus on working with students who have special education needs prior to commencing the tutoring program. In the week prior to the commencement of university, students attended a one-and-a-half hour lecture where they were provided with an overview of the subject, asked to complete a questionnaire on their knowledge of teaching of reading, and participated in a discussion about how they would cater for students

with reading difficulties. The first author also engaged students through a set of interview questions, to facilitate an open discussion about how they perceived the teaching of reading. The other two of the authors recorded responses.

In week one of the university semester, students spent the first tutoring session completing a two-hour workshop on campus. In this workshop, students were introduced to the expectations of the tutoring program that included participation in an in-school tutorial. Each in-school tutorial commenced with all students gathering with their tutor to receive feedback on the previous session, and participating in a discussion about an article they had been set to read. Their reading was scaffolded through a series of set questions that focused the students' attention on the key elements of learning to read. In many instances, content in the readings was directed towards the application of strategies for the teaching of reading (e.g. promoting fluency of decoding, integration of skills).

The first tutorial on-campus also focused on the assessment students were to complete with their assigned child. The set of assessments to be undertaken were from a document each student was given in the first tutorial – *Programming and Strategies Handbook* (DET, 2003). These assessments included the use of running records, the *Sutherland Phonemic Awareness Test* (Nielson, 2003), *Educheck* (DET, 2002), and *Johnson Word List* (DET, 2002). During the tutorial, students were shown examples of results, and how they could identify the strengths and weaknesses of students from them.

The final element of this first tutorial was focused on the necessary planning for each session. Students were guided through the use of a planning format that required them to demonstrate that they were addressing a range of elements within a balanced reading program. These elements included modelled reading, explicit teaching of skills (e.g. phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, vocabulary, decoding fluency, comprehension), and practice of skills through games. At the end of each session, students were then required to evaluate their lesson according to these requirements, and plan for the following session. Their plans were submitted for review by the school-based learning

support teacher, who provided feedback at the commencement of the next session.

Following these workshops, students were expected to attend two tutoring sessions at their allocated school. The university timetable had been arranged to ensure students were scheduled to be in schools between 9 and 12 on two mornings during the week.

## **Measures**

Various methods for collecting data were used during the five-week tutoring program. Data were collected from students during the first lecture on their beliefs about how they would teach reading, and their attitudes toward catering for students with additional learning needs. Students were also interviewed at the conclusion of the program in smaller groups. During this time, they were asked questions about the program, including what they felt were its strengths and weaknesses, and their knowledge about the teaching of reading.

This feedback and the evaluation of the program were supported through an analysis of the journal each student submitted as part of the course assessment. These comments were assessed according to criteria such as: how well students understood how to plan a balanced reading program (including its links to the research literature), how effectively they could analyse errors made by child, the validity of decisions they made to adjust planning and instruction, their attitudes towards working with a student with learning difficulties, and how the instructional strategies from tutorial materials could be used in a whole class context.

## **Discussion of results**

This study investigated the outcomes of a project conducted collaboratively between university staff and school-based personnel to promote the knowledge and skills of pre-service teacher education students in the area of early reading. The outcomes of the project were evaluated through records of the perceptions of students before and after the project, analysis of the planning undertaken by students to cater for children with reading difficulties, and the feedback provided by students and school-based staff.

## **Knowledge of teaching reading**

A recurring observation in students' journals was the novelty of the material they were required to address. That is, students highlighted that they had not encountered and/or did not know concepts such as phonemic awareness, or the teaching of decoding fluency in previous classes. The introduction of these evidence-based features of effective reading programs created tensions for some students. The tension at one point boiled over in a lecture on campus, and it required some open discussion and clarification of differing points of view for this to be resolved. In the final group evaluations, this tension again arose with some students still quite anxious about the conflicting points of view they had experienced and the difficulty they faced in working through these differing perspectives on something so important to children (i.e. learning to read).

The notion of balanced reading programs was a concept named during initial students interviews. One student who claimed it as a "combination of whole-language and skills-based approaches" best depicted initial views of the concept balanced reading programs. These views were not evident in the final interview, or in the reflective journals. Students discussed, for example, the need for a balance between the differing elements (e.g. phonemic awareness, vocabulary and language development) based on the need of children. Some students went further by discussing how they analysed instructional texts to identify words useful for developing phonic skills, phonological awareness skills, and vocabulary, and then ensured that children could use these skills appropriately in their text reading. In lesson plans, this knowledge was further reinforced and maintained through implementing a series of activities or games.

The topic of effective instruction generated discussion about particular teaching activities (e.g. modelling reading, using games). At this point in their careers, students were not in a position to think beyond these activities and to consider the differing elements of instruction (i.e. what teachers do to help students achieve lesson outcomes). The elements of explicit instruction, for example, were a relatively unfamiliar concept to a number of students. Students came to this experience with the belief that students would be intrinsically motivated to learn to read, and that



involvement in motivational games and activities would offer sufficient additional incentive. This finding is similar to that of Moats and Foorman (2003), especially concerning the attitudes of pre-service teacher education students. At the conclusion of the program, planning by students showed elements of wider range of instructional strategies (e.g. example selection to foster discrimination practice or maintenance), while in their reflective journals a number of students referred to adjusting their language and vocabulary to assist students. In the discussion of whole class strategies, a small number of students referred to the use of peer-assisted instruction to foster skills and knowledge of reading, and linked it to relevant literature (Swanson, 2005).

Knowledge of how to transfer the skills they learned in one-to-one tuition to the whole class context was only emerging for most students. Most students were given one opportunity to observe an experienced teacher take a whole class and use many of the principles promoted in the tutoring programs (e.g. games to practise skills, peer-assisted instruction to facilitate fluency practice, or structured literacy time where all children received purposeful instruction). While they were able to discuss in a limited manner how they could transfer strategies to the classroom, those students who did not get the chance to observe were unable to discuss how the strategies they have been using could be transferred to the whole class. Future iterations of this program will need to develop a more systematic approach to building this knowledge with students.

Students were aware that many children experience difficulties in learning to read. They attributed these difficulties to various causes including lack of practice, home background, cultural background, and type of personality. In the words of one student:

I think it could be neurological, it could be behavioural, I think it could be the type of attention or instruction they are given at home ... it could be that they have other difficulties like hearing or seeing difficulties ... It could be a whole range of problems, I guess.

Responses from students in the initial interview highlighted a view that difficulties originating in the child or their family. Students did not

indicate a position that their approach to teaching could be a factor that assisted students overcome difficulties in learning to read.

When students were asked about the steps they would undertake to assist children, they stressed the role of assessment. The words of one student highlighted a level of caution they had about their own professional knowledge, stating we would “be guided by the counsellor or Reading Recovery tutor at the school”. The limited level of knowledge about the major elements of a reading program appeared to limit the ability of students to articulate what they would assess to find out “where students were at”. The use of assessment protocols in the tutoring program provided a support for students to develop their knowledge about reading, and provided concrete examples that they could use in the future to assist planning. In the final interviews students strongly supported the need to be given more time to the use and development of assessment materials in the area of early reading development.

Parent-teacher links were considered by students to be a feature of assisting students with additional learning needs to learn to read. These links though, were not portrayed by students as strong ones, with an emphasis on “Encouraging parents to spend as much time with the child on different literacy activities like reading, writing or you know just exposing the child to the range of texts and that sort of thing”. At the conclusion of the program some students felt that having information nights and forums would help “teach parents what to do”.

## **Benefits of program**

Feedback was attained from pre-service teacher education students, and school-based personnel as to the value and quality of the program. Senior administrative personnel, and parents of the children receiving tutoring also provided unsolicited feedback. Each type of feedback highlighted the benefit of the tutoring program.

Pre-service teacher education students were, in general, full of praise for the tutoring program. In the words of one student, and supported by their peers, it was the “best thing ever” they had completed in their course, with other students indicating that the subject should be one of

the first they take as it allowed them to examine first-hand the intricacies of teaching: “I wish we had been given this earlier”. While it was one-on-one, they argued that the experience was carefully scaffolded to provide explicit and direct feedback, and they were continuously experiencing success as they assisted a child to learn how to read.

A feature of the program that was considered important to its success was the contribution of the in-school support staff – “superb” in the words of one student. While there were differences between the approaches of the four in-school personnel, students highlighted key features that made their contribution so integral. Support staff were highly experienced in working with children experiencing difficulties learning, and they used this knowledge to guide students in their planning to ensure success for the children. Further, the support staff possessed expert knowledge about the teaching of reading, and were able to pass this knowledge on in the form of scaffolds and guidance. One student described the support staff as “fantastic”, going on to explain that the staff member was able to model and guide them in explicit teaching strategies in a clear and manageable manner.

While there were many comments of praise, the students were also forthcoming about how they thought the program could improve. One of their concerns was that the course only ran for five weeks, and there was a requirement that they become acquainted with the tutoring program, reading content, assessments, and instructional strategies in a very short time (i.e. two workshops). This they found confusing, exhausting and frustrating. Students made suggestions for alleviating this overload of information including obtaining video of assessments so they could be partially prepared as to what to expect, providing online pre-readings for the course, and trying to get more time allocated to the first workshop (e.g. half a day).

Positive feedback was also forthcoming from other sources in the schools. On one occasion, a senior member of the area management team visited a school to work with pre-service teachers and gain first hand information about the program. This opportunity resulted in discussion with university personnel about how the program could be broadened to include more schools. One option was to consider other groups of people who could be approached to implement the tutoring

program. Parents in one school provided unsolicited feedback on the success of the program, and petitioned for the program to continue due to its success in getting their children “hooked on reading”.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to report the outcomes of a program of work conducted jointly between a university and a group of schools, and the impact that it had on the learning of pre-service teacher education students about the teaching children who showed evidence of experiencing difficulties in learning to read. The results of this project provide evidence that both parties were able to benefit from the partnership.

In promoting the notion of reading clinics, Rohl and Greaves (2005) highlighted that many pre-service teacher programs have difficulty resourcing such practices. While this program was not developed in a reading clinic model as suggested by Rohl and Greaves, it does highlight how a university program, and a local school community, benefited from sharing their resources. This program received no additional university funding, with the only provision made being in regards to timetabling. In regards to school based personnel, the program ran within the regular workloads of staff.

Students completing the course claimed that they were satisfied with the outcome of the five-week program in schools. Their satisfaction was echoed through interviews conducted at the conclusion of the program and in the reflective journals they completed. School staff, area administrators, and parents of children within the host schools also supported the benefits of the program.

The more important aspect of this program though was the reported enhancement of the students’ knowledge about the teaching of reading. Students, through the interview process, indicated that they gained considerable knowledge about the teaching of reading, and in their reflective journals, some students showed evidence of how they were integrating the differing elements of reading in their pedagogy. The extent of their gains in knowledge is not examined extensively in this paper, but the authors are considering ways in which this could be

directly assessed. One possible measure being examined and piloted with this group of students is one used by Moats and Foorman (2003) that evaluates levels of knowledge about phonology, language structures and grammatic links between differing aspects of literacy programs.

Ongoing research will be undertaken to refine the current tutoring model. As part of these research projects focus will be placed on how to specifically measure the knowledge of teachers about the teaching of reading. Using the work of Moats and Foorman (2003) and Snow et al. (2005), this work aims to refine the overall program to ensure pre-service teachers are better prepared to teach reading for those students most at risk. This work needs to be matched with the development of research protocols that allow for the progress of children to be evaluated. This work will be put in place during the next iteration of this model, with these outcomes guiding future research to be undertaken. While the program does not intend or aim to make expert teachers of reading for students with reading difficulties, it is best depicted by the following commentary by one of the participating teachers:

In conclusion and reflecting on 'reading is rocket science', I feel that this program has given me the tools and the knowledge I require to build the rocket!! First attempt may well be basic, but in time they will develop! Not quite a professional or an expert yet, but on my way.

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