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Reading Squadron: Crossing borders in literacy experiences for preservice teachers

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Abstract

Teaching literacy requires accurate and current knowledge in the field (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). There have been persistent inquiries into what constitutes specialist knowledge and skills for teaching students to be literate. Preservice teacher education is fundamental to literacy development, which includes the approaches universities employ to prepare graduates for teaching literacy. Indeed, preservice teacher programs and literacy education also elicit insatiable media coverage. There is a continued push to improve literacy outcomes for school students across the nation and prepare the literacy knowledge and skills of Australian teachers. This study mainly focuses on 10 final-year preservice teachers attending a regional university campus who volunteered for further experiences to teach students to read traditional texts. These preservice teachers completed three university literacy units before commencing with practical applications. A literacy program, titled *Reading Squadron*, was developed in partnership between a local primary school and the university. Primary students were identified by the school as requiring literacy support. Preservice teachers attended a whole day training session run by school staff at the university and then visited the school for two one-hour sessions each week over a six-week period. Each preservice teacher was assigned two students and worked with each student for half an hour twice a week. The aim of this small-scale qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of the preservice teachers and school staff as a result of their involvement in the Reading Squadron program. The preservice teachers completed a questionnaire to determine their views of the program and ascertain how it assisted their development. Further data were gathered from the preservice teachers through individual face-to-face interviews. Three school staff involved in the program also completed a questionnaire to determine the value of the program. Results indicated that the preservice teachers made links between theory and practice, and felt they gained knowledge about teaching reading. Three preservice teachers noted it was difficult to work around timetable commitments but gained from the experience and suggested embedding such experiences into university literacy units. Data gathered from school staff indicated that six-weeks was not sufficient time to measure improvements in the school students, however, they were supportive of such a program, particularly for its continuation. Collaborations between schools and universities can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to use theoretical knowledge gained from core university subjects with application to assist primary students' literacy development in schools. Teachers in this study were supportive of the Reading Squadron program, however, more data needed to be collected to understand the literacy improvement of students. Longitudinal studies are required to ascertain specific knowledge and skills gained by preservice teachers to teach reading and how these programs enhance students' literacy levels.

Keywords: Preservice teachers, university-school partnerships, reading programs

It is recognised internationally that teaching literacy should be undertaken by those who have a depth of current and accurate knowledge in this field (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005a). In recent years, there have been persistent inquiries into what constitutes the specialised knowledge and skills needed to teach students to be literate. Literature in this field focuses on, not the *why* of teaching literacy, but the *what* and *how*. Inevitably, this leads to discussion about preservice education and ways in which universities prepare preservice teachers to become literacy experts in their future classrooms (e.g., House of Representatives Standing Committee on Educational and Vocational Training [HRSCEVT], 2007).

During the last decade, major inquiries into the teaching of reading have been completed in the United States, England and Australia. Despite variations in education systems, empirical evidence is used to describe the nature of learning how to read (e.g., Ehri, L. C., & Snowling, 2004; McBride-Chang, 2004). Recommendations for enhancing the development of literacy include advocating successful approaches employed by educational institutions (Rowe, 2009). Preservice teacher development for teaching literacy needs to be at the forefront of educational change (Reid, 2007, 2009). A national inquiry into the teaching of literacy was undertaken in 2005 by the Australian Government. One component of the inquiry examined teacher education courses, with the inquiry asked to “identify the extent to which prospective teachers are provided with reading teaching approaches and skills that are effective in the classroom, and have opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to implement effective classroom reading programs” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005a, p. 91).

There is significant support for the introduction of more systematic teaching of phonics, alongside the more commonly used meaning-centred approaches (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005b, p. 29). Similar observations were made in the report “*Learning to Read in Australia*” (Coltheart & Prior, 2007) which reported that “the evidence indicates that the Whole Language Approach to the teaching of reading, currently the most widely used approach to the teaching of reading in Australian schools, is not in the best interests of students” (p. 4). Furthermore, Coltheart and Prior recommended that the building blocks of learning to read, which include letter knowledge, phonological awareness and realisation of alphabetic principles, are imperative at the beginning of a student’s development and should be included in reading programs. These findings are supported by The National Reading Panel (2000) which reported that phonemic awareness and letter knowledge were “the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first 2 years of instruction” (p. 7). Also significant in terms of supporting evidence was the verification that the systematic teaching of phonics had major impact as an instructional tool in terms of resulting in successful reading outcomes achieved by students (National Reading Panel, 2000).

In England, the review of the teaching of reading drew upon “three main sources of information: the findings of research and inspection; wide ranging consultation, including practitioners, teachers, trainers, resource providers and policy makers, and visits to settings, schools and training events” (Rose, 2006, p. 2). Findings and recommendations concurred that improvements in reading standards were noted with a structured program that specifically outlined content and processes for the teaching of phonics. The review recommended the teaching of reading in the early years to be “a vigorous programme of phonic work to be securely embedded within a broad and language-rich curriculum: that is to say, a curriculum that generates purposeful discussion, interest, application, enjoyment and high achievement across all the areas of learning and experience in the early years and progressively throughout the key stages which follow” (p. 16).

In recent years in Australia, discussions around the need for a National Curriculum have given way to the preliminary steps towards practical applications. At this early stage of development, the National Curriculum Board has released a number discussion documents. Apparent in these documents is the intention of the Board to provide an unambiguous description of required elements

for the teaching of literacy in Australia. The Board advises that although explicit in its programming, the curriculum will also show “sufficient flexibility and support so that educators can adapt its contents and processes according to their students’ needs” (National Curriculum Board, 2008, p. 5). Once fully developed, the structure, rationale and common language generated by national guidelines as to the approach of teaching literacy will become the core systemic framework on which all school literacy programs will be based. Additionally, the broadening, consultation and explicit development of the National Curriculum through consultation and examination of current research will have dramatic consequences, and ultimately prompt reform to national teacher education programs.

Preservice teacher programs and literacy education are focuses not only for national government inquiries but also for seemingly insatiable media coverage, illustrating that this is an attention-grabbing issue of high public interest. Resulting debates are often centred on the teaching of phonics, the value of critical literacy and levels of literacy displayed by preservice education students (Grant, 2005). As a result of a renewed push to improve the standard of literacy benchmarks nationally, Dr Brendan Nelson, the Australian Government Minister for Education at the time, announced a national inquiry into the teaching of reading, emphasising that the aim of the inquiry was not only to raise achievement outcomes for students but also the quality of Australian teachers. Dr Nelson released a statement maintaining “that the quality of teaching is the single most important factor in improving educational outcomes for our students” (Nelson, 2002). The degree of enthusiasm for the debate over these issues could easily belie a sense of newness in its form, however, evidence of this key debate is found in government and university documentation well before 1970 (Grant, 2005).

One constituent of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) examined teacher education courses of four years duration available in Australia, acknowledging the role that institutes play in educating teachers who will later be relied upon to improve literacy standards in students. The findings reported that “in almost all such courses, less than 10 percent of course time was devoted to preparing teachers to teach reading; in about half of these courses this percentage was less than five percent” (Coltheart & Prior, 2007, p. 6). Mandated requirements for minimal practicum experiences in undergraduate courses vary from state to state. In Victoria, undergraduate teaching courses have a recommended 80 days of supervised teaching practice, while Western Australia mandates at least 30 days and South Australia requires students to complete supervised practicum work but provides no directive on the quantity (Coltheart & Prior, 2007).

In Queensland, stipulated by The Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, there exists a requirement of 100 days of practicum work. When compared with other professional courses and the required practicum components, a Bachelor of Education (4 years) ranks well below the practicum experiences advocated in other courses (Ramsey, 2000). The value of the practical elements of undergraduate courses prompts the call for education institutions to “seriously explore how they can optimally operate the practicum components of their programs” (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008, p. 158). Advantages gained from practical experience include the promotion of skills needed for adaptation, the building of values and attitudes that are required in particular contexts, recognition of the professional context and importantly, a strengthened opportunity for employment (Ramsey, 2000).

The Report of the Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales (Ramsey, 2000) outlines the magnitude of an apparent dichotomy between the theory and practice evident in many teacher education methodologies which “works against the preparation of a quality profession” (p. 38). Another policy paper, commissioned by The Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (Coltheart & Prior, 2007) concurs that preservice teachers need to be provided with specific training and practice

in the teaching of reading. The Top of the Class Report (HRSCEVT, 2007) advocates minimum requirements for preservice teacher attainment of literacy skills and that academic results may sometimes disguise their standards of literacy. Many other educators (e.g., Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Fisher, Bruce, & Greive, 2008) also insist on minimum standards of literacy for university students, which includes preservice teachers. Indeed, placing preservice teachers in practical situations will allow them to demonstrate their literacy levels and capabilities for teaching. Smith and Lev Ari (2005) state, "...it might be possible to learn about teaching in theoretical courses, the knowledge of teaching, the professional content knowledge of teachers can only be acquired by active engagement in teaching" (p. 291).

Bainbridge and Macy (2008) have studied the results of the implementation of two very different approaches to teacher education: transmission versus constructivism. The transmission approach focuses on the diffusion of subject content, concentrated direct teaching and the inducement of a goal that students are encouraged to work towards achieving. Contrastingly, a constructivist approach centres on "an open critical approach to literacy; teaching for understanding and real-life application; skill development in context rather than in isolation; student engagement, ownership and choice; student talk and collaboration; interdisciplinary linkages; and "learning for all" through meeting the needs of students with diverse interests, abilities, and background" (Bainbridge & Macy, 2008, p. 67). In a study around preservice teachers' perceptions of preparedness for literacy teaching, findings showed that when the course work included a constructivist approach and students worked in their zone of proximal development "the student teachers could work through preconceived notions and transform them into new and relevant understandings of literacy learning and teaching" (p. 79). However, reflections on the transmission approach led to feelings of frustration.

Practicum experiences are repeatedly nominated as key and valued experiences in the preparatory education of preservice teachers (Ralph et al., 2008). Despite "The No Child Left Behind" legislation prepared for the United States identifying the possession of content knowledge as what defines a highly qualified teacher (US Department of Education, 2002), the importance of pedagogical knowledge alongside content knowledge cannot be overlooked. Teachers must be able to combine content and pedagogical expertise in order to design and implement learning experiences that will enhance and improve student achievement (Andrews, 2007). The significance of well designed practical experience is built on the foundational premise that "authentic and deep learning occur when students apply relevant knowledge and skills to solving real-life problems encountered by actual practitioners in the field" (Ralph et al., 2008, p. 159).

Findings in research around the usefulness of practical experience note the positive impact that the practice has on both the student and the participants at the practicum site. Preservice teachers identify the opportunities created to close the divide between theory and practice, the building of personal teaching styles and the experience of being accepted as a member of a professional team. For the site based personnel, affirmations are expressed in the altruistic motive of being able to support the growth in understanding of a future generation of teachers, as well as the learning that occurs for themselves while being presented with new ideas and experiences brought by the preservice teacher (Ralph et al., 2008). Smith and Lev Ari (2005) state that "the practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop a personal teaching competence" (p. 291).

Considering that the Commonwealth of Australia (2005a) advocates explicit and systematic teaching of foundational skills, which they deem essential to achieving success in learning to read, it follows that experiences in preservice teacher education courses must support these developments. However, equally significant is the need for preservice teachers to engage actively in their own literacy learning, with opportunities to apply experiences as tools for developing their

knowledge and skills. Smith and Lev Ari (2005) note that knowing ‘what’ is not the same as knowing ‘how’, and the latter is needed in teaching others about the ‘what’. Recommendations from the report “*Revitalising teaching: Critical times, critical choices*” (Ramsey, 2000) challenge teacher education and university academics to foster the link between content and pedagogy, in recognition of the responsibility these establishments have in engendering teachers who will promote standards of achievement. Ramsey advocates “in teacher education and teaching, as in society more generally, many of the old certainties are being challenged on the grounds of relevance and appropriateness” (p. 25).

The contention with national reviews is that overly theoretical approaches are being offered by educational institutions, which they maintain are resulting in irrelevant and inaccessible programs that do not highlight or give precedence to real-world contexts (Vick, 2006). In response to this, calls have been made to re-examine the programs allowing preservice teachers to engage in practical experiences. Professional development and feelings of empowerment have been noted when examining education students who were guided and supported while in active learning contexts, or “walking the bridge between theory and practice” (Smith & Lev Ari, 2005, p. 300). Recognition that one set of skills and knowledge or one theory of teaching is not enough is at the core of this debate. Smith and Lev Ari maintain that because there is no one-size-fits-all theory for the teaching of reading, teaching should be more closely related to the notion of “artistry”.

The *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy: Report and Recommendations* cited that “because not all children, tasks, and teachers are the same, teachers must have a full repertoire of strategies for helping children develop literacy and a clear understanding of how and when to implement each strategy” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005b, p. 30). The report also established that teacher education courses should secure the preparation of student teachers in the teaching of reading, as their fundamental purpose. Ramsey (2000) notes that “the community at large has always had substantial expectations of its teachers” (p. 9) and the Commonwealth of Australia (2005a) acknowledged that “accumulating evidence exists which suggests that, given explicit instruction in phonological and orthographic information and the opportunity to practice their newfound skills in supervised, appropriately designed field-work experiences, preservice teachers can develop the knowledge and skills necessary for effective early literacy teaching” (p. 52). Ultimately, there have been continuous improvements and growth in supporting preservice teachers in the assembly of literacy practices, considering that as little as thirty hours of a two year course was spent on the teaching of English in one Western Australian teacher’s college in the time spanning 1957-1961 (Grant, 2005). Preparing preservice teachers for their roles as literacy teachers requires cognisance of evidence-based literacy teaching. Indeed, these beginning teachers will need to be armed with adequate knowledge and skills for teaching literacy as they will be challenged in their contexts by students, parents and communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005b; Ramsey, 2000). Nevertheless, it is also these teachers who will observe, assess, plan and prepare their students’ learning to make a difference in their literacy achievements (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005b; Rose, 2000).

Context

This study is set at a small regional Queensland campus that introduced a Bachelor of Education (Primary) in 2005. When establishing the campus it was noted in the strategic plan (Caboolture Campus Strategic Plan, 2008 -2012) that students would be provided with work-integrated learning opportunities within the local community. Being a lower socio-economic community, it was hoped that this would provide benefits for preservice teachers as well as community members. In 2008, 19 final-year preservice teachers were involved in focus group meetings to discuss their experiences at this newly established regional campus. A range of issues were highlighted but, of interest to this study, was that 10 of the 19 preservice teachers self nominated to have more skills and knowledge for teaching reading (traditional texts) to primary students. A local school principal was contacted

about providing these preservice teachers with further literacy teaching experiences and, as a result, a “Reading Squadron” program was established. The Reading Squadron consisted of a one-day training session for these preservice teachers ($n=10$) to be delivered by three local teachers nominated by the principal who had literacy expertise. Preservice teachers who had participated in the training session would then assist two primary students and work with each student for half an hour twice a week for six weeks. The one-on-one sessions would be carefully monitored by the school staff who had led the training program.

The Reading Squadron Program involved 10 final year preservice teachers volunteering to work with students who had been identified as having difficulties with reading and were being supported with additional school resources. These students were identified by the school. Prior to the commencement of the program, the preservice teachers attended a full day workshop which focused on the use of print texts as a tool to promote reading confidence, phonemic awareness and comprehension in the students. Preservice teachers were provided with ideas that assisted in developing questions, an overview of strategies to support individual readers, and a demonstration of expectations for implementing the reading program. Acknowledging the university workloads and availability of preservice teachers, the school was flexible with the times for student participation. Over a six-week period, the preservice teachers visited and worked individually with students in two one-hour sessions per week. A different print text was used during each session, with direct teaching in phonics and comprehension. Student reading records were kept by the school. The preservice teachers were monitored and supported by school staff during their sessions, and regular contact was maintained between the school and university during the six weeks.

Method

This small-scale qualitative study investigated preservice teachers’ involvement in a reading program. Specifically, the aim of this study was to describe the perceptions of preservice teachers ($n=10$) and school staff ($n=3$) as a result of their involvement in the Reading Squadron program. An email was sent to final-year preservice teachers outlining the Reading Squadron program and to call for expressions of interest. Ten preservice teachers volunteered and were enthusiastic about the opportunity to be involved. It was thought that by calling for volunteers these preservice teachers would be committed to take part (McMillan, 2008).

At the completion of the training program and subsequent six-weeks working with the primary students, the preservice teachers completed a questionnaire to determine their views of the program and ascertain whether it assisted their development. To provide a more in-depth response, further data were gathered from the preservice teachers through individual face-to-face interviews. The school staff involved in the program also completed a questionnaire to determine strengths and weaknesses identified during the project’s implementation. Areas for discovery in the questionnaire included the preservice teacher’s growth in understanding of the teaching of reading, the transference of theory into practice and the learning that had resulted from working with the mentor teacher. Data gathered from the preservice teachers and the school staff were then collated and analysed within emerging themes (Hittleman & Simon, 2006).

Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the preservice teacher data. First, eight of the preservice teachers noted they had benefited from the opportunity to be involved in the reading squadron program, particularly with understanding procedures for teaching a student to read. A typical response from a preservice teacher was: “This was a great program that assisted me to understand the steps that need to be taken to support a child in reading”. Further benefits were noted such as the opportunity to work with teachers in the field and the sense of belonging to a school community. Additionally, the preservice teachers indicated a perceived improvement in their knowledge of how

children read, catering for different abilities, support strategies to assist students with reading difficulties as well as the opportunity to network and spend time in schools. In the data collected, preservice teachers noted a deeper understanding of teaching reading with a strong sense of achievement. They also claimed that their own development was assisted by learning from experienced teachers as mentors and working with a student for six weeks. Seven out of ten preservice teachers recognised the experiences as one that aided them to link the theories of reading to practice (Table 1).

Table 1: *Summary of benefits noted by preservice teachers (n=10)*

Perceived benefits	Participant responses
Gained a deeper understanding of teaching reading	8
Working with a student for six weeks and assisted them to read	4
Learned from practicing teachers	5
Experienced teaching reading to a child	6
Gained a sense of belonging to a school community	6
Gained a sense of achievement	7
The ability to link the theories of reading to the practice	7
Working with skilled teachers who were great mentors	5
Experienced working with students with needs in literacy	3

The second theme that emerged was that preservice teachers agreed they had covered all aspects of how to teach reading in core university units, however, the opportunity to work with two primary students allowed them to link the content of the units to the practice in the field. Furthermore, there was a sense of achievement as most of the preservice teachers felt that the students they worked with improved over the six weeks. This view was shared by seven preservice teachers, for instance,

As I was participating in the training session I realised that we had done this before in the literacy unit last year. It was good to see what we had been taught at uni really linked with how it is being taught in schools. I think the opportunity to work with the two students consolidated the process of teaching reading and allowed us to make the links between theory and practice. It was also good to see the development of the students. Even though it was only six weeks, I could see that they did benefit.

The third emerging theme from the preservice teacher data noted that programs such as Reading Squadron would be beneficial in core units delivered at university. Nine of the preservice teachers felt that such experiences would ensure a greater understanding of the teaching of reading and provide benefits not only for them, but also for the students in schools. A typical response was:

I think this program would be great as part of a core unit. I think there are benefits for us as well as the kids in the schools. I felt that this experience really helped me to understand how to teach reading. Any program that does that should be part of a unit at uni.

Overall, preservice teachers were positive about their participation in the Reading Squadron program. However, five students noted they found it difficult to visit the school for the number of hours required because of work and university commitments, particularly mature-aged students. To illustrate, “This was a great program but I found it hard to fit in the hours. I’m a mum and I have to work and complete uni work. If it were part of a unit it would be better”. Similar to the perceptions of the preservice teachers, the three teachers involved in the program were positive. They commented on the “professionalism of the preservice teachers”, the “benefits to the school students” and the need to have “programs such as this in teacher education programs”. The school staff commented that the preservice teachers required more time and would benefit from a longer period working with the students. One staff member stated:

... the preservice teachers and the students benefit. It would be great if the preservice teachers had longer than six weeks and a greater amount of time to dedicate to this program. The teaching of reading is so vital. I wish they had this program when I was at uni.

A further response noted by the school staff concurred with the views of the preservice teachers that an experience such as Reading Squadron would be well-placed as part of a core unit within the teacher education degree. A typical response was, “We’ve discussed at the school that the preservice teachers need more time in school teaching reading. It would be great if Reading Squadron could sit in a unit that is delivered at university”. All participants involved in this study (i.e., preservice teachers and school staff) were unanimous that the Reading Squadron program should continue. Through discussion with key stakeholders, the following recommendations for future Reading Squadron Programs were noted:

1. Investigate the possibility of linking Reading Squadron to a core university unit.
2. Hold the training earlier in the semester to allow for more time in schools.
3. Provide preservice teachers with reading presentation notes prior to the day.
4. Investigate the possibility of other schools being involved in the reading program.

Conclusion

The paper described the perceptions of preservice teachers and school staff as a result of their involvement in a literacy program. This Reading Squadron program operated on “goodwill” and a motivation to attain higher standards for the preservice teachers’ development as literacy teachers and the school students’ literacy development. The goodwill is in the form of teachers donating their time to mentor preservice teachers, and the preservice teachers donating their time for two hours per week. The school’s learning support teacher stated, “I believe the children at the school as well as the [preservice teachers] learned a great deal during these lessons and judging by the feedback I had from students and Year 1 teachers, it was a success.”

Literacy standards and learning to teach literacy are at the core of national reviews on teacher education. Specifically, linking theoretical underpinnings learnt through university coursework to practical applications also presents as contentious issues. For decades there has been empirical evidence that connects phonemic knowledge and learning to read (e.g., Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Perfetti, Beck, Bell, & Hughes, 1987; Troia, 1999). The Reading Squadron program illustrates preservice teachers’ practical applications of their theoretical understandings that may assist in advancing students’ literacy levels. It also highlights university-community engagement to ensure preservice teachers have access to learn how to teach reading in the field. Furthermore, classroom teachers are called upon as experts in the teaching of reading and act as mentors to preservice teachers who can provide time to work with students in small ratios (e.g., one on one), which is not readily accessible with busy classroom teachers. This program emphasises mutual benefits where teachers receive extra help for assisting their students to read and preservice teachers receive opportunities to place into practice their university education.

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