



Literacy Teaching and Learning in Victorian Schools

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East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002

Authors

A. T. Czislawski-McKenna, J. J. Cumming, C.M. Wyatt-Smith and J. Elkins
Centre for Learning Research and the Centre for Applied Language, Literacy and
Communication Studies at Griffith University

Edited by members of the Research and Development Branch

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This project was managed by the Research and Development Branch, Office of Learning and Teaching

For more information contact:

Sandra Mahar

Research Manager

Email: mahar.sandra.t@edumail.vic.gov.au or

or

Email: research@edumail.vic.gov.au

CONTENTS

Executive summary	2
Introduction	4
Literacy teaching and learning theories and perspectives	5
Foundations of literacy – learning to read	7
Effective literacy teaching	7
Time on task and participation	7
Knowledge about literacy teaching	8
Integration of literacy	9
Teaching practices	10
Monitoring, assessing and differentiating	10
Classroom environment	12
Teaching Children to Read	12
The teaching of reading	12
Balanced reading programs	15
Building on literacy – reading and learning	18
Effective literacy teaching	18
Students' literacy practices and engagement	18
Teaching strategies in middle and secondary years	22
Monitoring, assessing and differentiating	24
Classroom environment	24
Student diversity	25
Pathways to literacy	30
For teachers	30
Plan for time on task	30
Plan to teach phonics	30
Have balance in their programs	30
Make connections across areas and in and out of school practices	30
For schools and school leadership	30
Build capacity	30
Develop a school literacy plan	31
Create literate school environments and communities	31
Respond to diverse student needs	31
References	32

Executive summary

The review examines the findings of national and international literacy education research from major studies in the last five years that explore and discuss effective literacy teaching and learning practices. The aim of the review is to consider all perspectives and theoretical viewpoints represented in the research literature, to emerge with simple guidelines of effective practice for classroom teachers and school leaders.

Evidence-based research findings suggest that there are four basic premises for effective teaching of literacy. Teachers should:

- **plan for time on task:** research shows that the time children spend reading and writing affects the acquisition of literacy skills. While the research is divided on the most effective ways to organise time to promote student interest in reading in addition to skills - from the implementation of singular focused literacy hours or simply time and activities across the day - the allocation of substantial time is a starting point.
- **plan to teach phonics:** the information on instruction in phonics provided in the review shows that it is important at some stage in reading development for children to have knowledge of phonics. The research is divided on the form of phonics instruction and the timing of such instruction. However, teachers should be developing programs that incorporate sound and letter associations from an early stage.
- **have balance in their programs:** effective literacy programs, particularly for the early years, have balance in instructional approaches incorporating phonics, and reading and composing text. Balanced programs enhance interest in reading for students while improving literacy skills.
- **make connections across areas and in and out of school practices:** literacy is not a practice in isolated classroom activities. Teachers need to support literacy practices across different discipline areas and link the children's literacy practices from home and outside school activities with school learning.

The review shows that effective literacy instruction stems from effective school approaches to literacy planning and support the findings and recommendations of DE&T initiatives such as *Restart* (2004); *Successful Interventions Literacy Research Project* (DE&T, 2002); and *Access to Excellence* (2005).

The following key principles emerge for effective school planning and operation.

- **Build capacity:** Schools can build their capacity for effective literacy instruction through engagement with others, other schools and professional bodies. Teachers engaging in professional conversations with others allows sharing of effective ideas and creation of a learning organisation. Schools should cluster with other schools in the area or like schools to create professional learning clusters.

- **Develop a school literacy plan:** Effective literacy instruction and planning requires a whole school literacy plan. This must be a living document, enacted in all classrooms, and discussed across the different year levels by teachers, allowing transitions in teaching and learning for students from year to year.
- **Create literate school environments and communities:** An effective literacy environment goes beyond the school. The literacy plan should be developed in consultation with members of the community and shared with members of the community. Parents and caregivers should be informed about the expectations of the school and instructional practices so that they also can assist in the development of their child's literacy skills.
- **Respond to diverse student needs:** Effective literacy teaching for all students requires early identification of potential difficulties in literacy development and ongoing assessment and monitoring of students' progress. Once identified, programs and interventions can be implemented to support the individual learning needs of students.

Further, teachers and schools need to develop the use of assessment information by consolidating and analysing individual student performance data to evaluate literacy programs or to drive curricula and teaching reform efforts.

Introduction

The theoretical context of literacy teaching and learning is multidisciplinary and complex. There are not only ongoing debates on particular approaches (for example, skills-based versus whole-language) but between proponents of positivist, quantitative research or more descriptive, qualitative research, and their differing views on matters of validity, generalisability, and scientific merit. O'Shea and colleagues (1998) suggest that researchers and practitioners need to seek out a connective web that bonds various theories and research approaches, moving beyond the confines of a single model and searching for the connections and disconnections between competing views. Furthermore, there is a number of both national and international researchers (for example, Beach et al., 2005; Cumming et al., 1998) who work from the proposition that a single theoretical perspective cannot address all the issues faced by teachers and students in complex and diverse classrooms. Schools need to provide education for students with diverse abilities, cultural backgrounds and life circumstances. To ensure the best literacy learning outcomes for all students, schools need to take views of literacy teaching and learning from multiple perspectives and informing theoretical frameworks. It is within this context that the Research and Development Branch, Office of Learning and Teaching, commissioned the Centre for Learning Research and the Centre for Applied Language, Literacy and Communication Studies at Griffith University to undertake a review of national and international research on the issue of literacy in education. The review considers all perspectives and theoretical viewpoints represented in the research literature, to emerge with simple guidelines for effective practice for classroom teachers and school leaders. The overall goal is to generate discussion and debate on the teaching of literacy amongst educators to help learners to learn.

The review seeks to identify and describe effective literacy practices under two broad headings: learning to read; and, reading and learning. The review is not segmented into year levels as attempting to describe a complex set of circumstances, such as literacy learning, under a hierarchical and linear framework would be overly simplistic. While it is systemically important to have broad descriptive parameters of what students should and could be learning at different year levels, students' learning needs are not always commensurate with their year level. For example, a Year 10 student might be laying the foundations of literacy required for vocational study; a Year 6 student with a learning disability might be laying the foundations in the English domain; and a Year 2 student might be building breadth and depth in the same domain. By using two broad organisers, this review asserts that, no matter what year level or specialist discipline area, every teacher is a teacher of literacy, while every student is a literacy learner, no matter what year level or ability.

For the purposes of this review, literacy is defined as:

the ability to read and use written information, to write appropriately, in a wide range of contexts, for many different purposes, and to communicate with a variety of audiences. Literacy is integrally related to learning in all areas of the curriculum, and enables all individuals to develop knowledge and understanding. Reading and writing, when integrated with speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking, constitutes valued aspects of literacy in modern life. (DETYA, 1998)

Literacy teaching and learning theories and perspectives

The field of literacy education has witnessed the emergence of numerous research perspectives, some of which are summarised in Table 1. These multiple theoretical positions reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the literacy field.

Table 1: Literacy theories and research perspectives

<p>Skills Approach: to literacy education: focus on teaching decoding and encoding i.e. reading and writing (Alloway et al., 2002).</p>	<p>Critical Discourse Analysis: a view of language as a mode of action in terms of which people act on the world and on each other. Study of spoken and written language within social practices (Gee, 2005, pp. 294-299).</p>	<p>Multiliteracies: literacy education that includes use of contemporary communication technologies and the multimodal ways in which meanings are made and shared.</p>
<p>Instructivist Approach: a focus on knowledge that is external to the individual but that the individual needs to know and therefore needs to receive instruction about.</p>	<p>Growth and Heritage Approach: to literacy education: teaching reading and writing as part of personal growth into the heritage of the culture (Alloway et al., 2002).</p>	<p>Constructivist Approach: focuses on what knowledge the student brings to a learning situation and how that knowledge is used to construct new knowledge.</p>
<p>Genre theory: a framework for understanding different features of text and the meaning making significance of those features.</p>	<p>Critical Literacy: the application of critical theories, developed within a range of paradigms and disciplines, to the study of what, why, how, and when we read and write (Freebody, 2005, p. 433).</p>	<p>Critical-Cultural Approach: to literacy education: reading and writing as part of the everyday social experience and the need to teach children to be critical analysts of text (Alloway et al., 2002).</p>

The influence of national and international literacy research in literacy is evident, in a variety of ways, in the Department's¹ policy programs and resources. For instance, in 1981, *Beginning Reading* was published to guide the teaching for reading based on three cuing systems: semantic cues, syntactic cues and grapho-phonetic cues. The emphasis was on the importance of learning to read in the primary school curriculum. In 1985, Victoria was the first state in Australia to implement the *Reading Recovery Program*, an early intervention program aimed at reducing the incidence of reading failure by accelerating, to average levels of performance, the progress of students in Year 1 who show early signs of reading difficulty. Since implementation, Victoria has had 64,188 students and 4,207 teachers involved in the program (Rowe, 2005). In 1996, the Department introduced the *Curriculum and Standards Frameworks* (CSF) to provide support for Victorian government schools in planning, developing and reviewing their programs. Literacy was described as speaking, listening, reading, writing and thinking within a cultural context, enabling a user to recognise and select

¹ From 1980, the Department has been titled in various ways: Education Department of Victoria (1977-85); Ministry of Education, Victoria (1985-90); Ministry of Education & Training, Victoria (1990-91); Department of School Education, Victoria (1991-92); Department of Education, Victoria (1992-99); Department of Education, Employment & Training (1999-2001); Department of Education and Training (2001-).

language appropriate to different situations was central to the English curriculum. In 2005, the *Victorian Essentials Learning Standards* (VELS) replaced the CSF. One of the interdisciplinary strands in the VELS, the communication strand, provides a clear focus on literacy in all domains. Successful communication requires students to be familiar with the forms, language and conventions used in different domains and employ them to communicate effectively. To inform and guide practice in Victorian schools and to contribute to the Department's evidence-based information resources, this review uses the VELS three stages of learning: (1) laying the foundation, (2) building breadth and depth and (3) developing pathways as an organising framework. While the foundation stage focuses on the type of instruction most suitable for early readers, all students are literacy learners and thus, these strategies may be needed for students at any stage throughout their schooling. The review examines the findings of national and international literacy education research from major studies in the last five years that explore and discuss effective literacy teaching and learning practices.

The evolution of literacy policies and programs in Victoria

Key Milestones

1980 *Language Curriculum Statement*: key policy documents for primary school curriculum

1981 *More than just talk and Teaching Secondary English*: key policy documents for secondary English curriculum

1981 *WISE Handbook for 1981 Year 12 Curriculum and Assessment*: First year implementation of HSC, students required to complete one of the available English courses for certification.

1981 *Beginning Reading*: a guide to the teaching for reading that emphasised the importance of learning to read in the primary school curriculum.

1985 *Reading On*: provides an overview of children's reading development throughout primary school.

Foundations of literacy – learning to read

Effective literacy teaching

Time on task and participation

Several research studies continue to identify time on task as critical to student success and a key element of effective literacy teaching and learning (Hall & Harding, 2003; Loudon et al., 2005; Pressley, 2002; Topping & Ferguson, 2005; Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson, 2000). High levels of student engagement and participation are characteristics of effective literacy teaching (Louden et al., 2005; Hall & Harding, 2003). The skill of an effective literacy teacher is further evident in the ability to maintain this engagement. Effective literacy teachers use a variety of strategies to motivate students to engage in literacy activities and to keep students on task. These strategies include setting time limits for literacy tasks, regularly refocusing students' attention to the task at hand and encouraging students to self-regulate their activity (Hall & Harding, 2003; Wray et al., 2000). Pressley (2002) identified that effective literacy teachers encourage students to do as much of set literacy tasks as possible for themselves, that is, to be independent learners.

To identify time on task as a key element of effective literacy teaching might seem to be unnecessary but in the context of contemporary classrooms with demanding and often competing educational programs, teachers need to take the time to make the time to 'do literacy'. Working within time constraints needs to be a conscious decision by the teacher as 'expert teachers explicitly maximise[d] time on task' (Topping & Ferguson, 2005, p. 140). Planning is essential to making the best use of time and to maximise students' opportunities to engage in literacy learning.

Key Milestones

1985 *The Teaching of Handwriting*: a guide to the implementation of the new style of handwriting recommended for Victorian primary schools. Learning handwriting is part of the larger task of learning to communicate by written expression.

1985 *Reading Recovery Program* was introduced with funding from Commonwealth Basic Learning in Primary Schools (BLIPS) program

1985 *Early Literacy In-Service Course* (ELIC) was introduced with funding from Commonwealth BLIPS program.

1985 *Ministerial Review of Post-compulsory Schooling* (known as the Blackburn report) ensured high literacy standards and laid the ground for the development of a single, two-year certificate for the final years of secondary school, the Victorian Certificate of Education.

Knowledge about literacy teaching

The skill and knowledge of the teacher are essential elements of effective literacy teaching. Louden et al. (2005) found that effective literacy teachers had extensive knowledge of literacy and the teaching of literacy in the early years. The success or failure of literacy programs and strategies is dependent upon the skills and knowledge of the teacher implementing the program or the strategy (Hall & Harding, 2003).

The importance of teachers' knowledge of literacy and literacy teaching is also highlighted in the recent *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading* report (DEST, 2005). This report states that there is a need to build capacity in literacy teaching and that to be effective teachers need to know

- how students learn to read
- how to assess reading
- how to use assessment to design and implement effective interventions.

The acquisition of knowledge and skills can be through formal professional development and in-service education for teaching literacy, however informal methods such as observing effective teachers, team teaching, mentoring and discussions also need to be recognised as important professional development opportunities. As stated by Topping and Ferguson (2005), 'the acquisition of effective teaching strategies had most likely taken place in multiple social contexts'. Professional learning communities develop teachers' knowledge and skills in literacy teaching.

Wray et al. (2000) found that even effective literacy teachers had difficulty in understanding some more technical aspects of phonological awareness. However, '*despite this apparent lack of explicit abstract knowledge of linguistic concepts, the effective teachers used such knowledge implicitly in their teaching, particularly that connected with phonics...they appeared to know and understand the material that they were teaching in a particular form in which they taught to the children, rather than abstracted from the teaching*

Key Milestones

1986 *English and Computers P-12*: the publication marked an early recognition of the impact of new technologies on literacy and English and made recommendations for the use of computers in English and English as a Second Language classrooms.

1987 the emphasis on literacy was significant with at least nine literacy programs including *ELIC*, the *Later Reading Inservice Course* (LaRIC), the *Continuing Literacy Inservice Course* (CLIC) operating in schools.

1988 the *Curriculum Frameworks* were introduced. Literacy was a central concern to the English Language Framework.

1990 *English Profiles Handbook* and *Reporting Students' Progress in English*: the development of the profiles was a response to interest in more effective assessment and reporting of literacy development.

context'. Here then is the conundrum of professional development in literacy teaching. Through professional development, teachers can be taught the theory, the technicalities and the science of literacy teaching, but it is the application of these understandings to the delivery of quality classroom programs, which will have an impact on students' learning outcomes. While professional development can be designed to include classroom application, classroom contexts are so diverse and dynamic that it is not possible to cover every possible situation. School-based professional learning communities can provide immediate and context-relevant responses and support to teachers as they continually acquire knowledge and skill in literacy teaching.

Integration of literacy

Integrating the teaching of literacy across different fields of knowledge is an important part of effective literacy teaching. Similarly, making connections between in and out of school literacy practices is also important. Pressley (2002) and Hall and Harding (2003) emphasise the need for strong connections across the curriculum so that literacy is also an integral part of other content areas such as science and studies of society. This emphasis enhances both literacy teaching and learning. For the teacher, it maximises both time and opportunity to teach literacy in purposeful ways. For the student, it makes literacy more relevant and initiates the student into diverse literacy practices. This initiation is made more powerful if connections with out of school literacy practices are also made, for example, home and community literacy practices (Hall & Harding, 2003).

Similarly, Wray et al. (2000) report that effective literacy teachers embed their teaching in wider classroom activities and contexts and demonstrate how specific aspects of literacy contribute to understanding and communication in those wider contexts.

Literacy teaching and learning are not discrete pursuits. They are undertaken for a purpose and that purpose is made explicit to both teachers and students when literacy is integrated into other curriculum areas and when

Key Milestones

1991 *100 Schools Project – Literacy Programs Study*: the study focused on empirical delineation of student, teacher and school level factors that were hypothesised to influence students' achievements and progress in reading.

1991 *Victorian Certificate of Education*: satisfactory completion of three units of VCE English was a compulsory requirement.

1993 increased interest in literacy in the secondary school.

Making a Difference: an intensive one-on-one teaching/learning situation

Bridging the Gap: a ten week, one-on-one literacy intervention program designed for students in Years 5-8 experiencing difficulty in reading and writing.

connections are made between school and out of school literacy practices.

Teaching practices

Central to any discussion of effective teaching practice is what effective literacy teachers actually do while teaching. It is possible to list several key teaching practices of effective literacy teachers based on recent research findings about effective literacy practices in the early years, including:

1. Effective literacy teachers teach literacy. They:
 - use a variety of teaching practices and approaches such as modelling; scaffolding; whole class, small group and individual instruction; questioning; monitoring; and coaching.
 - explicitly teach reading, comprehension and writing as well as technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and pronunciation.
2. Effective literacy teachers engage their students in literacy activities. They:
 - make literacy meaningful by explaining and demonstrating the uses and purposes of literacy and literacy activities
 - employ strategies that maintain student focus
 - make connections between students' current literacy knowledge and what is being taught.

Monitoring, assessing and differentiating

Meeting the individual needs of students is recognised as an important element of effective literacy teaching and learning (Hall & Harding, 2003; Loudon et al., 2005). The process of meeting individual learning needs is based on monitoring, assessment and differentiation of teaching strategies and learning programs. Wray et al. (2000) found that effective teachers:

Key Milestones

1996 The *Early Literacy Research Program* initiated to develop a system-wide approach to maximising the literacy achievement of 'at-risk' students in the early years of schooling (ages 5-8).

1996 The *Curriculum and Standards Framework* was developed from the national collaborative curriculum work that produced the English statements and profile for Australian schools. The development of literacy is central to the English curriculum.

1996 The *Learning Assessment Project (LAP)* introduced assessment for students in Years 3 and 5. The Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) replaced the LAP, and was extended to Year 7.

- are diagnostic in the ways in which they approach assessing and monitoring children's reading and writing
- are able to generate explanations as to why children read or wrote as they do
- are able to focus on possible underlying causes of the child's reading and/or writing difficulties
- are able to offer reasons for their conclusions and to make these detailed judgements quickly
- have very clear assessment procedures, including focused observation and systematic record-keeping.

Careful and frequent monitoring of student progress based on such assessment procedures allows effective literacy teachers to set tasks according to an individual student's abilities; to provide appropriate levels of additional support; and to increase demands as the student's literacy skills improve (Hall & Harding, 2003; Pressley, 2002; Wray et al., 2000).

Effective literacy teachers:

- ❖ explicitly teach a range of literacy skills and knowledge through demonstration and modelling
- ❖ teach decoding and spelling, in a systematic way that makes clear to students why these aspects are necessary and useful
- ❖ place great emphasis on students' knowledge of the purposes and function of reading and writing and of the strategies used to enable them to read and write
- ❖ pay systematic attention to the goals of reading and writing as well as technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and pronunciation
- ❖ pursue an embedded approach—give explicit attention to word and sentence level aspects of reading and writing within whole text activities which are both meaningful and explained to the students
- ❖ teach letter sounds within the context of using a text in short regular teaching sessions
- ❖ emphasis the connections between the goals of literacy activities and the activities themselves
- ❖ clearly mark the beginning and end of lessons
- ❖ require students to present a review at the end of the lesson
- ❖ ask questions related to decisions and strategies
- ❖ teach at a brisk pace, regularly refocusing students' attention and use clear time frames

Wray et al., 2000

Key Milestones

1997 publication of *Keys to Life Early Literacy Program* (later *the Early Literacy Program*) and accompanying videos

1998 The *Middle Years Research and Development* (MYRAD) project was based on a set of strategic intention to guide reform efforts and a set of design elements that could be used by schools to develop a number of specific models for the reform of the Middle Years.

Successful interventions: *a Secondary Literacy Numeracy initiative and Middle Years Literacy Project*

2000 *Curriculum and Standards Framework 11*: key references to literacy in the CSF

Effective literacy teachers:

- ❖ balance direct teaching of skills with authentic literacy activities
- ❖ use wide variety of teaching practices and approaches

(Hall & Harding, 2003)

Classroom environment

Creating and maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to literacy teaching and learning are identified as the role of an effective literacy teacher in the early years (Hall & Harding, 2003; Loudon et al., 2005; Pressley, 2002). While Loudon et al. (2005) describe such classrooms as energetic and exciting where pleasure in literacy learning is clearly evident, Pressley (2002) and Wray et al. (2000) describe these classrooms as having many examples of literacy and literature resources displayed. Students are actively encouraged to use these resources and to extend their literacy experiences as much as possible. Pressley goes on to say that

excellent classrooms are very busy academically, with students doing a great deal of actual reading (that is, in contrast to reading related activities, such as completing work sheets) and writing.

In addition to creating a physical space that supports and enriches literacy teaching and learning, creating a safe intellectual climate is also important. Such classrooms are characterised by a positive tone, cooperative atmosphere, encouragement, reinforcement and mutual respect (Loudon et al., 2005; Pressley, 2002).

Teaching Children to Read

The teaching of reading

The National Reading Panel (NRP) project conducted in the USA in 2000 was reported in 'Teaching Children to Read'. The NRP project was a meta-analysis of reading research studies. Some 100,000 studies were identified. There were four criteria on which studies were selected for analysis. Studies with well-defined teaching procedures or with clear links between teaching and learning outcomes, or with a large sample size, or with a recognised experimental design were selected. However, in light of the preceding discussion of the literature on effective literacy teaching, there were no qualitative studies included in the NRP project.

Key Milestones

2002 The aim of the *Restart* initiative was to provide 100 extra teachers in 101 schools over three years to support Year 7 literacy intervention for students most at 'risk' of not achieving satisfactory literacy achievement levels.

2003 *Access to Excellence* is one of four initiatives that make up the Victorian *Innovation and Excellence in the Middle Years* program:

These initiatives were characterised by their flexibility in the local context. Schools could adapt the funding, within the guidelines, within the local context.

2003 The Access to Excellence initiative provided funding to employ 300 additional teachers in 118 selected schools where students in Years 7-10 were not achieving satisfactory levels in literacy, numeracy, attendance or retention.

The NRP investigated five areas of reading instruction: alphabetics (phonemic awareness and phonics instruction); fluency; comprehension - vocabulary and text comprehension instruction; teacher education - reading instruction in teacher education programs; and, computer technology - reading instruction with the use of technology. Findings included the following.

- Phonemic awareness is an important skill when learning to read. Teaching phonemic awareness supports beginning readers, at-risk readers and to a lesser extent older students with reading difficulties.
- Phonemic awareness instruction improves reading comprehension and spelling skills in most readers but is less successful for older students with reading difficulties.
- Phonemic awareness is most effectively taught in small groups rather than individually or in class groups.
- Phonics instruction improves reading, spelling and to a lesser extent comprehension.
- Early instruction in phonics is beneficial for all beginning readers. Evidence suggests that such instruction should continue during the first two to three years of learning to read.
- Systematic phonics instruction, that is teaching a planned sequence of phonic elements, is more effective than responsive teaching of phonics, that is, teaching phonic elements in an unplanned way by highlighting phonic elements as they appear in texts.
- Students need to understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds and to be able to apply these skills in daily reading and writing activities. (2000b)

Key Milestones

2003 The *Schools for Innovation and Excellence (SIE)* initiative provides support for primary and secondary schools to work together in clusters to raise levels of innovation and excellence in Victorian schools.

2005 One of the interdisciplinary strands in the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)*, the Communication strand, provided a clear focus on literacy in all domains.

Refer to Literacy Chronology for further details and the related research. The document can be downloaded at

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/research/researchpublications.htm>

Effective literacy teachers:

- ❖ maximise time on task
- ❖ balance individual with small-group and whole-class instruction
- ❖ engage in modelling, questioning and scaffolding
- ❖ build upon students' responses
- ❖ balance open and closed questions
- ❖ engage in coaching

Ferguson & Topping, 2005

- Phonics instruction is never a total reading program; it needs to be integrated with other reading instruction as part of a balanced reading instruction program. (2000b)
- There is a close relationship between fluency and comprehension at all stages of learning. Guided oral reading with support from an already skilled and fluent reader improves students' word recognition, reading fluency and comprehension.
- Vocabulary instruction improves comprehension.
- Cognitive-strategies instruction improves comprehension. Strategies such as comprehension monitoring, understanding story structure, using graphic organisers, question generation, question answering, and summarising information are effective in improving comprehension.
- Improving the quality of both pre- and in-service teacher education programs improves student outcomes.

Following the NRP study, Ehri, Nunes, Stahl and Willows (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of systemic phonics instruction in relation to learning to read. Research that had already been used in the NRP meta-analysis was not included. The results of this meta-analysis largely reflected those of the NRP report including:

- Systematic phonics instruction supports reading acquisition and helps prevent reading difficulties.
- Phonic instruction should begin early and continue for two to three years.
- Phonics instruction does not help low achieving readers with cognitive limitations.
- Fluency instruction and some forms of comprehension strategy instruction also improved reading, suggesting that to achieve maximum outcomes, phonics instruction must be combined with other forms of reading instruction.

By suggesting that phonics instruction alone does not maximise outcomes in learning to read, Ehri et al. (2001)

contribute to the ongoing debate on the efficacy of whole language approaches versus phonic approaches to the teaching of reading. More specifically Ehri et al. state that:

Some of the studies in our database examined the effectiveness of enriching whole language instruction with systematic phonics. Results were positive and suggest the importance of integrating systematic phonics instruction into whole language approaches rather than eliminating whole language from beginning reading instruction.

Ehri et al. (2001) conclude that

it is important to underscore the place of phonics in a beginning reading program. Systematic phonics instruction by itself does not help students acquire all the processes they need to become successful readers. Phonics needs to be combined with other essential instructional components to create a complete and balanced reading program...By emphasizing all of the processes that contribute to growth in reading, teachers will have the best chance of making every child a reader.

Camilli, Vargas and Yurecko (2003) conducted a re-analysis of the NRP data and claim that ‘two independent teams of researchers arrived at substantially different interpretations of the same evidence’ (emphasis in original, p. 34). Camilli et al. (2003) found that systematic whole language activities and tutoring had a greater effect than systematic phonics instruction; and that ‘systematic phonics instruction when combined with language activities and individual tutoring may triple the effect of phonics alone’.

The findings of these three large meta-analyses (Camilli et al., 2003; Ehri et al., 2001; NRP, 2000) support the findings of the research reviewed in the above section. Research shows that to teach children how to read there needs to be a balanced reading program that systematically teaches the phonics and all other language activities.

Balanced reading programs

Elements of balanced reading programs are discussed in Australian research reports (Louden, 2005; Moore, Evans & Dowson, 2005). Louden et al. (2005) found that while all teachers taught phonics, there were differences in how effective teachers taught phonics. These differences highlight the need for balanced and systematic planning and teaching of reading programs; Louden et al. (2005) found that effective teachers:

- use highly structured approaches to phonics teaching and taught skills and knowledge within wider contexts, such as in themes, in shared book reading, in writing or spelling lessons
- make the purpose of learning phonics clear and relevant
- provide clear explanations
- provide careful scaffolding, including guided practice in a variety of contexts, to ensure that important phonic concepts are learnt

- maintain a focus on broader text level features, with a particular focus on comprehension of texts.

Less effective teachers are more likely to teach phonics as an isolated and routine activity that is presented as an end in itself, rather than as a means to understanding text and tend to place little emphasis on comprehension of text (Louden et al., 2005).

Similarly, Moore, Evans and Dowson (2005) focus on the importance of explicitly teaching phonological awareness skills together with a ‘rich program of language development, vocabulary development, and access to challenging and stimulating literature’. The research reading programs included phonological awareness, print awareness, oral language and vocabulary instruction. All students showed improvement in reading, and the students who received the more complex phonics instruction improved more than those who received regular phonics instruction.

Teaching Children to Read, prepared by the British House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005), reports on literacy education in the UK. This report defines reading by the processes that a reader needs to know:

- decoding: the ability to translate letters on a page into sounds that correspond to a word
- comprehension: once a word has been sounded out, understanding the meaning of that word
- narrative: knowing that a story has an innate progression and coherence—a beginning, middle and end
- familiarity with books and other printed material: a culture of wanting to read and enjoying it.

The current UK literacy policy, the National Literacy Strategy, includes the Searchlight model, so called because the more ‘searchlights’ that can be turned on, the less critical it is if one fails. The analogy works well when considering the importance of balanced reading programs. To become accomplished readers students need an array of skills and strategies to successfully deal with the challenges of living and learning in a complex literate society. The Searchlight model assumes that reading can best be taught by using a range of strategies and skills simultaneously. The elements in the Searchlight model are:

- phonics
- knowledge of text
- grammatical knowledge
- word recognition and graphic knowledge. (p. 10)

One of the reasons for the inquiry and its report *Teaching Children to Read* (British House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005) is continuing concern in the UK about the 20 per cent of eleven-year old students that do not read at an appropriate standard. This is

despite the fact that the UK introduced the ‘literacy hour’ as part of the National Literacy Strategy in 1997. The inquiry investigated teaching methods and program content with much evidence presented on varying methods of literacy instruction. The major finding of the report is that there ‘is unlikely to be any one method or set of changes that would lead to a complete elimination of underachievement in reading’. The report recommends further large-scale comparative research to investigate the best ways to teach children to read and recognises the need for continuing improvements in teacher professional development.

The British House of Commons Education and Skills Committee reported on the results of the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) (2001) These results indicated that of 140,000 ten year old children in 35 European countries, English children ranked third behind Sweden and the Netherlands. However, English children were less likely to enjoy reading than children from other countries and England has one the ‘largest variations between its most and least able pupils’.

Submissions to the committee also raised this lack of pleasure in reading. Concern was expressed that the ‘NLS Framework for Teaching is too rigid in structure and leads to dull and mechanical experience for pupils. These submissions suggested that there is a danger that such uninspiring lessons will demotivate pupils, so that although they may be proficient in reading and writing the English language, they have little enthusiasm to learn and any benefits that this proficiency may have afforded them are lost’.

This again raises the need for balance; balance between teaching so that students can achieve agreed benchmarks and at the same time enjoy reading for pleasure; balance between systematic skills instruction and innovative and enjoyable engagement with texts. Knowledgeable and committed teachers are able to strike this balance in teaching children to read. Effective literacy teachers work the balance to the benefit of all students in their classrooms.

Effective literacy teachers balance between:

- ❖ analytical decoding and holistic comprehension
- ❖ whole-class, small group and individual instruction
- ❖ work at word, sentence and whole-text level
- ❖ too much and too little task challenge
- ❖ the integration of language, reading and writing with each other and with other aspects of the curriculum
- ❖ various types of direct instruction (teaching, telling, modelling, explaining, summarising and various methods of eliciting, monitoring, shaping and consolidating pupil performance
- ❖ various types of questioning—especially open questioning about strategies, building on pupil responses, coaching and pupil summarisation
- ❖ classroom teaching that is both complicated and coherent and is also tailored to the needs of the individual students.

Building on literacy – reading and learning

Effective literacy teaching

Building on the foundations of literacy is a complex task. Not only is there a need to build breadth and depth but inevitably, often unexpectedly, the soundness of the foundations will be tested. Teachers and students face increasingly sophisticated technologies and academic demands. Into this mix are added increasingly diverse and complex life experiences and expectations of students. Not only are students engaged in school-based literacy but they will also engage in a wide range of out-of-school literacy practices. To be effective, literacy teaching needs to be responsive to these demands, experiences, expectations and practices.

Literacy research in this area has broad, recurring themes of student engagement and in and out of school literacy practices. These themes are not mutually inclusive, adding yet more complexity to the task of identifying effective literacy teaching and learning practices.

Students' literacy practices and engagement

To be effective, literacy teaching must address issues of self-efficacy and engagement (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Alvermann, 2001; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) concluded that the level of student short and long-term engagement is an important factor for learning outcomes. While Guthrie and Wigfield acknowledge other factors, such as achievement on standardised tests and other assessment strategies to be important, student engagement is the most crucial factor.

Effective literacy teachers explicitly:

- ❖ teach at word level
- ❖ teach comprehension
- ❖ teach writing skills

(Pressley, 2002)

Student engagement is related to how competent and confident students are about their abilities to comprehend, discuss, study, and write about multiple forms of text (print, visual, and oral) by using both their everyday knowledge of language and literacy and subject-specific content knowledge (Alvermann, 2001). Students view themselves as either successful or unsuccessful according to their perceptions of their own self-efficacy in these matters. These perceptions are validated by teachers, parents and peers. Such validation provides positive reinforcement for high achieving students but the opposite for low achieving students.

Hand et al. (2003) proffer that both high and low achieving students engage in complex out-of-school literacy practices yet the academic value of these skills is often unrecognised or denied. If students are given the opportunity to use these skills in school activities, for example undertaking a web search for a science activity, then

in carrying out these academic tasks using a full repertoire of literacies, they are learning not only valuable content and skills, but also (and just as important) how to see themselves as autonomous learners who know things about speaking, listening, representing, interpreting, reading, and writing outside the classroom that have application and value inside the school as well (Hand et al., 2003).

Similarly, Hull and Schultz (2001) also identify the need to bridge students' worlds and classroom practice; the importance of using and extending the range of literacy practices that students use; and the importance of deciding what 'forms of schooled literacy are powerful intellectual tools, appropriate for these new times, and what forms are mere conventions or historical artifacts' (Hull & Schultz, 2001).

Alloway et al. (2002) studied classroom interventions aimed at improving the literacy learning of boys, which included the use of in and out of school literacy activities. While this study was about boys and literacy, like most other education research it was not conducted in a gender-free zone. Most participating classes had students who were boys and students who were girls. Alloway et al. report on the interventions as contributing to the improvement of the male students but also stress that the literacy learning of female students was not compromised by the interventions.

Importantly, no teachers reported that the intervention strategies that they trialled had jeopardised girls' opportunities to learn or to participate in the literate practices of the classroom. Those who thought that their interventions had worked for boys, also thought that they worked for girls. In teachers' observations, it simply was not the case that girls were excluded through the processes they employed to engage more boys. The improved pedagogy seemed to enfranchise both boys and girls.

The first of the interventions in the Alloway et al. (2002) study, 'expanding repertoires for (re)presenting the self', was aimed at improving engagement with classroom literacy activities by extending the range of acceptable ways that students (with a focus on boys) could participate in these activities. The interventions focused on boys' sense of self and personal experiences and reconfigured classroom literacy as active and embodied. There was an emphasis on 'providing 'hands-on' literacy experiences and of 'doing' literacy' and using boys' perceived interest in technologies to increase their engagement. The strategies used included

- intensified use of technology
- co-authoring and co-production of magazines and newspapers
- debating and oral performances
- sustained role-play
- opportunities for choice, expression of personal interests and opinion in literacy activities, for example, speaking and writing activities on a range of topics such as movies, music, video games, magazines, sport and school issues.

The second intervention, 'expanding repertoires for relating', aimed at developing productive social relations within the classrooms and classroom literacy activities. Table 2 is a reproduction of the rationale and activities used in this intervention.

Table 2: Expanding repertoire of relating

<p>Providing boys with more authority and agency with tasks and materials</p>	<p>Changing relationships of authority and agency in classrooms to democratise the context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with student–selected topics and resources, deliberately using everyday, real–life, popular texts • Focusing on opinions and non–fictional, visual material • Providing students with ownership of task, topic (more free choice) • Developing hands–on, practical activities
<p>Building ‘safe’ classroom environments</p>	<p>Constructing and insisting upon a classroom environment for speaking out and being treated with dignity and respect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing a safe classroom environment for sharing ideas and opinions and building confidence • Establishing single–sex mixed–ability groups for discussion and collaboration • Establishing contexts requiring cooperation and sharing, and respect for the needs and rights of other students
<p>Providing contexts where boys receive positive feedback, and can demonstrate their skills and knowledge</p>	<p>Providing regular feedback, and establishing contexts where boys’ knowledge, opinions and contributions can be valued</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building in positive feedback and reinforcement: for example, rewards, competitions • Providing opportunity for learning and presentation through multimedia • Encouraging risk–taking by involving boys in new genres and new literacy activities • Teachers treating children with respect and dignity at all times • Teachers valuing students opinions and advice • Boys producing materials for younger boys and sharing it with them • Establishing a buddy system in the school

Source: Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt (2002)

The third intervention, ‘expanding repertoires for engaging with and negotiating the culture’, focused on ways of increasing the ways that boys engage with the real and everyday literacy, with popular culture materials, with electronic technologies and with multimedia and multimodal work. This intervention involved expanding school literacy related materials to include things such as youth culture, cross–cultural activities and a range of modes of delivery and used the following strategies:

- incorporating genres from everyday life, for example, advertisements, docketts, lolly wrappers

- drawing on content of popular culture in which boys seemed to be interested, for example, surfing, dirt bikes, rugby league, fishing and skate boarding
- increasing the use of electronic technologies in the classroom, for example, computers, digital cameras, CD-ROMs
- integrating multiple media and communication modes in the classroom, for example, model-making, conducting and taping interviews, designing posters, drawing diagrams, taking photographs, using the telephone or fax machine and undertaking scientific experiments (Alloway et al., 2002) .

The interventions were successful in improving the engagement and confidence of boys in literacy activities as well as in areas such as student vocabulary, quality of literacy work, behaviour and attitude, and the capacity to ‘operate as critically literate text analysts’. These improvements were reported for boys and girls, for ‘reluctant literacy learners’, and for students with more significant reading difficulties. Alloway et al. also found that broadening one repertoire impacted on the other two, thus implying that improvements in student engagement and levels of self-efficacy can be instigated through small changes to teaching strategies as outlined above.

There is however a note of caution. Alloway et al. (2002) question the overall efficacy of real-world repertoires as a long-term literacy strategy by asking whether

the importations of ‘real world’ repertoires constitute a long-term literacy programs, or are they at best brief motivational or energising moves in schools’ part to have boys re-engage the demands of literacy learning across the curricular arrears and across the school years?

and how schools can prepare students for

everyday realities, outside [school] and later [post school], at the same time as acculturating students into specialised non-commonsensical and powerful knowledge through exposure to curricular disciplines.

Above and beyond the need to engage students and improve their confidence in literacy learning, teachers need to ensure that students are challenged and continuously extended in their literacy knowledge and experience. There is a balance to be maintained.

From another perspective, Hand et al. (2003) consider that school literacy is privileged over more informal kinds of literacy and this ‘elevates the importance and value of academic discourse, reading, and writing but tells teachers little about their students’ everyday uses of language and literacy’. Further, Hand et al. (2003) claim that

language practices of research laboratories and classrooms involve speaking, listening, writing, representing, reading and viewing the various signs, gestures, texts and discourses related to doing science, understanding science, and communicating science. These uses of language must be seen as a legitimate part of scientific literacy

and must be considered in future science education explorations so as to empower learning and inform instruction.

The message, even though they start from different positions, from Alloway et al. (2002) and Hand et al. (2003) is the same; students need to be inducted into real and powerful literacies. Engagement of students through practices that they find interesting and meaningful within their current life contexts is meeting only part of the responsibility that teachers have to their students. The other part lies in teaching students the skills and literate practices that will enable them to assume their roles as participating members of a society that is increasingly demanding in terms of literacy.

To equip students to take their place in a literate society, teachers need to involve adolescents in higher level thinking about what they read and write. Alvermann argues that this is not possible through a transmission model of teaching, *'with its emphasis on skill and drill, teacher-centred instruction, and passive learning'* and that *'effective alternatives to this model include participatory approaches that actively engage students in their own learning and that treat texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorized'* (Alvermann, 2001).

Teaching strategies in middle and secondary years

Table 3 is an overview of recent research findings about effective literacy teaching practices in middle and secondary years of schooling. From this overview and the research reviewed above it is possible to list several key teaching practices of effective literacy teachers. They:

- purposefully plan to actively engage students in a wide range of literacy learning experiences
- actively position students as being responsible for their own literacy learning
- create learning contexts in which all students are supported and encouraged to participate in powerful curriculum literacies
- explicitly teach curriculum literacies, including vocabulary, comprehension strategies, genre and critical analysis skills
- make explicit links between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- acknowledge the impact of popular culture and new technologies on the students and plan to use student knowledge of these in literacy teaching and learning.

Effective literacy teachers use:

- ❖ assessment-based teaching
- ❖ explicit teaching
- ❖ modelling and scaffolding

(Louden et al, 2005)

Table 3 Effective literacy instruction in middle and secondary years of schooling

<p>Effective literacy instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fosters student motivation—including self-efficacy and goal setting • teaches strategies—for example, self-monitoring for lapses in comprehension and analysing new vocabulary • supports growth in conceptual knowledge—for example, reading trade books to supplement textbook information, viewing videos, and hands-on experience • includes social interaction—for example, collaborating and discussing with peers <p style="text-align: right;">Guthrie and Wigfield (2000)</p>	<p>Effective reading instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • includes strategies for developing comprehension skills—for example, self-questioning, answering a teacher’s questions, cooperative learning, comprehension monitoring, representing information using graphic organisers, making use of different text structures, and summarising • explicitly teaches skills and strategies • teaches vocabulary knowledge • exposes students to various genres of text (for example, information, narrative, poetry) and teaches that different genres are used for different purposes <p style="text-align: right;">RAND Reading Study Group (2002)</p>
<p>Effective literacy instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • builds on elements of both formal and informal literacies • takes into account students’ interests and needs • attends to the challenges of living in an information-based economy during a time when the bar has been raised significantly for literacy achievement <p style="text-align: right;">Alvermann (2001)</p>	<p>A meta-analysis of the effects of school-based writing-to-learn interventions on academic achievement found small but positive impact on academic achievement. The two factors enhanced effects were the use of meta-cognitive prompts and program length.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Bangert-Drowns, Hurley & Wilkinson (2004)</p>
<p>Effective literacy instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • includes purposeful teaching • makes the literacy objective of a lesson explicit and includes a multi-strand approach with • the specific teaching of literacy within English and related departments • the subject-specific literacy demands within individual departments • cross-curricular issues of literacy which can be supported by all departments • a whole school literacy awareness strand that concentrates on creating, and maintaining, a positive ethos towards literacy and a high public profile for literacy within the institution <p style="text-align: right;">Lewis & Wray (2001)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom discussion approaches were effective across a range of situations and for students of varying levels of academic ability (p. 719) • Discussion-based approaches supports students in the context of high academic demands to internalise the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own (p. 706) • Approaches that contributed most to student performance were those that used discussion to develop comprehensive understanding, encouraging explorations and multiple perspectives rather than focusing on correct interpretations and predetermined conclusions (p. 722) <p style="text-align: right;">Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran (2003)</p>
<p>Literacy assessment practices need to be closely linked to teaching and learning and assessment information needs to guide curriculum development and reform.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luke et al. (2003)</p>	

Monitoring, assessing and differentiating

Luke et al. (2003) in their study of middle year schooling found that:

- there was little consistency around curriculum, teaching practice, and the use of assessment data
- there was limited consolidation of diverse assessment information and limited alignment with school programs
- there was a general proliferation of assessment practices using eclectic methods and instruments.

The implications of these findings suggest that teachers and schools need to develop the use of assessment information within the context of evaluating their literacy programs, curricula and/or teaching reform efforts, and need to consider how to use individual student performance information for the purpose of reporting to parents. The report concluded that there needs to be a stronger focus on providing teachers and schools with the skills to use and integrate diverse assessment information so that they can consolidate and analyse their data on individual student performance to then drive improved curricula and/or teaching reform efforts. The greatest potential for generating improved literacy outcomes for middle years students, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, appears to be in schools with whole school approaches to assessment, a large focus on curriculum and teaching practice as well as recognition of the diversity and needs of their student populations.

Assessment and monitoring and differentiation are considered significant by other researchers. Alloway et al. (2002) call for teachers to acknowledge and explore the different backgrounds of students and what backgrounds mean for literacy learning. Alvermann (2001) states that students who struggle to read in subject area classrooms need to have instruction that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to their needs and that to be effective, such instruction needs to be embedded in the regular curriculum and address differences in their abilities to read, write, and communicate orally as strengths, not as deficits. The process of supporting student learning through matching instruction to individual needs begins, and ends, with assessment.

Classroom environment

Just as the creation and maintenance of positive classroom and school environments are considered to be an important part of the development of early literacy, so too are they important in later years of schooling. Lewis and Wray (2001) note that all classrooms, not just subject area English classrooms, need to be attractive literate environments in which literacy skills are demonstrated, displayed, supported and valued. Alloway et al. (2002) identify the need for classrooms to be a safe space where students can participate without the fear of humiliation even when they are not successful in their literacy attempts. Teachers' skills and knowledge contribute to the creation of such environments.

Student diversity

To this point the focus of this review has been on strategies to develop and improve the literacy skills of students who are progressing, and can be expected to continue to progress, along what can be loosely called, normal paths of development. There are however, students for whom normal pathways are challenging and elusive. For the purposes of this section the term ‘learning difficulties’ will be used to describe a range of factors that impact on the learning of these students. While there is much debate on definitions and description (Elkins, 2002), the scope of the present review does not permit in depth consideration of these issues. However, there also needs to be recognition that these learning difficulties manifest themselves to varying degrees and with varying levels of effect on the literacy learning. These differing manifestations require different types of interventions and some flexibility in the description of the difficulty, for example the term ‘reading difficulty’. This point will be demonstrated in the following section.

The *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (the Inquiry) (DEST, 2005) reviewed and analysed recent national and international research about literacy teaching approaches particularly approaches that are shown to be effective in assisting students with reading difficulties. The Inquiry focused on reading and identified six key elements related to the teaching and learning of reading. These key elements are:

1. A belief that each child can learn to read and write regardless of background.
2. An early and systematic emphasis on the explicit teaching of phonics.
3. A subsequent focus on direct teaching.
4. A rich print environment with many resources, including fiction and non-fiction books, charts and computer programs.
5. Strong leadership and management practices, involving whole-school approaches to the teaching of reading and writing.
6. An expectation that teachers will engage in evidence-based professional learning and learn from each other. (DEST, 2005)

The Inquiry also identified that effective teachers often integrate teaching practices from several strategies and that an integrated, balanced approach is more effective than exclusive reliance on one single approach (DEST, 2005).

School visits conducted as part of the Inquiry revealed a broad range of teaching practices from which teachers draw to meet the diverse learning needs of children in their classrooms (DEST, 2005). These teaching practices included:

- explicit, direct teaching of reading via systematic phonics instruction
- use of an extensive range of observation strategies and assessments to identify specific learning needs and to monitor students’ learning progress
- professional learning communities among teachers with a strong sense of collegiality

- a culture of data-informed continuous improvement
- strong connections with other support agencies
- planning and management of transitions from one phase of schooling to another
- valuing of parents and provision of accurate and timely reports on progress
- whole-school approaches and policies to teaching and learning
- use of assessment at on entry to school and regularly throughout the years of schooling to identify students who are at risk of not making adequate progress.

The intervention approach implicit in the findings of the Inquiry is the provision of early literacy teaching and learning experiences that minimise the chances that students will have difficulties as they progress through their schooling. While such an approach has the potential to improve the literacy outcomes of many students, it seems unlikely that improvements derived through this approach could be universal. Even with exemplary early years literacy education, there will be some students who do not acquire literacy skills at an appropriate level. These students will require additional support.

Hay, Elias and Booker (2005) conducted a review of literature relating to literacy and numeracy and students with learning difficulties and identified the following with regard to literacy teaching and learning.

- The attitude of the regular classroom teacher is a critical factor in assisting students with learning difficulties.
- Students with learning difficulties are frequently unable to use strategies that will best enable them to achieve the goals of the reading task.
- Students with learning difficulties make greater progress when instructional interventions are multifaceted combining a range of approaches, for example, vocabulary, comprehension, awareness of sound and letter recognition, use of environmental print and concepts of print.
- Teachers' pacing and presentation of classroom content significantly influence students' ability to learn.
- Multi-sensory teaching strategies assist students to identify, integrate, store and recall information such as basic number facts and word patterns.
- Frequent supportive and motivating practice enhances students' learning.
- Providing assistance to parents to understand literacy enhances achievement.

While these findings provide only general guidelines for support and intervention, they are congruent with more detailed findings of other researchers in the field of literacy and learning difficulties.

Gersten, Fuchs, Williams and Baker (2001) reviewed literature related to teaching comprehension to students with learning disabilities. Gersten et al. (2001) describe the difficulties experienced by these students in terms of inefficiency rather than deficiency. Inefficiency in strategic processing of text means that students with learning disabilities might not be able to actively monitor their comprehension. According to Gersten et al. other difficulties in comprehension skills include:

- Knowledge of text structures—students with learning disabilities develop this skill at a much slower rate and have little awareness of narrative and/or expository text structures.
- Vocabulary knowledge—students with learning disabilities bring less vocabulary knowledge to reading than those without disabilities and therefore their comprehension is also diminished.
- Using background information—students with learning difficulties have difficulty identifying story themes, summarising and discussing what they read.
- Students with learning disabilities have difficulty with both fluency and comprehension.
- Limited task persistence also hinders reading comprehension.

Effective literacy strategy instruction for students with learning disabilities includes oral reading and repeated readings. Questioning, retelling, teacher modelling and extensive teacher feedback lead to improved comprehension.

Ellis (2005) in her review of the educational psychology research identifies two teaching approaches that support the learning of students with learning difficulties. These are direct instruction and strategy instruction. Direct instruction (sometimes referred to as explicit instruction) is based on behaviourist principles and involves teaching a fixed sequence of skills acquisition, for example, synthetic phonics instruction. According to Ellis (2005), direct instruction is characterised by:

- scripted presentations that have been developed through field tests and are intended to provide teachers with explicit guidance on lesson structure and presentation
- teaching the essentials, that is, specific skills needed to accomplish specific tasks
- small group instruction with students with similar abilities in the same group
- rapid pacing
- practice and drill. (Ellis, 2005)

Strategy instruction focuses on teaching students strategies to enhance their performance on given tasks. Ellis (2005) identifies three broad categories of strategies:

- cognitive strategies, including comprehension related skills such as underlining and summarising

- meta-cognitive strategies focusing on self-management of learning skills
- self-regulation strategies including regulating motivational and emotional states in relation to learning skills. (Ellis, 2005)

Strategy instruction is characterised by

- presenting strategy in small steps
- modelling, including think-aloud and scaffolding techniques
- guided practice and feedback. (Ellis, 2005)

Ellis (2005) also acknowledges that ‘balance’ is a key term and concept in the literature related to teaching students with learning difficulties and that ‘balance’ can be described as a ‘combination or alternation of various aspects of the curriculum and/or instruction’. Balance is central to the process of meeting the learning needs of students with learning difficulties and is achieved when teachers make decisions based on their knowledge of the needs of their students and strategies that will meet these needs.

Again the issue of balance comes to the fore in literacy intervention programs, as do other key factors in literacy learning. Selecting the balance is based on the teacher’s knowledge and understanding of the individual learning needs of students and knowledge of the strategies the will enhance the literacy learning of individual students. Selecting the balance is dependent on issues of teachers’ professional development and schools’ literacy policy and procedures. Through the skilled and informed selection of intervention strategies to support the literacy learning of students with learning difficulties it is possible to ameliorate some of these difficulties and to broadly decrease the number of students who do not achieve at appropriate levels. However, it is likely there will be other students who do not respond to literacy intervention programs. For these students, learning to read will be elusive. Yet they are called to function and participate in literate environments, in school and in the community. While teaching ‘basic’ skills might remain a valid part of literacy programs for these students, alternate pathways need to be accessed. Such pathways need to engage these students with the purpose, richness and pleasure of literacy.

Andrew, Beswick, Swabey, Barrett and Bridge (2005) found that in classrooms which included students with high support needs (HSN) effective literacy teaching practices included:

- connectedness across the curriculum
- plenary sessions used purposively to sustain analysis and deepen awareness and understanding of what was being developed, or what had been learned
- metalanguage explicitly explored during inquiry units and skill routines
- thinking aloud, metacognitive cueing, modelling and explicit feedback used without succumbing to ‘answer-getting’ or ‘quickest’ closure on challenges
- differentiation and multi-layering support and open-ended activity

- exposure of the student with HSN to rich pedagogies through learning activity in the main class groupings, bridged as appropriate by teaching assistant or peers
- in-group mediation from teacher, peers or teacher assistant to engage student with HSN in 'same or similar' learning as the class
- a focus by the teacher assistant on communicative competence, capitalising on the interactive opportunities inherent in the one-on-one and mediated group experiences of students with HSN
- dedicated and funded planning time for the teacher and the teacher assistant to develop programs and monitor progress of students with HSN.

The students, despite their HSN, were engaged in the richness and diversity of classroom literacy programs and activities. Others provided support as required. In the giving and receiving of this support, the participants in these classrooms participated formally and informally in important aspects of intervention, that is, the recognition of difference and the acknowledgement that metaphorically and practically 'we are all in this together'.

Pathways to literacy

For teachers

The findings from the review of national and international research on the issue of literacy in education suggest four basic premises for effective teaching of literacy. Teachers should

Plan for time on task

Research shows that time children spend reading and writing affects the acquisition of literacy skills. While the research is divided on the most effective ways to organise time to promote student interest in reading in addition to skills—from the implementation of singular focused literacy hours or simply time and activities across the day—the allocation of substantial time is a starting point.

Plan to teach phonics

The information on instruction in phonics provided in the review shows that it is important at some stage in reading development for children to have a knowledge of phonics. The research is divided on the form of phonics instruction and the timing of such instruction. However, teachers should be developing programs that incorporate sound and letter associations from an early stage.

Have balance in their programs

Effective literacy programs, particularly for the early years, have balance in instructional approaches incorporating phonics, book readings and draft writing. Balanced programs enhance interest in reading for students while improving literacy skills.

Make connections across areas and in and out of school practices

Literacy is not a practice in isolated classroom activities. Teachers need to focus on literacy practices across different discipline areas and link the children's literacy practices from home and outside school activities with school learning.

For schools and school leadership

The review shows that effective literacy instruction stems from effective school approaches to literacy planning and support the findings and recommendations of DE&T initiatives such as *Restart (2004)*; *Successful Interventions Literacy Research Project*" (DE&T, 2002); and *Access to Excellence (2005)*.

The following key principles emerge for effective school planning and operation.

Build capacity

Schools can build their capacity for effective literacy instruction through engagement with others, other schools and professional bodies. Teachers engaging in professional conversations with others allows sharing of effective ideas and creation of a learning

organisation. Schools should cluster with other schools in the area or like schools to create professional learning clusters.

Develop a school literacy plan

Effective literacy instruction and planning requires a whole school literacy plan. This must be a living document, enacted in all classrooms, and discussed across the different year levels by teachers, allowing transitions in teaching and learning for students from year to year.

Create literate school environments and communities

An effective literacy environment goes beyond the school. The literacy plan should be developed in consultation with members of the community and shared with members of the community. Parents and caregivers should be informed about the expectations of the school and instructional practices so that they also can assist in the development of their child's literacy skills.

Respond to diverse student needs

Effective literacy teaching for all students requires early identification of potential difficulties in literacy development and ongoing assessment and monitoring of students' progress. Once identified, programs and interventions can be implemented to support the individual learning needs of students.

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