Literacy Literature Review for Evidence Based Practices Framework
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Evidence Based Literacy and Numeracy Framework

Literature Review: Literacy

*Purpose of the Literature Review*

This literature review aims to distil the critical features of effective literacy learning design and classroom practices from a wide range of current studies and research. These key characteristics will inform the design of an Evidence Based Literacy Practices Framework. The purpose of the Framework is to define and explain the repertoire of practices that research has found will lead to improved literacy outcomes for students. It is proposed to use this Framework to inform the evaluation and/or development of literacy programs for schools in the Northern Territory (NT).

*Scope*

Given the plethora of studies into various aspects of literacy teaching and learning (Freebody, 2007), it is important to define the research parameters for this literature review. Firstly, it has focussed on recent, major studies into effective literacy teaching and learning practices conducted in the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA) and Australia. Secondly, for the purposes of developing an evidence based literacy and numeracy framework that could be used at the system level, it was decided to consider only research that involved a meta-analysis of current research or large scale research studies conducted in a wide range of schools. Findings from these studies are more likely to be transferable when applied to the range of learning contexts in the NT. Finally, the research selected for this literature review focussed on effective literacy teaching and learning for students in the early, primary and middle years of schooling (students from or just prior to school entry to years 9 or 10).

Recent research on literacy has explored a number of discrete areas:

1. The features of effective literacy classroom teaching and learning including:
   - the content of literacy programs
   - teaching, learning and assessment strategies.
2. Characteristics of literacy teacher effectiveness, including knowledge, beliefs and skills and attitudes towards professional learning.
Studies in these areas have been considered as relevant to this review and have been included in this literature review.

**The literacy debate**

What should be in a literacy program and how that content should be taught and learned has been the focus of considerable debate amongst literacy educators for the past forty years. Much of this debate has polarised around two approaches to teaching literacy: the whole language method and the skills-based method and has largely focussed on the teaching of reading. Proponents of these methods have strongly influenced both the recommended content of literacy programs and the teaching and learning strategies. The whole language approach proposes a contextual view of learning literacy. Based on constructivist theory, it emphasises the importance of teaching and learning reading and writing in authentic literacy contexts. By contrast, the skills based approach has focussed on breaking down reading and writing into component parts and the explicit teaching of skills such as phonics, phonemic awareness and spelling.

More recent research on literacy teaching advocates a more balanced approach to literacy content and teaching strategies encompassing aspects of skills based and whole language methods. Many highlight it is not a matter of which method is best but rather which approaches are best used to teach a particular specific element of literacy for particular groups of students (Education Queensland, 2000; DEST, 2005). Importantly, it has been pointed out that the most effective literacy teachers use aspects of both approaches in a balanced and integrated way (Stanovich, 2000; Davis, 2002).

**Literacy program content**

**Literacy**

*Literacy conventionally refers to reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening effectively in a range of contexts. In the 21st century, the definition of literacy has expanded to refer to a flexible, sustainable mastery of a set of capabilities in the use*
and production of traditional texts and new communications technologies using spoken language, print and multimedia. Learners need to be able to adjust and modify their use of language to better meet contextual demands in varying situations (National Curriculum Board currently ACARA, 2009, p.6).

Literacy is not a subject but rather a set of skills that include speaking and listening, reading and writing. These skills are not confined to the English learning area. While literacy is a strand in the proposed new national English curriculum (ACARA, 2010) and the development of many literacy skills will occur through the teaching and learning of English, learners will use these skills in other learning areas and must be supported to develop and consolidate these skills in these contexts. This means that in defining the learning content or ‘curriculum’ for literacy programs in the NT it is reasonable to expect that a large proportion of literacy learning should align with the content descriptions and achievement standards in the literacy strand of the proposed Australian curriculum and with the curriculum and achievement standards in the English and ESL learning areas of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF). However, a review of national and international research on what should be in a literacy program is useful to ensure that all important aspects of literacy learning have been considered.

**United Kingdom**

Much of the recent research into literacy teaching, in particular for students in the early years of schooling, has focussed on teaching reading. Developments in literacy teaching in the United Kingdom have recently been dominated by the design and implementation of the National Literacy Strategy Framework (1998) aimed at ensuring higher literacy standards for children at primary school. The Framework included strong recommendations regarding the content and organisation of literacy teaching including a prescribed emphasis on phonics. This caused much debate amongst educators in the UK, resulting in the *House of Commons Education and Skills Committee Report Teaching Children to Read* (2005) which recommended the renewal of the *National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching in the UK*. An independent review was commissioned by the UK Government in 2005 to conduct the review and to determine:
• the types of best practice that should be expected in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics
• what range of provision best supports children with significant literacy difficulties and enables them to catch up with their peers.

The independent review (Rose, 2006), states that the case for systematic phonic work is overwhelming and much strengthened by a synthetic approach. The key features of this approach are to teach beginning readers:

- grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
- to apply the highly important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes in order, all through a word to read it
- to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- that blending and segmenting are reversible processes (Rose, 2006, p.20).

While Rose acknowledges the teaching of phonics is a vital element in teaching students to read, he recognises it is also important in the development of their writing and spelling skills. He points out that there are other knowledge, skills and understandings which children need to become skilled readers and writers. These include reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills which should be developed through students’ exposure to a wide range of literature and literacy activities. Rose acknowledges that teachers require a detailed knowledge and understanding of literacy and an ability to draw on a range of literacy approaches to engage students and maximise their learning outcomes (Rose, 2006, p.4).

**United States**

Similarly in the US, recent large scale studies have examined existing research into the teaching and learning of literacy with a particular focus on the teaching of reading in the early years of schooling. The first study, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, by Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) reviewed research on:
• normal reading development and instruction
• risk factors useful in identifying groups and individuals at risk of reading failure
• prevention, intervention and instructional approaches to ensuring optimal reading outcomes.

Snow, Burns and Griffin recommend that the full array of early reading accomplishments be explicitly taught to all students. These include the alphabetic principle, reading sight words, reading words by mapping speech sounds to parts of words, achieving fluency, and comprehension (1998, p.6). They point out that:

getting started in alphabetic reading depends critically on mapping the letters and spellings of words onto the speech units that they represent; failure to master word recognition can impede text comprehension (1998, p.6).

While their report recognises that explicit phonics and phonemic awareness instruction is vital for beginning readers, it acknowledges that comprehension skills need to be developed in the early years of schooling. Their report notes that these skills can be enhanced through explicit instruction on vocabulary, the syntax and rhetorical structures of written language and strategies such as summarising, predicting and monitoring (1998, p.6).

In 1997, US Congress commissioned research on the various approaches to teaching children to read. A National Reading Panel was established which conducted an extensive and rigorous meta-analysis of recent research on teaching reading. Key findings were published in their report, Teaching Children to Read (2000), and largely concurred with those from Snow’s report. The panel argues strongly that phonemic awareness and phonics provide essential foundational knowledge in the alphabetic system. However, they also recognise that reading fluency, comprehension and vocabulary were important components of effective reading programs.

In response to increasing national concern about the number of students in the middle years who are struggling with literacy, a number of US researchers
conducted investigations into effective literacy programs for primary aged students and adolescents (Biancarosa and Snow, 2004; Torgesen, et al., 2007). These studies maintain that students in the middle years need explicit teaching in many of the same areas of literacy as students in the early years, although there may be less emphasis on phonics instruction\(^1\).

In addition, Biancarosa and Snow (2004) and Torgesen et al., (2007) recommend that students in the middle years should:

- be taught explicit vocabulary concepts
- be exposed to diverse texts at a variety of difficulty levels and on a variety of topics
- include comprehension strategies across all learning areas.

In another report, *Interventions for Adolescent Struggling Readers: A Meta-Analysis with Implications for Practice*, Scammacca et al., (2007) state that appropriate reading interventions will benefit young adolescents if they are targeted at both the text and whole word level. The researchers conclude that interventions that focused on vocabulary work, comprehension strategies, and repeated reading for reading fluency were effective in improving outcomes for struggling readers in the middle years.

**Multilingual learners**

Given that by 2030 in the USA it is anticipated that 40 percent of the school population will be students who have a language background other than English, a number of recent, large scale research studies have focussed specifically on effective literacy practices for this demographic group. A National Literacy Panel of 13 experts in second language learning reviewed the quantitative and qualitative research on the development of literacy in language-minority students. Their report, *Developing Literacy in Second Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* (2006) identified, assessed, and synthesised findings from this research. The National Literacy Panel’s findings on

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\(^1\) It should be noted that a number of important studies on teaching literacy to multilingual learners maintain that ongoing phonics instruction is often required for students in the middle years who are learning English as a second language or dialect (Thomas and Collier, 2002; National Literacy Panel, 2006).
curriculum content for second language learners are similar to those of the National Reading Panel and Snow, Burns and Griffin. They identify phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension as having clear benefits for the literacy learning of language-minority students. The panel states that high quality writing instruction for native English speakers has similar benefits for language-minority students. Moreover, programs that integrate the teaching of these various components or oral language, reading and writing simultaneously are more successful in improving literacy for language-minority students. Nevertheless, the Panel highlights that there may need to be greater emphasis on particular areas of literacy learning such as work with particular phonemes and combinations of phonemes in English that do not exist in the home language of multilingual learners (2006, p.9).

**Australia**

In Australia, a number of recent research projects have concurred with international findings in advocating a more balanced and integrated approach to literacy content. In 2005, a team of researchers was funded by the Australian Government to conduct an inquiry into the current practices in the literacy acquisition of Australian school children. The inquiry report, *Teaching Reading, A National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (2005), states that the current dichotomy between a whole language and phonics approach to teaching reading is unhelpful and proposed that teachers need to draw on a range of literacy teaching practices, knowing when, how and why to apply them according to students’ particular learning needs. It stressed that the systematic teaching of phonics is pivotal in providing students with the skills to read and must be included in early years literacy programs and in intervention programs for students in the primary and/or middle years.

The importance of a balanced and integrated approach to teaching literacy is reinforced in other research, notably the recent research project, *In Teachers Hands: Effective Literacy Practices in the Early Years of Schooling* (Louden et al., 2006). Its purpose was to determine the literacy practices that lead to improved students’ outcomes in the early years.
In the first phase of the study the researchers undertook an extensive literacy review which indicated that:

>a balanced literacy curriculum that is explicitly taught and which includes word and text level knowledge and skills, particularly phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension and oral language in addition to varied classroom practice, leads to improved literacy outcomes (Louden et al., 2006, p.2).

Another important research paper Literate Futures: the report of the literacy review for Queensland state schools (Education Queensland, 2000) presented similar findings. It maintains that:

Effective literacy approaches involve an informed blending and theorised matching of program decisions, rather than from an adherence to any one particular prescribed method or approach (Education Queensland, 2000, p.69).

A key outcome of the Literate Futures Report was the proposal of a new framework that could be responsive to the emergence of the new electronically based, digital culture. The ‘four resource roles of the literate person’ model was designed to map and chart the repertoire of new literacy practices that are required of young people. These are that young people will need to be a:

- **Code Breaker**: The practices required to ‘crack’ the codes and systems of written and spoken language and visual images
- **Meaning Maker**: The practices required to build and construct cultural meanings from texts
- **Text User**: The practices required to use texts effectively in everyday, face-to-face situations
- **Text Analyst**: The practices required to analyse, critique and second-guess texts (Education Queensland, 2000; p.12).
This Four Literacy Resources model has been adopted by a number of Australian states to inform the range of literacy practices required by students to interact with any print-based, visual, spoken or digital text. The model emphasises the importance of decoding as well as being able to understand and critically evaluate and use texts for a variety of purposes. It provides a framework for planning or evaluating literacy programs as all aspects of the model must be addressed using an integrated and balanced approach. It stresses that these skills are not learnt in a hierarchical manner but rather literacy teaching and learning at all stages of schooling should attend to the development of these four aspects of literacy development (Education Queensland, 2000, p.12).

The Literate Futures Report also explores a number of intervention strategies for teaching reading and reported on a number of issues associated with the use of prescriptive reading programs. Firstly, it concludes that these packages may be based on a relatively narrow notion of what reading entails, focussing on decoding and spelling, with little regard for comprehension. If used as the literacy program for all students, they can limit students’ literacy learning experiences and achievement. Additionally, the report states that rigid programs of instruction are not, in general, responsive to the individual needs of the students (Education Queensland, 2000, p.74). It points out that with increasing diversity of students’ backgrounds and needs, educators need to exercise caution in implementing such packages.

In May 2009, the Interim National Curriculum Board (now the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, ACARA) published a series of The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English, Mathematics, Science and History. The papers are foundational documents to guide the development of the Australian curriculum for each learning area and were informed by current research in these learning areas as well as a comprehensive analysis of national and international policy and practice.

The Shape Paper for English (2009) proposes that literacy should be one of three strands in a National English Curriculum. However, it emphasises the teaching of literacy should be interwoven into the teaching and learning of the other two strands
of the curriculum (language and literature), affirming the importance of an integrated approach to the teaching of literacy. The Paper states that students need systematic attention to phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension strategies and vocabulary development when learning to read. It emphasises that students should encounter and compose a wide range of literary and everyday texts in spoken, print, and digital forms. They should be taught the structures and conventions of those texts including spelling, grammar and punctuation. The Paper also points out that oral proficiency is vital in learning to read and write and in the further development of the full range of communication skills (National Curriculum Board now ACARA, 2009).

Summary of findings on content of literacy learning

The findings of these recent major research studies present a remarkably convergent view as to what should be included in an effective literacy program. There is strong evidence that there should be:

- a balanced and integrated range of oral, reading and writing activities that provide opportunities for students to be a code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text analyst
- explicit, systematic teaching and learning sequences
- systematic teaching and learning on
  - phonemic awareness
  - phonics
  - concepts about print and digital texts
  - fluency
  - vocabulary
  - the full range of comprehension strategies
- opportunities to create texts for a growing range of audiences and contexts which includes explicit teaching and learning of spelling, grammar and punctuation
- exposure to a wide range of oral, print and multimedia texts from a range of genres as a context for literacy teaching and learning.
Literacy: Teaching and Learning Strategies

In order to determine the best teaching and learning strategies for literacy learning, a number of recent, large scale research studies have focussed on elements of pedagogy in effective literacy programs, while others have explored the characteristics of effective literacy teachers. Both areas of research have informed the identification of a set of critical features in literacy.

International research

In 2000, the Teacher Training Agency in the United Kingdom commissioned a review to identify the characteristics of effective literacy teachers. The review conducted a close study of a national sample of teachers who had been identified by educational leaders as effective teachers of literacy and whose students had made effective learning gains in literacy. Their classroom practice was observed and analysed against a sample of teachers identified as less effective teachers of literacy.

Summarising their research design and findings in the article, Effective Teachers of Literacy: Knowledge, Beliefs and Practices, Wray and Medwell (1999) reported that effective literacy teachers:

- paid explicit attention to word and sentence level aspects of reading and writing within whole text activities which were both meaningful and explained clearly to pupils
- used an embedded but systematic approach to teaching technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and punctuation
- modelled extensively, regularly demonstrating reading and writing to their classes in a variety of ways, often accompanying these demonstrations by verbal explanations of what they were doing
- made effective use of student assessment and were more able to generate explanations as to why children read or wrote as they did and to modify teaching and learning experiences accordingly (1999, pp.4-5).
In 2003, Hall and Harding sought to identify the professional characteristics, beliefs and classroom approaches of literacy teachers who had been nominated as effective literacy teachers. Their meta-analysis of 12 in-depth research studies found that: *effective literacy teachers avoid strict coherence to one approach but rather balance direct skills teaching with more authentic, contextually-grounded literacy activities* (Hall and Harding, 2003, p.3).

Hall and Harding maintain that effective literacy teachers have a wide and varied repertoire of teaching practices and approaches which included:

- scaffolding (where support in learning is initially provided by the teacher and then gradually withdrawn as the pupil gains in confidence)
- integrating reading and writing activities
- differentiated instruction
- excellent classroom management skills
- the ability to skilfully blend these approaches in different combinations according to the needs of individual pupils.

They also note that effective literacy teachers carefully monitor their students’ progress and employ the appropriate method or practice to meet individual learning needs (Hall and Harding, 2003, p.3).

**Formative Assessment and Feedback**

Black and Wiliam’s review of a wide range of studies on the use of assessment found that *strengthening the practice of formative assessment produced significant and often substantial learning gains* (1998, p.3). They highlighted a number of formative assessment practices that when used in combination have the potential to maximise learning.

These include:

- establishing and sharing with students key learning goals with clear criteria for performance
- regular monitoring of their progress using effective questioning techniques
• self and peer assessment
• providing specific feedback on strengths and weaknesses
• realignment of learning to address gaps in knowledge and skills (1998, pp.7-16).

The importance of feedback in effective learning, including literacy learning, is confirmed by Hattie. He states that feedback that is timely, specific, clear and directed to the level or nature of task performance is a very powerful in enhancing learning, especially if it is coupled with effective instruction (Hattie, 2009, p.178).

United States

In the US the National Reading Panel’s research (2000) identified a number of key strategies for effective literacy learning. These include:

• a systematic teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using explicit teaching approaches and opportunities for practice
• a variety of direct and indirect methods of vocabulary instruction requiring active student participation and repeated exposure to words from rich contexts
• repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance
• the use of comprehension monitoring by the reader
• exploring who, what, where, when, and why questions about the plot, characters, and events in stories
• summarising main ideas, predicting and generating questions about the text
• using graphic and semantic organizers to represent ideas and relationships within the text
• a combination of comprehensive strategies used within cooperative learning groups.

Duke and Pearson’s (2002) review of research on comprehension strategies confirms many of the teaching strategies recommended by the Panel. It points out that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies; teacher modelling and thinking
aloud about the strategy; and guided practice and support for students applying the strategy independently and in cooperative learning groups are most effective. Like the panel they state that the teaching and use of a range of strategies is more beneficial than focusing on just one or a few comprehension strategies.

**Middle and High School Years**

A number of research studies have focussed on effective literacy teaching and learning strategies for students in the middle and high school years. Biancarosa and Snow’s report, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (2004), explores the teaching and learning practices required to support the eight million young people between fourth and twelfth grade who struggle to read at grade level. They acknowledge that while most of these students can decode texts, many have difficulty in comprehending what they have read (2004, p.1).

Biancarosa and Snow gathered a panel of experts who developed a list of essential elements for effective literacy programs based on a meta-analysis of current research into adolescent literacy. The panel concluded that no single intervention or program could meet the needs of struggling readers. Instead they outline the following elements as all having contributed to successful literacy outcomes for students:

- direct, explicit comprehension instruction
- effective literacy teaching embedded in the content from a range of discipline areas
- self-directed learning, to build motivation to read and learn and provide students with the instruction and supports needed for independent learning
- text-based collaborative learning, where students interact with one another around a variety of texts
- strategic tutoring, to provide students with intense individualized support
- intensive writing, including instruction connected to the kinds of writing tasks students will have to perform well in high school and beyond
• a technology component, which includes technology as a tool for and a topic of literacy
• formative assessment to inform teachers of student progress
• summative assessment of students and programs, for reporting, accountability and research purposes (2004, p.4).

They stress that these instructional strategies have to be aligned with other infrastructural approaches in order for students’ literacy outcomes to be maximised. These include increased time spent on literacy instruction, the formation of interdisciplinary teams in high schools to cater for students’ literacy development across all curriculum/learning areas and the provision of targeted professional learning for teachers in all disciplines about the literacy demands of their subjects.

In their meta-analysis of research studies on instructional strategies for increasing academic literacy for students from grades 4 to 12, Torgesen et al. (2007) report that explicit instruction from the teacher about the particular strategies being learned — with frequent think-aloud demonstrations (modelling) by the teacher to show how the strategy is used during reading—supports student literacy learning. They propose that comprehension strategies such as re-reading; the use of graphic and semantic organizers, including story maps, question generation, summarisation and paraphrasing; and selective rereading are vital in encouraging students to make inferences, draw conclusions and engage in critical thinking. They also promote the importance of providing students with opportunities for rich, extended discussion about what they are reading and opportunities to reflect on the cognitive processes they use while reading.

Another meta-analysis of effective reading programs for students in the middle and high school years, conducted by Slavin et al. (2008), states that while many reading programs did not stand up to the rigorous criteria they applied for inclusion in their research, most of the programs with good evidence of effectiveness have cooperative learning at their core. In these programs, students work in small groups to help one another master reading skills. Slavin et al. maintain that mixed-method
models of classroom practices, which combine large and small group work and literacy programs that offer a range of instructional strategies also produce positive results for students.

**Australia**

Again findings in Australian research on effective literacy teaching and learning practices mirror those found in the international research. Researchers in the second phase of the Australian Government project, *In Teachers Hands: Effective Literacy Practices in the Early Years of School* (Louden et al., 2006) used a classroom Literacy Observation Schedule (CLOS)\(^2\) to determine the most effective literacy teaching and learning practices.

Louden et al. claim that the most effective literacy teachers:

- have highly developed classroom management skills
- use a wide repertoire of strategies to motivate students according to learning purpose and student need
- make explicit to students their substantial knowledge of literacy using a rich literacy environment and concentrated on the development of significant literacy concepts and skills
- employ differentiated levels of challenge, instructions and tasks according to students’ needs
- use metalanguage when modelling and scaffolding which is clear and precise
- teach phonics in context, through shared book readings, writing or spelling tasks so that the purpose for this learning is clear
- provide clear explanations of word level structures and guided practice of skills in a range of contexts as well as focusing on comprehension at whole text level
- create a socially supportive classroom environment with established class routines and recognise individual students’ home and community backgrounds (2006, pp.171-177).

\(^2\) The CLOS was developed and validated in the first phases of the project.
In 2007, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in Victoria conducted a literature review of recent major studies and meta-analyses on how best to improve students’ literacy skills. The key finding from this review is that:

*No single study, methodology or finding is considered a sufficient basis for action. The professional challenge for teachers is to use their professional knowledge to draw from a wide variety of information in order to better serve their practice* (DEECD, 2007, p.17).

Consequently, the review makes it clear that the challenge for teachers is not about choosing one program or approach over another but rather one of knowing when best to use a particular approach according to the diversity of students’ social, cultural and learning needs (DEECD, 2007, p.7). The paper does, however, establish some key principles about literacy teaching and learning which include that:

- instructional approaches need to be systematically organised
- student motivation and engagements are critical determinants of quality literacy outcomes. They propose using strategies such as providing stimulating texts and learning tasks, allowing students to have some say in their learning, collaborative learning and positive feedback.
- monitoring and assessment are essential to build up detailed student literacy profiles and to inform planning and teaching
- classroom talk is a key medium for literacy learning (DEECD, 2007, pp.17-20).

A teaching guide published recently by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2009) summarises key findings from the literature on literacy teaching and learning. It notes that the words explicit and systematic are key terms when quality literacy teaching and learning is described. Further, the teaching guide proposes that systematic and explicit literacy teaching:

- builds on prior learning
- includes clear unit and lesson objectives
- employs a range of strategies for direct teaching including demonstrations
• includes modelled, guided and independent teaching according to student needs
• offers opportunities to apply and practise new knowledge and skills
• allows for the use of assessment for learning practices to guide future learning (NSW DET, 2009, pp.16–23).

**Teaching writing**

Although discussions about approaches to teaching writing generally emerge in the research on reading, far fewer research studies have focused specifically on the teaching of writing. Moreover, the teaching of writing has rarely attracted the intense debate as reading (Freebody, 2007). Nevertheless, over the past thirty years there have been distinct differences of opinion amongst educators about appropriate strategies for teaching writing. Again these differences have centred on two approaches; process writing and the genre approach. While process writing seeks to provide students with the linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting, revising and editing, it has less emphasis on the development of linguistic knowledge, such as knowledge about grammar and text structure. Genre approaches on the other hand, emphasise the importance of students learning the linguistic knowledge required to create texts for specific audiences, purpose and contexts. Teachers use a staged approach to writing where students are presented with models, analyse or deconstruct these models at the whole text, sentence and word level and then participate in joint or guided constructions of similar texts before composing their own text independently.

Recent research indicates that many educators are advocating the merging of these two approaches. Students are provided with models and taught the socio linguistic structure and conventions in texts and engage in joint deconstruction and construction of texts. However, they are also provided with opportunities to use a process writing approach when attempting their independent construction of text by engaging in pre writing, drafting, revising and editing activities (Badger and White, 2000; Panofsky et al., 2005).
Graham and Perin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of recent research into effective strategies for teaching writing to students in the United States from grades 4 to 12. They identify a range of teaching and learning strategies such as providing them with:

- goals and models for their writing
- a range of pre writing activities including inquiry activities to find information or evidence to support their writing
- activities such as summarising, sentence combining and collaborative writing
- a process writing approach
- opportunities to use a word processor when writing (2007, pp.15-20).

There has been some research on the effectiveness of using a genre approach in Australia, in particular in NSW and in the Catholic schools sector in Victoria (Rose, 2006; Culican, 2004). These studies indicate that the teaching and learning of specific linguistic knowledge and skills using models and a scaffolded approach has resulted in improved learning outcomes for diverse groups of students, including multilingual learners.

**Diversity**

**Multilingual learners**

Thomas and Collier’s research, *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*, was a five-year research study that analysed qualitative and quantitative research findings from schools across the US. It was designed to determine what school practices are most effective for language minority students. A range of literacy programs was represented in this study including six different types of bilingual programs, ESL and English only programs. Results indicate that when students with a language background other than English initially move into the English mainstream, those schooled all in English classes outperform those schooled bilingually. However, by the middle and high school years the bilingually schooled students reach the same levels of achievement as those schooled all in English and over time outperform the monolingual-schooled students. Thomas and
Collier conclude that short-term, remedial, English only programs cannot close the large achievement gap and should be avoided (2001, pp.7–9).

However, the report also points out that an enrichment bilingual/ESL program must:

…create a natural learning environment in school, with lots of natural, rich oral and written language used by students and teachers (L1 and L2 used in separate instructional contexts, not using translation); meaningful, ‘real world’ problem-solving; all students working together; media-rich learning (video, computers, print); challenging thematic units that get and hold students’ interest; and using students’ bilingual-bicultural knowledge to bridge to new knowledge across the curriculum (2008, p.8).

The National Literacy Panel’s (2006) report on developing literacy for second language states that the sequencing of literacy teaching in second language learning should be similar to that for native speakers. However, vocabulary and the background knowledge about language and concepts need to be linked to prior learning and scaffolded throughout the teaching and learning process. This is confirmed by Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition which states that language is learned by hearing and understanding messages that are slightly above their current English language level and by participation in structured oral activities that build on students’ prior knowledge and scaffolds the new information (1981).

In addition, the Panel (2006, p.5) emphasises that students who are learning English literacy as an additional language or dialect need to develop an understanding of the cultural meaning behind the language they are learning. These students may lack concepts as well as labels for English words or may have different concepts for the same label. When explaining terms and concepts, teachers need to make explicit the cultural understandings that are implicit in the language students are in the process of learning.
Another key finding is that oral proficiency in English is critical for literacy development in language minority students and there was evidence to indicate it is often overlooked in instruction. They acknowledge that word-level skills in literacy—such as decoding, word recognition and spelling—are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain comparable levels of performance with native English speakers. However, this is not the case for text-level skills such as reading comprehension and writing. The research indicates that language-minority students rarely achieve the same levels of proficiency in these skills.

The Panel maintains that developed oral proficiency in English is vital for the development of reading comprehension and writing skills and the poor results of language minority students in these areas is likely to be linked to the lack of attention to oral proficiency. In short they agreed: *Literacy programs that provide instructional support of oral language development in English aligned with high-quality literacy instruction are the most successful* (2006, p.10). It recommends early, intensive and ongoing work in oral literacy development for language minority students.

Unsurprisingly, the Panel found that becoming literate in a second language depends on the quality of teaching. They define high quality literacy teaching as that which covers the range of appropriate curriculum content, has intensity or thoroughness of instruction and where teachers closely monitor students’ learning progress and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to their own professional development. The Literacy Panel also indicate that language-minority students instructed in their native language as well as in English perform better, on average, than language-minority students instructed only in English.

In Australia, research into literacy teaching and learning practices for Indigenous students has largely focused on small scale or single site research studies. However, a significant study was conducted by Rose to examine the implementation of the *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* literacy program to Aboriginal students of diverse abilities in government schools across a range of contexts in New South Wales. The research project provides professional development to teachers in
scaffolding strategies that support students to read texts with fluency and comprehension in all learning areas. The ability to read these texts then forms the basis for learning to write texts. The strategies use scaffolding activities to support students to:

- read and comprehend texts by preparing them for reading
- deconstruct texts at whole text, sentence and word level
- participate in guided practice in note making and sentence writing
- participate in joint and independent construction of similar texts.

Rose explains that:

*The core of the pedagogy is a carefully designed pattern of classroom interaction, in which the teacher prepares all students in a class to successfully identify features of reading texts, or select elements to write. Students’ responses are consistently affirmed, and then elaborated by defining new words, explaining new concepts, or discussing with students’ experience* (2006, p.4).

An independent review of the project conducted by Erebus International (2005) found that the program resulted in:

- stronger engagement by all students including Aboriginal students in their literacy learning
- increased confidence in reading skills including improved fluency and comprehension skills
- improved writing outcomes for students including Aboriginal students irrespective of reading ability and literacy experience
- improved student attendance, in particular with students whose poor attendance had previously hindered their learning (2005, pp.11-12).

While the evidence for these outcomes is largely qualitative, the samples of student writing collected before and after the project substantiates the information collected from teacher interviews and work manuals. Teachers also commented positively
about the less confrontational questioning style in the program and how it allowed all
students to contribute to the lesson (Erebus, 2005).

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

A number of large-scale studies have focussed on the best teaching and learning
strategies for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The key finding
from many of these reports is that the intervention strategies must be closely aligned
with the mainstream literacy programs. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) maintain that
even with high quality teaching, some children fail to make satisfactory progress in
reading. They believe that such children require supplementary services, ideally from
a reading specialist who provides individual or small-group intensive instruction that
is coordinated with high quality instruction from the classroom teacher. Snow, Burns
and Griffin emphasise that children who are having difficulty learning to read do not,
as a rule, require qualitatively different instruction from children who are "getting it"

Identifying the effectiveness of targeted intervention has been the focus of a number
of reports. A Report on Interventions for Adolescent Struggling Readers: A Meta-
Analysis with Implications for Practice found that for older students with specific
learning disabilities, reading intervention that is appropriately focused and targeted at
specific areas related to the disability is most effective.

A number of studies, though limited in scope, have focussed specifically on the
teaching and learning practices for students who are struggling with literacy.
Munro’s (2006) research study, Literacy Intervention: Determining the Evidence
Base for Effective Options allocated specific literacy interventions to year 2 students
who were struggling with literacy learning according to their literacy learning
readiness profile. He found that at risk readers can make the same level of progress
as average readers when exposed to interventions that match their existing literacy
learning profiles (2006, p.6). However, he also established that those students who
struggled most with literacy would probably have benefited from an intervention
strategy that encompassed all three approaches (2006, p.6). Similarly, Hay, Elias
and Booker (2005) confirm that students with learning difficulties made greater progress when presented with a range of approaches, including multisensory teaching strategies and that appropriate pacing of the instruction is important. These findings indicate that while a targeted approach to addressing a specific literacy need with an aligned intervention is effective in some cases, those who need the most support require interventions in all aspects of literacy teaching and learning to maximise their improvement.

Summary of findings on literacy teaching and learning

The research reveals that there is no simple answer as to what constitutes effective literacy teaching and learning strategies. It is clear that no one method or strategy alone will suffice in meeting the literacy learning needs of the diversity of students in Northern Territory classrooms. Rather, teachers need an array of practices and the ability to select from this repertoire according to the learning purpose and the learning needs of individual and/or groups of students. Nevertheless, a number of reoccurring themes did emerge in the literature that point to a number of critical features for effective literacy teaching and learning practices.

Effective literacy programs:

- provide learning experiences (lesson plans and teaching and learning sequences) with coordinated sequences and routines
- present clear, specific goals for learning with performance criteria
- link to and build on existing knowledge, skills and understandings
- use unstructured and structured oral work as a key medium for learning
- include strategies to make explicit the assumptions that are implicit in English language for multilingual learners
- model and encourage the use of appropriate metalanguage
- entail explicit or direct instruction
- include strategies for the scaffolding of new learning to students
- include modelling of new learning accompanied by detailed explanations
- provide opportunities to practise skills to increase accuracy and fluency
• provide opportunities to apply knowledge, skills and understandings in a range of authentic contexts
• include effective questioning techniques
• include strategies for developing high order comprehension skills
• provide an embedded but systematic approach to teaching technical processes such as grammar, punctuation and spelling
• include strategies for providing timely and appropriate feedback
• allow for cooperative learning according to the nature of the task and the learning needs of individual students
• offer differentiated levels of teaching, tasks and materials according to the learning purpose and the learners’ needs
• include strategies for intensive instruction for learners with particular learning needs including English language instruction for multilingual learners
• embed the use of digital technologies in learning
• operate in a socially supportive and productive classroom environment.

Professional learning

A key finding in much of the research on effective literacy teaching is the critical role the teacher plays in a student’s literacy development and the importance of ongoing teacher professional development in improving teacher efficacy and student literacy outcomes.

As well as establishing strategies for effective literacy teaching, Wray and Medwell’s UK research (1999) explores the characteristics of effective literacy teachers. They claim these teachers:

• have a strong knowledge of their subject matter and its relationship to the teaching context
• are more coherent in their belief systems about the teaching of literacy and tend to favour teaching activities which explicitly emphasise the understanding of what was read and written.
Hall and Harding conclude that effective teachers are characterised by their continuing commitment to their own professional development (2003, p.49). Similarly, the Rose Report highlights the importance of ongoing professional learning not only for literacy teachers but also support staff who assist teachers in the delivery of literacy programs (2006, p.61).

In the US research, Snow, Burns and Griffith (1998) emphasise the importance of teachers having a comprehensive understanding of literacy development and teaching and learning processes that best support students’ literacy development. This includes a detailed knowledge about language and literacy systems and processes, assessment, adapting the curriculum for individual needs, the reading curriculum, creating positive attitudes to reading and using research findings from different research paradigms to inform practice. It was pointed out that this knowledge could be developed through good pre service training, mentoring support for neophytes and ongoing professional development which involves support from colleagues and specialists, as well as regular opportunities for self-examination and reflection (1998, p.10). The National Reading Panel also stressed the importance of school based teacher professional learning in improving literacy outcomes for students (2000, p.398).

Biancarosa and Snow's (2004) report on strategies for improving literacy outcomes for students in the middle years stressed that professional development for literacy teachers has to be ongoing and long term. They proposed that in secondary schools, interdisciplinary teams of teachers should meet regularly to discuss students’ literacy needs, to align instruction and to support each other (2004, p.21).

Likewise, Torgesen et al. (2007) state that staff development is critical to help teachers design and implement instruction that will improve literacy outcomes. They stress that professional learning opportunities need to extend to teachers in other subject areas so they understand the literacy demands of their subject area and how to teach these literacy concepts and skills. Torgesen et al. maintain that the most powerful tool for teachers’ learning is the examination of student work as a basis for
identifying areas for improved instruction and possible professional learning (2007, p.124).

A number of recent research projects initiated by the Australian Government underline the importance of teacher professional learning for effective literacy teaching and learning. *The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (DEST, 2005, p.58) emphasises that teachers need access to high quality pre service training and ongoing opportunities for professional development that includes knowledge and skills on how:

- students best learn to read
- to assess students’ literacy skills and learning growth
- to use data to apply appropriate teaching and/or intervention strategies from a repertoire of practices from evidence based research.

The Inquiry team were presented with evidence that indicates opportunities for professional learning can take many forms, including:

- quality pre service and induction programs
- teachers’ shared and collaborative learning in school
- work in professional learning teams
- mentoring and professional learning for principals and school literacy leaders (DEST, 2005, p.58).

Similarly the Literate Futures report (Education Queensland, 2000) highlights the need for ongoing school based professional learning, in particular in the teaching of reading, which allows for alignment with the specific literacy practices and needs of the student cohort. It also argues for pre service programs with a greater emphasis on school-based practica and internships (Education Queensland, 2000, p.81).

Timperley et al. (2007) reviewed a range of research studies on professional learning activities that resulted in improved literacy outcomes for students. Many of these core studies were primarily from New Zealand and the United States, with one large
They conclude that the following are critical factors in effective professional learning for improved literacy outcomes:

- to access the content of professional development, common beliefs, understandings, values and goals about literacy learning must be established
- teachers respond best to professional learning that provides a balance of theory and practice
- teachers require an understanding of the theoretical principles underpinning the pedagogical content knowledge related to the new practice
- using assessment tools help teachers decide what they and their students need to learn. Where teachers do not have a strong focus on improving student outcomes through the use of assessment data the outcomes rarely change.
- it is vital that teachers have repeated opportunities to encounter, understand, translate and refine new theories and related practices. They need extended time and multiple occasions to link theory and practice, revisit theoretical understandings, and refine practice.
- finally, the establishment of professional learning communities is a feature of all successful professional learning programs. To be effective, these communities needed to have input from an expert leader, establish common goals, and be focussed on improved literacy outcomes for all students (Timperley et al. 2007, pp.153–154).

**Conclusion**

Effective literacy teaching is a complex and sophisticated practice. Teachers need extensive knowledge about literacy learning and a wide repertoire of practices which they combine and integrate in different ways and combinations. While this paper has endeavoured to identify from the research literature critical features of literacy learning content and teaching and learning strategies, there is no secret recipe for
successful literacy teaching. It is the individual teacher’s ability to select from this range of appropriate content and instructional strategies to suit the learning purpose and context and to meet individual learning needs that will determine the effectiveness of teaching practice. The ability to do this well requires ongoing commitment to reflecting on and analysing student learning achievement and teaching practice and using this information to inform future professional learning and/or instruction.
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