Preparing teachers to teach reading and writing:

Towards quality literacy education for preservice teachers

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INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense this paper is about every child being able to read and write. It has a particular concern for the role of preservice teacher education in making this literacy goal come about. More narrowly, this paper presents ideas on how to prepare preservice teachers to teach reading and writing. In effect, this is a theory-seeking study that draws upon the perspectives of preservice teachers themselves. The intention is to explain ideas that may guide and enhance research and practice in the literacy components of preservice teacher education.

Getting literacy education right in teacher education matters because in Aotearoa New Zealand although we do well in literacy, we do not do well enough. In short, we are not sure that we are adequately preparing our prospective teachers to address ongoing disparities in achievement in reading and writing. While by international standards our children are performing well in reading and writing the achievement gap between good readers and poor readers is very wide. The continued underachievement of some children (particularly Māori, Pacific Island or children from non-English speaking backgrounds) means that "more of the same" in the teaching of reading and writing is not good enough.

The impetus for concern has been accelerated by the New Zealand government's declared commitment to improving literacy levels. In particular, the government has adopted the goal that "By 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write and do maths for success". The goal has received support from principals and teachers as well as literacy experts and the wider community. Besides, who would not wish for every child to be literate?

The renewed interest has meant questions being asked on how best to educate to teach reading and writing. A Literacy Taskforce was established to provide advice on how the government's goal should be defined, progress towards it measured and the ways in which literacy learning could best be supported especially in the first four years at school. Along with a range of recommendations, Taskforce members expressed concern over the reported variability in the skills and knowledge about literacy learning found in graduates from current teacher education providers. The Literacy Experts Group attached to the Taskforce argued that preservice teacher education should enable student teachers to become "good practitioners" who reflect on both practice and theoretical knowledge and apply this to their literacy programmes. Such practitioners are characterised by the ways in which they "can explain the purposes and justify the approaches used in literacy instruction." (Literacy Experts Group, 1999: 17). In this way, the good practitioner is both practically capable and pedagogically critical. Both the Taskforce and the Experts Group called for evidence on the specific literacy components of preservice teacher education, the contention being that high-quality teacher education should have a strong focus on developing the skills and knowledge necessary to implement best practice in the teaching of reading and writing.
The suggestion that preservice teachers need adequate knowledge about literacy education is reasonably easy to make and reasonably easy to manage. Timetabling classes at Colleges of Education and experiences in the teaching of reading and writing is practical and achievable. However, defining what is actually meant by knowledge about literacy education is considerably more complex. Berliner (1986) and Shulman (1986) helpfully point to the significance in teacher education of knowing and understanding. To think about developing expertise in reading and writing as developing 'understanding', suggests a kind of teacher knowledge that reaches out to transformation rather than mere repetition. This is more than knowing that (Berliner, 1986), say, reading is taught using a particular range of techniques (eg. phonics, whole language), in particular ways (eg. intensive one-to-one contact, small group, guided silent reading). It is the ability to critically reflect on both practice and theoretical knowledge and apply this to the preparation and implementation of classroom literacy programmes. For the children this means novice readers and writers have the opportunity to learn to use literacy skills to further their own understanding of the world around them. This, Berliner (1986) explains, is the difference between a teacher knowing that and knowing how to meaningfully teach reading and writing.

What then can we say about the ways in which preservice teachers are taught to understand the teaching of reading and writing? What guidelines might help to distinguish those teacher education practices that develop genuine knowledge and understanding of reading and writing, from others that do not? These questions are important because their answers have the potential to help researchers, policy writers and teacher educators to be better at what we do in literacy education. What is more, assessing what teacher education communicates to preservice teachers about reading and writing is crucial to improving teacher education practices in literacy education and thereby the possibility of school children being able to read and write for success.

This paper is about literacy specific aspects of preservice teacher education, about student perceptions of these aspects and what those perceptions might tell us about how best to prepare teachers to teach reading and writing. In a time in which literacy education expertise is receiving increasing public scrutiny and today’s school students are expected to attain higher levels of literacy than ever before, a teaching force that is knowledgeable about and understands the most effective approaches to teaching reading and writing is needed. With the intention of generating informed decisions about quality teacher education in literacy, this paper describes factors that help or hinder learning in literacy education and, thereby, influences the student’s ability to know how to teach children to read and write.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Drawing on work undertaken as a wider study (Airini & Brooker, 1999) into quality teacher education I was curious about how the preservice teacher perceives quality instruction in specific literacy components of their preservice teacher education. It seemed important to understand what they talked about and what they remembered as critical to their development as teachers of reading and writing. My motivation paralleled that of the wider study in that I wanted to ensure that student teacher perspectives informed how it is that we understand quality in teacher education. As with other case study research (Holt-Reynolds, 1999; Bassey, 1999) no attempt was made to critique what was said on the basis of its validity. It wasn’t a matter of seeing if their knowledge "worked" or if it were true factually. Rather, I was curious about the characteristics and content of how they understood their own education in reading and writing instruction. It was intended that this information would provide a platform for an exploration of quality (in the sense of fit-for-purpose) in the specific literacy components of preservice teacher education.
FEATURES OF THE STUDY

To date, the research data available on how we set about teaching people to teach reading and writing is minimal and limited in scope. The tendency has been to focus upon addressing inadequacies in prospective teachers and has focused little on how preservice teachers gain and apply knowledge about teaching and learning in literacy. Studies have tended to be functionalist and methods-focused. While appropriate in the narrow pragmatic sense, arguably the more fundamental concern is with epistemology in teacher education (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996: 39). To know what counts as knowledge, where knowledge is located and how knowledge increases in teacher education literacy classes is to know something of the nature and depth of understanding in the specific literacy components of preservice teacher education. After all, many if not most educational debates (such as those presented in pre-service teacher education between whole language and systematic phonics instruction) are about different views of what it means to learn, to know and to become educated rather than about the different approaches or methods, objectives or goals that we might find in literacy instruction (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Wingo, 1965, Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996). Therefore, one of the features of this paper is that it is theoretical in intent; that is it seeks a description of ideas, in this case, ideas revealed in student teacher talk.

STUDY DESIGN

With a view to informing understandings of how to prepare teachers to teach reading and writing, research through the Quality Teacher Education (QTE) Project has focused on Reading and Language courses in preservice teacher education. Particular attention has been paid to what students themselves report as influencing their ability to be effective teachers of reading and writing.

Final year students in the College of Education were invited to talk with me about what helps or hinders their learning as preservice teachers. The Critical Incident research method (Flanagan, 1954) provided a framework for the interviews and transcript analysis. In the course of conversations with 22 volunteers, critical incidents in their preparation for teaching were described.

By looking carefully for the source of these incidents, associated activity that affected their learning, and outcomes relating to their learning and the aims of this study, it was possible to derive categories that divided the incidents into groups that seemed similar. These groupings describe what helps or hinders learning, from the point of view of the preservice teachers themselves.

During the course of the interviews several students spoke about the ways in which their learning had been helped or hindered as they learned to be teachers of reading and writing. Amongst other things they described experiences in lectures, impressions of teacher educators, interactions with their peers, and in-school teaching practice. Taking these accounts aside for more in-depth discussion, this paper describes those critical incidents from the QTE study that relate to preservice teacher education in literacy.

RESULTS

Through analysing interviews, critical incidents were elicited that reported on what helps or hinders literacy education in preservice teacher education. The incidents related to five categories (see table 1).

Table 1
Categories of factors that help or hinder literacy education in preservice teacher education

- Lecturing style
- Lecture content
- Course design
- Academic/ vocational focus
- In-school professional practice

A brief description of the category, examples of the incidents and ideas in the category and an indication of the range or variation within each category is provided. Some of the categories are inter-related and thus any given extract may fit within more than one category.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CATEGORIES

Lecturing style

In this category, participants described ways in which lecturing style helped or hindered their learning to be an effective teacher of reading and writing; that is, ways in which lecturers did or did not use appropriate teaching skills to provide a learning environment. Several sub-categories emerged.

Sub-categories of lecturing style

1 Atmosphere

Through their lecturing style the lecturer in literacy specific classes helped or hindered learning about how to teach reading and writing.

Examples:

QTE 5: I learnt so much in [these Reading] courses because for a start [the lecturer] had a sense of humour, That is very important to me. And also because … there was like a real equality thing going on. [The lecturer] wasn’t like, they had so much to share from their experiences but they never gave you the impression that they knew it all.

QTE 6: Reading courses I love those.

Airini: Tell me about what they are like and what factors help you learn in those?

QTE 6: I don’t know I think they actually just give the classroom a nice atmosphere.

Airini: What kind of atmosphere?
QTE 6: Like co-operative, um positive atmosphere because I think the lecturers like really love reading themselves and they all seem so enthusiastic and they talk about all these theories that they believe in and all the books that they have read or the children that they have met that they have inspired or changed and they just seem to really love it and get everyone involved.

2 Knowledge

In this sub-category participants described ways in which the lecturer's technical and personal knowledge of literacy education affected their learning. Participants referred to the way in which lecturer knowledge could or should encourage confidence as a beginning teacher in reading and writing.

Example

QTE 2: Reading is quite different because although you can read you don’t know how you learnt to read so .... having a lecture who can bring, I think the real value in learning from [the lecturer in Reading] was that they were a lecturer who knew what they had done. He could talk about how he had been here and taught these people how to read, how he had been in the classroom for years and tried these different techniques. He had read the people... [If] you said, "What about" (you knew what Frank Smith said), he could. [say], "Yeap I’ve read that. I know what he is talking about." So he could come in a different way, he could sit there and say, "Yeap, ok, this works well".....He knew what he was talking about. He had done it. He had been in the classroom, he had studied, he really knew it and that I think that was real value for me. [It] was knowing his pedigree. And he knew what he was talking about and you couldn’t stump him or you know and he was quite willing to go on the divergent and talk to you and if you had a query you know, so that’s what really helped my learning: somebody like that.

QTE 5: I said to [the Reading lecturer], "So what is the right answer [about how to teach reading]"? He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Is [this way] correct or isn't it?" And he wouldn’t.…. and I found that really annoying cause I wanted to know what was right, whether I was right or not. But according to him there was not a right or a wrong answer. That was tuff.....[I]n one way it was really frustrating that we couldn’t get the right or wrong answers but in other ways it was like you say really really good because you would just have to go with what you believed in.

3 Acceptance

Participants described the effect upon their learning of a lecturing style that is or is not accepting, particularly with regards to in-class experiences.

Example

QTE 2 And I really felt that he accepted... you could say anything to him you could, you know, and he wouldn’t judge you for what you said and I think that was um he did a class this year where he dared basically us. He said to us, "You know you are all going to go out and teach [reading] this way aren’t you? No one is going to go out and teach the old way." And he was just daring somebody to do it because we all knew that if we did all say ‘Oh yeah,”.... by him saying that that it made it acceptable for us to say it even in jest not for serious. By saying these things I felt that I could bring up anything that I felt and he wouldn’t judge me because of what I said.
4 Role model

Participants were aware of the impact of role models of effective teaching upon their learning about literacy in classroom practice.

Examples

QTE 20: [The lecturer] actually pulled out a book. It was getting rather noisy (end of year everybody didn’t want to be in the classroom). And I could see that it was getting just a little bit too heightened and he pulled out a book and started to read the most humorous story and I knew exactly what he was doing. Everybody suddenly calmed down and they loved it. And I enjoyed it too. But it was such an obvious ploy. Well to me it was obvious. And I just noted in my book at the top of the page, “[The lecturer] read a story today,” and I knew what it meant. It brought everyone back on track and they all listened to the rest of the lesson and felt better about it.

QTE 8: Um I remember once in my first year course we had a lecture that actually goes out and it was a reading course and actually sat down with the kids and actually read the book and we observed that, that was really valuable I think cause then we saw the lecture as a teacher as well.

5 Practicality

In this sub-category participants commented on whether or not the lecturing style leads to learning about literacy that can be of practical use in the classroom. The effect of lack of practicality was noted. That is, learning about how to practice the teaching of reading and writing was hindered when clear guidelines were not given.

Example

QTE 5: But you see [because the lecturer didn’t say what was the right or wrong way to teach reading and writing] that really annoyed me…because I thought “Ok you are having how many students coming through your course doing this reading course? How many teachers are doing what they think is right and suddenly the kids could be getting the wrong, you know, the wrong end of the stick and that’s why it could be that so many children are failing in reading. And that started bugging me. It’s like we should all be doing it … the same way, the right way. Yeah but, there is no… Everybody does what they want and that really annoyed me. … I might go into a classroom and see one women teaching or male teaching reading and I might think that is so ‘not the way to do it’, but that is the way they believe and that’s the way they were taught to do it. So, then what about those kids, little kids like me that learn the way I do that aren’t getting anything from, that’s really hard.

6 Promotion of intellectual development

This sub-category describes participants learning through a lecturing style that challenged knowledge and understanding.

Example

QTE 21: [The lecturer] also provided us with, a debate. [They] provided us with the right stuff to read about um theories of phonetics: to have it or not to have it, how important is it. And I found that really good, I really enjoyed, being given something to think about.
Lecture content

This category refers to the content of literacy education lectures at ‘College’. A recurring theme was that helpful content was that which is practical, i.e. what is helpful to students learning to be teachers of reading and writing is lecture content that links their own development as a teacher, with effective classroom practice in literacy.

Examples

QTE 3: In my first semester we did reading and I did um a seminar on we had to choose a topic within the readings curriculum and present a 20 minute seminar. And I did mine on poetry. And I had to do a lot of reading with poetry and things like that, and I even read a couple of poems that I had written, which was a real biggy for me at the time. But I um was really nervous and I started and I was shaking and I got better as I sought of went on and started talking away and everyone really enjoyed it. And I just felt a real buzz afterwards. Yeah it’s really good.

Airini: Was this a time when you think you were learning?

QTE 3: Yeah I sortt of learnt that I cou

Course design

This category refers to the teacher education curriculum in document form, i.e. the ways in which the approved programme or course design statement helps or hinders learning.

Example

QTE 21 I have been learning some of the ways that you are suppose to make sure you teach children the particular catergories ie. the stuff thats written in a curriculum. I’m actually not hugely confident that I understand all those catergories…because they are sought of abstract, I don’t know they seem to me to be sought of abstract.

Airini: How does that come across in classes?

QTE 21: Here at college?

Airini: Yeah, the abstractness.

QTE 21: Of the curriculum?

Airini: Mmm

QTE 21: [The] English document says that children will read and enjoy well I mean that seems a bit abstract to me that children will read and enjoy and I’m not sure that we have done the follow through of um this… you must teach this… this objective therefore how are you going to teach it what…. how are you going to choose your theme do you begin with a document do you begin with the idea. This sought of
debate about this or this sort of ‘trying both ways’, we haven’t done this.

**Academic/ vocational focus**

In this category participants compared teacher education courses at ‘College’ with Education courses at the nearby ‘University’. The former was associated with vocational practices associated with teaching reading and writing, and the latter was perceived to be more likely to integrate critical analysis, theory and research into their courses. Comments on academic rigor highlight an unresolved question of the relationship between theory and practice in literacy education.

**Example**

QTE 21: [There] is a push a strong push for making vocational courses into degree courses but I have a problem with it and I think.... when I was at university it was about ideas and concepts um... and the idea was to debate them and to have some understanding of them. At College you are supposed to be learning a craft to some extent you are suppose to be um.... You see I don’t see that understanding has ever been a part of this

Airini: A part of this place?

QTE 21: Yeah yeah not really understanding not concepts yeah.... So um I haven’t, apart from as I say, apart from that debate that [the literacy lecturer] gave us, I don’t think I’ve been given any debate orientated, or understanding orientated, [material]. I could be wrong, but I don’t know that I have yeah.

**In-school professional practice**

This category refers to ways in which participants’ learning about how to teach reading and writing was helped or hindered by the conditions and processes of in-school experiences of teaching, otherwise known as ‘Professional Practice’. These experiences varied from single lessons in which the student visited a school briefly, to an intensive period where the student would be resident with a class and associate teacher for four to five weeks and expected to take on an increasing level of responsibility and independence in teaching.

**Examples**

QTE 8: At the same time you also have to realise that, you know, learning takes such a long time that ...you wont get the same rewards you would if you spent even longer with the children. I’m thinking of ... an age five class that I was in and struggling with these two children to get them to really recognise letters, these words and stuff like that. And it never, it wasn’t while I was there, but I have been back to see my associate, and she said, "Just after you left it all came together for them," and oh, and you think, "Oh great...", you know, for five weeks you really..... Yeah its good to know that it worked eventually and you think, "Oh at least they are progressing now."

QTE 15: I have just done a course with low [progress readers] and we go out and teach every oh three times a week and you teach a child. You can see me learn. Like, he’s learning, but I am learning though him as well.
Summary of categories

Through an examination of the 22 transcripts this study identified critical incidents and five categories that describe what helps or hinders literacy learning in preservice teacher education. These findings arise from the perspective of the preservice teachers themselves. With the aim of informing policy and practices associated with quality literacy education for preservice teachers, the categories indicate possible aspects of preservice teacher education that critically affect individuals learning to be effective teachers in reading and writing.

DISCUSSION

The research described in this paper presents ideas on what helps and hinders literacy education in preservice teacher education. The matter was investigated in a way that relied upon the ideas and recollections of students who were enrolled in final year studies in preservice teacher education at the time of the research interviews. The students described contexts and processes that they perceived to be present in literacy education. Through gathering these reports from preservice teachers, this project has begun to develop a set of categories of what may help or hinder literacy learning in preservice teacher education.

The long-term aim is to inform thinking and decisions around the provision of quality literacy education for preservice teachers. In particular, the intention is to develop guidelines for quality literacy education. This paper does not provide sufficient detail for such guidelines at this stage. It does indicate however that there are previously hidden perspectives and outcomes arising from literacy education in preservice teacher education. In short, we cannot be sure that the courses we implement result in the learning we expect. If there is to be a united effort towards all children reading and writing for success, then there is a need for a full understanding of the impact of teacher education upon the knowledge and understanding of reading and writing. In addition to research focused upon student outcomes, there is a need for information and ideas arising from reflecting and comparing how we have been and might be educating our future teachers of literacies. The beginning is to recognise that there are multiple perspectives affecting the preparation of teachers to teach reading and writing.

The nature and scope of quality literacy education for our future teachers remains unsettled. This project’s contribution is that it presents some insights and experiences of the people involved in literacy education. As a consequence we have the opportunity to obtain further information to determine what is happening and why in literacy education, and the most appropriate ways to achieve quality in preservice teacher literacy education. It would be premature to view the categories described in this paper as conclusive, and they were never intended to be so. However they do indicate something of the extent of understanding that preservice teachers are developing, what they believe they know and how they came to know what they do about literacy education. The material presented in this paper is intended to prompt further investigations.

This initial report on the literacy education in preservice teacher education has implications for teacher education providers, and teacher education policy makers.

Teacher education providers could use the categories to develop initiatives centred upon achieving quality in the literacy education. Possibilities include:
• teacher educator professional development focused on lecturing style and content appropriate for literacy education
• reviewing the role and importance of practical content in literacy education, with a view to implementing changes to course structures
• effective, purposeful dialogue groups where staff and students can collaborate in addressing issues relating to the content and processes of literacy education.

Research is now required into ways of applying the insights arising from this study. Options include further data gathering with a range of teacher education providers and participants, to consolidate and test the current findings, and establishing and monitoring the effectiveness of a variety of initiatives in literacy education. International perspectives would further expand and consolidate understandings of quality literacy education.

Appropriate policy decisions are also needed to provide the conditions for quality in preservice teacher literacy education. These include:

• the establishment of an organised research agenda linked with government literacy strategies and the national curriculum. The aim would be a data-rich understanding of influences in preservice teacher literacy education. As a result of this process (which would, necessarily, involve many forms of research), policy makers would be better placed to determine the conditions whereby quality in preservice teacher literacy education might be achieved;

• policy formulation to devise conditions that support and provide incentives for the professional development of literacy specific teacher educators.

To achieve the levels of literacy demanded of today’s students will require a teaching profession that is knowledgeable about the most effective approaches in teaching and learning literacy. The "good practitioner" will be able to perceive and resolve (at least practically) points of convergence and divergence between views of reading and writing instruction, will have confidence in their ability to teach reading and writing and will understand the relationship between literacy learning and the national curriculum. Parents and caregivers will demand these things of the teacher; children will require these things as emerging readers and writers. We do need to know more about ways in which quality preservice teacher education in literacy can promote the knowledge and understanding needed to be good practitioners. Getting it right, in reading and writing, matters.
REFERENCES


