A whole-school literacy pedagogy:
The Victorian Early Years Literacy Program and its implications for the teaching and learning of literacy

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Abstract

Students’ literacy standards have over the last two decades been identified as an area of educational policy focus. For example, a focus on identifying individual students literacy needs and assisting teachers to effectively address these needs is evident in The Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF I and CSF II) and the current Victorian Curriculum Reform project. As a regional literacy consultant and a part-time tertiary educator I am actively involved in supporting the teaching and learning of both pre-service and practising teachers in the area of literacy. This experience has given rise to a simple yet highly effective model of literacy pedagogy which is outlined in this paper. This pedagogy is based on the whole-school approach advocated by the Victorian Early Years Literacy Initiative (VEYLI).

Specifically, I will discuss three areas on which this whole-school literacy pedagogy rests - the development of consistent and informed beliefs and understandings about how primary students acquire literacy skills; the strategies inherent in a whole school literacy approach with an emphasis on teaching a range of literacies in a contextualised manner. Lastly, I will discuss how my dual roles of department consultant and tertiary educator have highlighted this literacy pedagogy as applicable and highly effective for teachers at a range of career stages. In conclusion I suggest the implications this has for the ways in which government agencies can continue to support the development and growth of both teachers and students literacy skills.

Introduction

_If what is learned depends on the way it is learned then effective pedagogy is about teaching in such a way that all students reach their potential._

(Jeffery, 2003)

I had been a teacher of literacy for nearly 20 years when the Victorian Early Years Literacy Initiative (VEYLI) was first introduced in 1998. At the time I believed I was teaching literacy effectively, yet many unanswered questions remained. For example, I was not fully cognisant of how and why I was teaching literacy and hence not fully facilitating students so that they could realise their potential. The introduction of the VEYLI was a ‘light-bulb moment’ for me for a number of reasons that will become more apparent as this paper progresses.

The VEYLI was supported by The Early Years Literacy Research Project (EYLRP) (1998). Reading the project findings provided the impetus for me to trust my personal beliefs and identified a number of strategies to promote effective literacy development. This was not ‘whole language’ literacy teaching where it is assumed that students would learn to read and
write naturally. Rather, the VEYLI endorsed a whole school approach to the teaching and learning of literacy. This pedagogy is a ‘balanced approach’ where students are engaged with meaningful continuous text and in response to deliberate monitoring and assessment, the teacher plans and implements focused and explicit small group teaching.

Not only did this spark my interest, it allowed me to connect previously separate understandings of literacy pedagogies. In my mind, it stimulated research and ‘best practice’ synergies and addressed many of my previous confusions and frustrations when it came to learning and teaching literacy. Suddenly, I had an explanation or a frame of reference for why some strategies worked and why some were less successful. I felt empowered to make a difference for my students or as Jeffery states above, to help students reach their potential. In this paper I share the experiences I have had in affirming the VEYLI whole school literacy pedagogy, the research supporting this approach and the improved literacy outcomes achieved in Victoria as a result of this pedagogy.

To do so in an effective manner this paper comprises four sections. Each section examines an important part of the literacy pedagogy endorsed by the VEYLI. In the first section, the nature and purpose of the VEYLI is examined. In the second section I explore the development of consistent and informed beliefs and understandings about how primary students acquire literacy skills. As beliefs are innately personal I draw on my experiences as a teachers and learner to evidence my claims. In the third section I explore the teaching strategies inherent in a whole school literacy approach. I review how I have worked with teachers using these strategies and their effectiveness. In the final section I will discuss how my dual roles of department consultant and tertiary educator have highlighted this literacy pedagogy as applicable and highly effective for teachers at a range of career stages.
Section 1: The contexts surrounding the VEYLI

The VEYLI literacy pedagogy stems from The Early Years Literacy Research project (EYLRP) (1998) which was a joint initiative of the Victorian Department of Education and the University of Melbourne. There was strong national and State support for this research. In 1997 the Commonwealth, State and territorial Education Ministers agreed to a national literacy and numeracy goal under the 'Literacy for All' banner: “That every child leaving primary school should be numerate, and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level” (DET, 1998, p5). A related sub-goal was also adopted “that every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years” (DET, 1998, p5). With this goal in mind the Victorian Premier set the similar benchmarks for all Victorian schools. Yearly Reading data is collected in Victoria for years prep to two on unseen reading of Reading recovery text levels 1, 5, 15, and 20.

The resultant EYLRP was based on field research involving students, teams of teachers, coordinators and researchers Carmel ĆrÈvola and Peter Hill. The project was conducted in 27 trial schools and 25 reference schools representing a range of schools (as identified by the Student Learning Needs [SLN] index). The trial schools had intensive professional development over the period 1996-1998. Researchers worked with teams of teachers testing, analysing, modelling, coaching, planning and preparing resources. They based their 'Whole school approach” around nine beliefs and understandings about the teaching of early years literacy, as adapted from the research of Ashton & Webb, 1986; Lee, Dedrick & Smith, 1991; Rosenhalz, 1989; Heady & Kilgore, 1996) These nine beliefs and understandings are diagrammatically represented in Figure 1 on the following page. These beliefs and understandings will be examined in greater depth is section 2 of the paper.
Pre and post testing of student literacy standards in the trial schools was conducted over this period. Testing was based on continuous text with grade P-1 student reading text levels 1, 5, 15, 20 (graded texts) and with the Burt word test, (New Zealand Revised), The Observation Survey (Clay 1993) and the Record of Oral language (Clay et al 1983).

There were significant improved results in the trial schools in comparison with the reference schools as Tables 1 and 2 evidence (overpage). Interestingly, the research found the variation between schools was not as significant as the variation between classes.
Table 1: Comparison of performance of Year prep students in reference schools at the end of 1996 with that of Year Prep students in trial schools at the end of 1998. (ELRP)

Table 2: Comparison of performance of Year 1 students in reference schools at the end of 1996 with that of Year 1 students in trial schools at the end of 1998. (ELRP)

Each of these tables indicates the increased proportions of children reaching in the trial schools where whole school support and professional development was offered. The most significant increase was for level 5 (Reading Recovery Level text) for prep and Levels 5 and 15 for grade one. Statewide Benchmarking is now completed for all students in level 1 and 5 (prep), 1,5,15 (grade one), 5, 15, 20 (grade 2).
It was hypothesized that minimising the internal variation (between classes) and bringing all classrooms up to those measured as most effective would result in dramatic improvements in all students literacy standards (Hill & Crevola, 1999). In response to the EYLRP findings and Hill and Crevola’s recommendations, the Victorian DET developed resource material and a training program to support broader implementation of the VEYLI in Victorian Government schools. Support material was set out in modules for professional development for teachers. Further support documents, videos, schools TV support programs and discussions, and CDROMS were developed. A trainer program was developed with skilled practitioners and communicators trained to deliver professional development, to drive discussions and to support school.

Schools were given funding for literacy coordination and teachers were offered extensive professional development. This meant that teachers were talking a common language. We were using data and analysis of student work to plan and inform our teaching. Schools were selecting engaging texts for students to learn with and most importantly we understood how our students were learning. We could cater for students at all levels providing additional support as required. There were education programs for parents to involve them in the literacy process both at home and by assisting in classroom programs. It was an exciting time for education and the improvement of literacy outcomes.

The broader implementation of the VEYLI was renamed The Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) and had several essential features including:

- A whole-school commitment
- A daily, timetabled, uninterrupted, focused 2 hour literacy block 5 days a week
- 1-hour reading and 1hour writing, which operates on the whole-small-whole model
- An effective trained Coordinator
- A strategically planned home and school liaison

Additional government support came with the agreement to reduce class sizes in Prep-2 to maximize the opportunity for teachers to know their students better and to provide the level of support needed. How teachers enact the EYLP is (as Table 1 clearly highlights) based on beliefs and understandings about the learning and teaching of literacy. In the following section I examine this issue in greater depth.
Section 2: The importance of developing consistent and informed beliefs and understandings about how primary students acquire literacy skills

Some personal reflections

I have been privileged to work as a teacher, literacy coordinator, literacy trainer and I am currently a consultant to schools and a part-time tertiary educator in a Primary Education Program at Deakin University, Warrnambool. From these perspectives I have had the opportunity to reflect on research and practice and to work with both teachers and undergraduate teachers in bettering their understandings and practice as literacy learners and teachers.

My role as a literacy educator is based on my personal beliefs about literacy and my experiences of teaching and learning literacy. I knew that the joy of sharing texts with my students was extremely powerful and that most students took on the task of reading and writing quickly from reading and writing together. But somehow I wasn’t trusting of this process so I followed traditional or ‘old’ guidelines that were based on introducing successive ‘sounds’, ‘letter clusters’ and ‘blends’. I followed this with regular sessions on “sight vocabulary” that someone had once told me was for grade prep or grade one. I knew that many of the students already had these skills but I sequentially went through them anyway. It was a very linear approach. I was however, simultaneously exposing students to wonderful sight vocabulary and letter/ sound relationships whenever we shared text or wrote together. We also had rich discussions about our reading and writing and learnt more about the world from our shared reading. On reflection I believe I was dabbling in a ‘variety show’ and not teaching with a deep understanding of the processes of literacy acquisition or with an understanding of the needs of my students. The VEYLI allowed me to ‘ferment’ my initial teaching experiences and ‘brew’ a whole school based philosophy of teaching literacy. What might this look like in terms of teacher practice? An example is outlined on the following page.
Let’s consider the reading process:

“Welcome to my _____”, the bear yawned as he moved the rubble from cave entrance.

How many of you had to read the word “home” or “cave” or “place” to have read this passage with meaning?

“Welcome to my h____” the bear yawned.

Is your prediction more accurate now?

Reading with meaning and structure helped make the initial insertion, but we also strive for accurate reading, which, means we must also attend to the grapho-phonics of text. Reading is a complex task in which the message is interpreted through problem-solving using sources of information. But it is more than that. It requires a strong understanding of how children learn. My experience has shown that once teachers are understanding of the process of learning to read, teachers are able to focus on “how to teach” these strategies through a whole-school approach.

**What does research tell us about teachers’ beliefs in relation to how children acquire literacy skills?**

This responsibility to improve literacy levels weighs heavily on the shoulders of governments who in turn place the responsibility on educators, and in Australia, more specifically on Primary Teachers. But the teaching of literacy is not perceived to be a ‘burden’ when teachers understand how children learn and teach with passion and purpose. Shared commitment through a whole school approach also provides a supportive environment in which to focus on raising literacy standards.

Primary teachers accept this responsibility, but recognise that family and experiences with literacy before and beyond the classroom contribute significantly to progress in literacy acquisition and mastery. Where families are unable to provide this support, schools must
compensate. We must also continue to involve students’ families in the shared experience of learning literacy as much as possible and as early as possible.

Reading does not start in the first year of school. Mem Fox, a well known Australian children’s author claims that “What happens before school is therefore crucial, since it sets the stage for the rest of a child’s life.” (2003, P-1) She concedes that every child needs to be read 1000 books before they are ready to learn to read (Fox, 2001). Further, she argues that children need different kinds of knowledge - knowledge of the world, knowledge of language and knowledge of print, in order to become proficient readers (Fox, 2001) To aid the development of these knowledges she argues that we need to make:

“the unfamiliar familiar, whether it be recent experiences of refugees in Australia, or the pronunciation of the word ‘mischievous,’ or the shape of the letter M. As we listen we’re introduced to new worlds, new ideas and new understandings that we might never have known about otherwise: new places, different ways of life, how things used to happen, how they happen now, moral dilemmas, why wrong is wrong, and right is right, and so on. Listening to books or stories or poems or articles develops a natural and deep understanding of grammar and the way language works. It gives us language that we don’t already have—language that we might need one day to help us make our meanings crystal clear when we speak or write. Listening to excellent writing read aloud helps us and the children we teach to develop a startling vocabulary and spectacular verbal skills, quite naturally—as any read-aloud parent of a precocious pre-school child will tell you, if you give them half a chance.... Listening to stories eases children, and us, into a better understanding of the world’s complexities, and increases our, and their, general knowledge through hundreds of mind-expanding experiences and emotions” (Fox, 2003 P -3)

This passionate belief of Mem Fox is closely aligned with my personal belief and connects with the strong focus on effective teaching of literacy, which the Victorian Department of Education and Training supports in the Early Years of schooling. As a practicing school literacy coordinator the central belief we continually revisited was that we as teachers could make the difference. We were to put aside excuses for poor student literacy such as “home life”, “his brother couldn’t read either” or “maybe that’s all she can achieve”. There was no maybe, no preconceived ideas. We worked on always trying to find a way to improve the child’s literacy performance. The central belief and understanding is that all students can achieve high standards given sufficient time and support. We had to believe that we could make the difference and have goals and targets for each child to strive for.
I have read the continuing debates about the effective teaching of literacy. They are often littered with polarised protagonists for whole language, phonics, and programmed reading schemes. Whilst I support a ‘whole-school approach’ to the teaching of literacy I am aware that the rhetoric of whole school pedagogy is not enough – whole school literacy pedagogy relies on a range of effective teaching and learning strategies.

Section 2: The VEYLI literacy pedagogy: examining effective teaching and learning strategies

The nine beliefs and understandings about learning and teaching early years literacy (refer to Figure 1) are worthy of greater examination as they outline a number of key teaching and learning strategies to support a whole-school literacy approach. These are examined below.

1. **Belief and Understanding**
   The core of this model is that we must believe that all students will learn given sufficient time and support (Refer to Figure 1, p9). Excuses are lame if we are not looking at the needs of the students and their starting points. We need to be constantly reflecting on the student and our practice to ensure they have success. It is essential to return to this belief in all professional learning teams.

2. **Professional Learning teams**
   Professional Learning Teams gave us an opportunity to share our analysis of student work, discuss the starting points for instruction and share strategies to move the child forward. We always focused on the strengths of the child and used this to build on with other strategies. We shared the understandings of the teaching approaches and refined our own understandings. As a consultant, it is my observation that the schools that regularly have professional learning team meetings have made the greatest gains in their literacy. They have shared responsibility for meeting targets and support each other in the process. This involves reflecting on practice and striving for improvement. It also challenges the teacher to have
high expectations of the students. With a supportive learning environment, students will respond to expectations, which are made explicit and modeled to them. The teams I worked with believed in celebrating the successes of teachers and students. It is essential to have starting point to show improvement. We also valued assessing and monitoring our students regularly to see if there were gains.

3. Monitoring and Assessment

Regular monitoring of students ensured knowing the students’ abilities and strengths to help move them forward. Teachers assessed individual reading with regular running records, which they analysed to better inform the teaching, organize their grouping and to monitor progress. Writing samples were analysed and annotated for both secretarial (surface features such as spelling) and authorial (content and composition). From this analysis teachers were informed to articulate the “what” and “why” for their teaching, linking theory and practice. From this the teachers consider the teaching approaches to offer the different levels of support, what text level and type to support the child and the focus, what prior knowledge the child brings to this text, and what prompts may be needed to support the child. Teachers became reflective and responsive to student need. As a result of regular monitoring and assessment students requiring additional assistance are identified.

4. Intervention and special assistance

The approach to additional assistance will vary in accordance with the need of the child. It may be a simple selection of a different text type or choosing a different teaching approach, through to an intervention program. Additional assistance is not about a “bandaid”. It should be an integral part of the classroom program. Individual Learning Improvement plans are recommended for students requiring additional assistance and should involve the parents in the strategy for improvement. I would often be a part of these meetings with parents and teachers and mostly parents were pleased to be involved in discussing the strategies. In one instance a father rescheduled his work commitments to meet with us, as he wanted to support his daughter. We demonstrated the sharing of a storybook with his daughter and some of the possibilities he could take from this experience to assist his daughter in reading. He left feeling empowered. But the real joy for me was when the family stopped me in the
street, a year after I had left the school, to tell me how much their daughter had improved and to thank me for ‘giving them some tips. It isn’t this simple for all students, but if we truly believe we can make a difference we must approach all angles. Some students however, do require intervention.

The recommended intervention program for grade one is Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery “has been delivered as an early intervention, monitored and researched in most English-speaking countries... after children have had some formal teaching” (Clay 2001 p217)

Reading Recovery recognizes that early intervention enables the lowest achieving students to catch up quickly. “The confusions of young readers belong to all beginners: it is just that the successful children sort themselves out and the unsuccessful children do not.” (Clay, 1985, p3). Reading Recovery is provided in year one (second year of schooling) after considering normal maturation and teaching and learning opportunities in the first year of schooling. It is a series of lesson between 12 and 20 weeks (5 days a week) Reading recovery is an individualised program to bring the students instructional reading up to the level of the students in their class where they should continue to have strong supportive teaching and regular monitoring so that gains from Reading Recovery are maintained. Data from studies of Reading Recovery support claims:

- text reading supports the progress of low achievers
- learning to write contributes to learning to read
- phonological awareness can be learned concurrently with other literacy learning especially when reciprocity of reading and writing are stressed
- later effects of developmental lags can be minimized in a series of lessons designed and delivered individually (Askew & Fountas, 1998) "

(Clay, 2001, p217)

5. Leadership and coordination

A trained literacy coordinator was a powerful link in the strategy. As a literacy coordinator I had the opportunity to deliver professional development in the modules, model teaching approaches, act as a mentor and coach, select and organize resources with the team, plan with the leadership team for whole school decisions and track student progress. Through the
facilitation of Professional Learning Teams we shared the understandings and supported each other. This was challenging in initial stages as I was encouraging my peers to reflect on their teaching practice and to change their approach. Its success depended on my leadership skills as the coordinator. It was important to be inclusive of each team member in the process of change and to recognize the different strengths they each contributed. As with students in the classroom, teacher came from different levels of understanding. There were implications of the initiative, which required whole school planning decisions. We needed to develop a culture in the school, which respects the need for uninterrupted instruction time of 2 hours literacy every day. Classes needed to make a commitment to the ‘whole-small-whole’ strategy for a reading hour and a writing hour. This required schools to alter timetables and classroom management strategies.

6. Home-school-community links
The Parent Helpers program and Developing Literacy Partnerships are wonderful programs, which the coordinator delivered. It became a feature of each year at my school and we even presented the program to “Dad’s only” on a request from families. The secrets of how to teach literacy were being shared. Parents were welcome to assist in the classroom settings. A genuine partnership between home and school resulted. The power of positive communication with parents cannot be underestimated and the offering of constructive feedback to parents strengthens the child’s learning. It can be a simple note in the lunch box saying how expressively their child read today or what a fabulous introduction to a mystery story their child wrote. The broader community can strengthen the literacy program too. Retirees reading with children, community professional talking about the literacy demands of their jobs etc. make strong links to the importance of literacy.
7. **School and classroom organisation**

To maximize the literacy opportunities, whole school decisions needed to be made to ensure a two hour uninterrupted literacy teaching block. Timetables, specialist classes, lunch times, assemblies etc needed to be discussed. Loudspeaker interruption needed to stop in these valuable teaching times. Class sizes reduced to maximize the opportunities for small group teaching for all students. Matching teacher expertise to classes was considered too although smaller schools had less flexibility for this. These decisions needed to be agreed to by all staff and needed to be made for the purpose of improving the teaching and learning in literacy. It was to maximize opportunities for focused teaching.

8. **Expectations and targets**

Initially this concerned teachers as they felt their teaching was being judged. Once a culture of ‘no blame’ but shared responsibility was established then teachers were happy to set targets understanding that if they were not met, then the Professional Learning Team would problem solve together. Initially targets of Reading Recovery Levels were used which created a concept of ‘leveland’, which focused at the decoding aspect of reading. Reading behaviours and personal goals are simultaneously set for students now. In setting expectations and goals the resultant discussion provides the power for discussion, reflection and planning.

9. **Teaching strategies**

Prior to the EYLP teachers were using some excellent strategies in the teaching of literacy, but didn’t always know why it was successful. Often these strategies were used for all students without regard for the individual needs of the student. Often there was a ‘one size fits all’ approach e.g. today we will all learn “S” regardless of whether some students knew the letter/sound already.

Some teachers employed a ‘bottom-up’ approach for reading (working from letters/sounds to words and then to sentences and texts), whilst others used a whole language approach, which focused on immersion in language and worked with passages of text. It may therefore be that specific literacy skills were reliant on exposure rather than focused teaching.
In contrast to these strategies the EYLP advocates a ‘balanced approach’ to the teaching of reading and writing. If we consider the process of learning the reader uses 3 sources of information:

- meaning (semantic),
- structure (syntax)
- visual (grapho-phonic)

The more successful we are as a reader, the more integrated these sources of information become. At times, depending on the reader’s experience and knowledge of the topic, one source may be used more than others.

Reading is developing the ability to problem-solve in text using all the sources. This enables the reader to generate meaning from the text. These are the three sources you were using to complete the reading task about the bears at the beginning of the paper.

The teachers’ responsibility is to model and focus on these sources. When monitoring our students’ progress we recognise their strengths and use these to build up the balance required for true reading. e.g. The child reads, “The kitten ran across the garden” when the text says, “The kitten scampered across the garden”. The child is using syntax and semantics accurately and so as a teacher we provide feedback encouraging this but then prompt them to attend to the grapho-phonics so that they can read with accuracy. All aspects of the decoding process can be articulated and explicitly taught through the process of shared reading, language experience and guided reading. This includes building of sight vocabulary, the knowledge of sound /symbol relationships, syllabification and word patterns and the importance of the structure of language, in other words, “Does that sound right?” or “Can you say it that way?” But its strength is that it is taught in the context of authentic and engaging text so that meaning is always maintained.

The debates which rage over the lack of “phonics approach” should not be relevant to schools who are genuinely committed to the Early Years strategy as there is no less value placed on the importance of grapho-phonnic learning. It is taught in the context of reading for meaning. As a young traveller myself, I learnt the Greek alphabet and enjoyed reading my way around...
Greece, phonetically reading street signs etc, but I had no meaning whatsoever of these unless there was clear pictorial or concrete support to help me predict meaning. The ability to unpack the grapho-phonics of words will only give one support to readers and writers but will not fully develop their understanding and message making.

The following passage from Mrs Wishy Washy, a well known book for shared reading shows the joy of learning about reading through reading.

“Oh lovely mud”, said the duck and she paddled in it.
Along came Mrs Wishy Washy.
“Just look at you” she screamed,
“In the tub you go.”
In went the cow, wishy-washy, wishy-washy.
In went the pig, wishy-washy, wishy-washy.
In went the duck. wishy-washy, wishy-washy.

(Cowley, Meltzer & Fuller, 1980)

Through this text we can explore meaning and structure sources of information with the meaning beautifully supported by the illustrations, but the opportunity to explore the grapho-phononic strategy is very strong...only of course, after the children have enjoyed the sheer joy of the story and its illustrations.

This approach of explicit teaching in a balanced approach is consistent with the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards (DE&T Victoria 2004) where the goal to develop life-long learners is central. Explicit teaching and learning strategies include:

a) Modelling: the learner plays a more passive role in this strategy, but the teacher is making very explicit the teaching of strategy. The teacher reads the text to the group or individual. The teacher records and composes in modeled writing.

b) Shared reading and writing: involves the student in the process. They join in with the reading, problem solving, thinking and discussion. By modeling and sharing we are reinforcing the strategies of reading and writing. We are providing our students with a repertoire they can call upon when exposed to new and varying texts. We are developing
meta-cognition where the child internalizes the voice of the teacher to become his or her own inner voice to aid problem-solving. Jerome Bruner describes metacognition as the child saying to itself what is said to them which then becomes their silent voice. This is a powerful concept when we consider who provides that “more knowing other” voice.

The importance of the choice of “teacher talk” and prompts is crucial to this development of meta-cognition. This is powerfully developed through modeling, sharing, guiding and providing supportive independent work.

c) **Independent work** allows the student the opportunity to practice and reinforce learning and to try newly acquired skills in different tasks. It needs to be self motivating and self managing. Where possible it is helpful to have parent or teacher assistance available.

d) **Guided reading/writing** is the child reading or writing independently with the teacher providing prompts, asking questions or providing constructive feedback and engaging in discussion prior, during and after the reading and writing.

e) **Reciprocal teaching**: For competent and fluent readers, the strategy of reciprocal teaching provides further independence in a small group approach where the students gradually take over the role of leader, leading their group through steps of predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarizing. This is a strong strategy for developing deeper understanding of text. Independent tasks should also be matched to need and be self-managing and successful for the student.

f) **Scaffolding**: The scaffolding concept is critical to the teaching of literacy. It is the provision of temporary support which can be withdrawn as competency becomes established and the student’s gains control over the new learning. Jerome Bruner in 1976 described scaffolding as when a more competent person attempts to develop the understanding of a less competent person. We take scaffolding even further, recognising that the level of text, genre of text, prior knowledge children bring to the text or need to be provided with to access text, are also
supports. The selection of prompts and questions provide support. The links to prior learning and skills and the careful grouping of students are all forms of scaffolding.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to select the most appropriate teaching approaches to best support the learners. This was often the topic of rich discussion in professional learning teams. Teachers found it difficult to model to students with the common belief that students only learnt “if they did all the work”. This is a powerful shift in our thinking, to allow modeling while still providing the opportunity for the individual to read and write. Teachers were encouraged to utilise the gradient of support figure on the following page (figure 2) to guide their selection and scaffolding of appropriate teaching strategies. As the figure demonstrates, the aim of these teaching strategies is to increase student independence.

**Figure 2: Gradient of Support**

(DET, 2000)
To understand the different levels of support and the selection of appropriate teaching focuses, teachers need to monitor and analyse their students' work. For example, teachers monitor their students’ use of strategy, by analysing the students' reading using running records on continuous, familiar text. Errors, self-corrections and reading behaviours are analyzed according to the three sources of information. Comments are made on fluency, phrasing and other strategies they may employ e.g. finger pointing, re-reading. When students are reading with 90-95% accuracy at a text level, that is their instructional text level for further teaching. Statewide benchmarks are established using text levels. Some criticism has been made against this process claiming that we have created a concept of “level land” where students progress through levels decoding text accurately without the necessary comprehension of the text. There is some validity in this criticism, but the teaching of understanding with reading also needs to be modeled, shared and monitored. Decoding of text is a crucial skill and requires the use of meaning. The deeper concept of inferential understanding and recall of detail is best done with focused discussion and modeling of these strategies. A balanced approach encompasses:

- places meaning at the core of reading
- recognizes the interaction between reading and writing
- recognizes the importance of context in reading
- places equal emphasis on the development of semantic, grammatical and grapho-phonological knowledge
- recognizes the importance of students developing effective strategies for processing text
- provides for instruction across a range of fictional and factual text-types including public and electronic texts
- promotes a balance of Shared, Guided and Independent Reading opportunities

instruction on effective assessment of students’ needs and abilities(Winch et al, 2004 P-13)

A strong basis for the acquisition of literacy is the strong connection to oral language.

It is children’s oral language that is a large part of what they bring to print, together with an understanding of the topic in question ... It is their knowledge of spoken grammar that tells them what to expect next in a written text and it is their vocabulary knowledge that helps them construct mental images from the texts they are reading. Children with a well-developed vocabulary knowledge will know not only words like ‘big”, but also others like ‘huge’, ‘enormous’ and ‘gigantic’.
This equally applies to the modeling of language as referred to by Mem Fox with her strong message for the power of “reading to” children.

We know that we have successful readers when the readers expect what they read to make sense, can predict what is to come in the text on the basis of their understanding of the content, of language and of print, can confirm their predictions and can correct themselves when they find their predictions to be unsatisfactory, using the three cues automatically. With this foundation of the nine beliefs and understandings underpinning the teaching of literacy we can see that it is a whole school commitment and shared responsibility. Why has it been such a significant challenge to schools and individual teachers? Accountability applied pressure to teachers. The need to reflect on practice in the light of research hadn’t previously been expected. We needed to know our students comprehensively, to plan specifically for their needs and to be responsive in our teaching. The teaching of literacy was under the microscope. The strength of the initiative was its foundations in the Early years Literacy Research project, linking to Reading Recovery and “best practice” in teaching. In other words, “what had been proven to make a difference”. Figure 3 (on the following page) identifies a range of practices effective teachers of literacy engage in.
The Victorian reading data has shown significant gains in reading levels attributing the success of the balanced approach to literacy as demonstrated by the following data “almost 78 per cent of prep students, 85.7 per cent of year 1 students and 94.5 per cent of year 2 students in Government schools read at 90 to 100 per cent accuracy. This is 15.5 per cent more at prep level, 14.7 per cent more at year 1 and 9 per cent more at year 2 than in 1998” (The Age Monday, October 18 2004 Behind the News P-3 Margaret Cook)

I have focused on the decoding aspects of the teaching of literacy and yet the VELYI acknowledges the broader roles of the reader as described by Luke and Freebody (1999). They talk of the Four Resources Model for reading:

1. Code-breaker role – the decoding of text using semantics, syntax and grapho-phonetic knowledge
2. Text-participant role—the meaning the reader brings to and gains from the text in both the literal and inferential sense
3. Text-user role – understanding the way texts are used for differing purposes e.g. timetable, recipe, editorial article, poetry
4. Text-analyst role – developing critical thinking about the underlying assumptions in a text and how a text is trying to persuade the reader.
It is essential that in order to approach the latter three roles, students need a strong ability on the code-breaker role, but it doesn’t imply that we do not address these roles at early stages with our students. The rich approach that the Early Years pedagogy provides allows these to occur simultaneously. When we are sharing the delightful “Big Books” in the Mrs Wishy Washy Series with our prep. children, we are also able to discuss the character of Mrs Wishy Washy and her stereotype and the underlying values of cleanliness etc. read the written text tells us one rather simple story but the children infer a much funnier and richer story from the illustrations. They are already reading for inference. What is more powerful for developing the text participant role than language experience reading with our students? In language experience they bring their prior knowledge directly to the text? Every guided reading opportunity begins by establishing prior knowledge with the students or the teacher provides any essential prior knowledge to enable the students to access the text, hence developing the text participant role. It is the skilled teacher who maximizes these opportunities to engage the students in powerful discussion with the students. As we move into the older grades the opportunity in modeled, shared and guided reading expands these opportunities with specific strategies of comprehension being demonstrated and practiced. Graphic organizers and thinking tools are powerful supports in developing strategies for greater understanding of reading and for planning powerful writing. The application of the 6 Thinking Hats, really allows for that critical analysis. The use of venn diagrams help to explore text-to-text, text to self or text to the world connections. These strategies help the students to focus their thinking and to make their thoughts visual and organized.

The acknowledgement of multiliteracies is a powerful shift in education. When we refer to text we open up a wide range including film, video, signage, email, webpages, chat lines and text messaging. The list goes on... A fascinating aspect of this is the changing nature of conventions of print as a result of the technological age of communication.

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as abbreviations in text messaging are challenging our concepts of spelling and structure of language.
“Whethr peple lik it or not. New ways of spellg r ere.4betr or worse.Bck 2 basics in C21? Ur kidding!” Bell (2004). We see by Bell’s response to the Back to Basics debate in his text message that we are amidst rapid changes in thinking, although I would suggest he has rather strong knowledge of grapho-phonics but is using it efficiently.

But Language is always evolving, and the current rate of change is extraordinary. We must be ready to acknowledge these changes and connect these to our traditional concepts of literacy to maximize communication.

Section 3: The EYLP and pre-service teachers

Generation Y as defined by McCrindle refers to young people born between 1983 –2000. He believes they best connect as facilitators and through experiencing rather than explaining, they value process rather than content and are more visual in their learning. They respond better to a relaxed setting for learning and connect through fun and feelings. To keep them engaged, communication needs to be real, relevant, responsive and relational (McCrindle 2004)

We need to consider this in our preservice education as this is the generation who now make up the majority of our preservice teachers currently studying for a Bachelor of Education (primary). The delivery of preservice education in literacy needs to consider the position of these students to both cater for their needs while ensuring we prepare them for ongoing learning and reflection of practice and to acknowledge the findings of research on literacy an learning.

Deakin University (Warrnambool) chose to offer a different approach to preservice education in the faculty of Education (Primary) by employing practicing teachers and consultants in the delivery of lectures and tutorials in the teaching of literacy and numeracy unit, and one of their Education Studies Major unit titled ‘Understanding Learners’. The teachers are also “trainers” in the Victorian Early Years literacy and numeracy program. They had been chosen as trainers because of their expertise in these areas and because they had excellent skills in
communication. The Early Years program used a “Train the Trainer” approach, so trainers were crucial to the delivery of the program to schools.

This opportunity for Deakin allowed the “Best Practice” in these areas to be delivered to their students. It was delivered, modelling the teaching methodology and strategies. Teachers in schools welcomed this as the students were receiving the same messages that they were exploring and delivering. It provided consistency across the university and the schools. Students responded positively to the lectures and tutorials where they were actually observing and engaging in teaching approaches of modelling, sharing and guiding. They were analysing actual students work and worked in different grouping arrangements. Each lecture and tutorial was supported by examples and illustrations from children and classes. Strong links were made between the disciplines. With the teaching of literacy we were able to explore the “balanced approach to literacy” as recommended by the EYLP while reflecting on other approaches. As a consultant, I am privileged to go into many classrooms. I am aware that while there is a genuine commitment to this balanced approach to literacy, not all teachers have changed their practice. Research has proven it to be effective but while we have disparate delivery of the program we will not maximize the possible gains. Change takes a long time, particularly if teachers feel their practice has been questioned. This makes it imperative that our graduates are well prepared with solid understandings of the “why and how” of the teaching of literacy so that they can further develop their skills.

We must empower our preservice teachers well for this responsibility with a strong understanding of the research and theories of learning in literacy balanced with excellent models of application. They must believe that they can make the difference.

The reading and writing process was demonstrated, students practiced taking and analyzing running records, they assessed students writing and made teaching decisions on the analysis. Poetry, Big Books, information texts and writing were shared with the students joining in with the teaching and the responding. The guided reading and reciprocal teaching strategies was explored with the reference articles for the literacy unit. Explicit teaching was modeled about the importance of explicit teaching. Shared reading demonstrated the power of shared
reading. They were given specific strategies to look for in schools. We were able to reflect on practice they observed in school placements and the students made excellent comment in relation to their understanding of the teaching of literacy. Their engagement in the literacy unit was exceptional and their developing understanding was reflected in their assignments.

It is vital that our preservice teachers are delivered the “best practice” model, with the acknowledgement that research should continue to question and improve our knowledge of the teaching of literacy. To ensure we have a strong commitment in our schools to a focused and balanced approach to teaching literacy, it is essential that our graduates have strong understandings. Deakin University is pleased with the success of this initiative, although there are problems in maintaining the availability of practitioners who have the expertise to deliver to undergraduates. The first hand examples and anecdotes, which support the learning, need to be current. We don’t want the situation of delivering “same old, same old”. We need to consider employing the best teachers and researchers to deliver the preservice education of teachers who model “best practice” in their own teaching. Again the need is for a balanced and dynamic approach. Our future teachers deserve the best in research and the best on the modeling of practice.

Teachers in schools who have the students on placement, have been pleased with the knowledge and understandings that the students bring, but caution that because of the high level of understanding this initiative has developed with the students, the students are putting great expectations on themselves trying to ‘do it all’ perfectly and at once. Negative or positive criticism? I’m undecided, but I do know the students have soaked up an enormous amount of practical and theoretical understanding about the teaching of literacy and have enjoyed the unit. That has to be positive. Our feedback at this early stage is mostly anecdotal and observational. Students were asked to comment on the literacy units and rated it extremely high. From this perspective we are pleased with the results. This year the program was delivered within the context already set by the unit guidelines. There is great opportunity to explore the balance of practitioners and academics delivering preservice education of teachers in literacy and by also exploring the action research model with students working with students and teachers on clearly defined projects to improve literacy outcomes.
Conclusion

Whether we are teaching young people the acquisition of literacy or preparing our next generation of teachers the same understanding applies. As Figure 4 (below) indicates it is the teacher who makes the difference with the progress of our students. Our primary students and our preservice teachers both require the best practice modeled to them in their education. The research strongly agrees with Hill and Crevola, that apart from the individual student differences, it is the individual teacher who makes a difference to student improved learning.

I conclude by revisiting Jeffery’s initial statement (2003) but this time it applies to tertiary preservice educators. “If what is learned depends on the way it is learned then effective pedagogy is about teaching in such a way that all students reach their potential.”

*Figure 4: Potential Teacher Impact on Learning (DET, 2002)*
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