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ABSTRACT

Research has indicated that teachers' beliefs and their value systems guide the implementation of specific instructional strategies in their classrooms. Moreover, the ways in which they structure their instructional environments are also influenced by their belief systems. In areas where there are contestable views about the most effective ways of teaching a particular area of the curriculum, the teachers' beliefs can theoretically and practically influence the outcomes students gain from their pedagogical encounters. Within English-speaking educational systems there is considerable contestation about the most effective way to teach literacy. This study reports interview data collected from a sample of Tasmanian early childhood teachers about the beliefs they hold about literacy instruction and matches them with observational and student outcome data about their instructional practices. Based on these data, suggestions are made about how teachers' beliefs influence their pedagogical practices. (Contains 22 references and 17 tables of data. Appendixes contain descriptions of five categories identified, and descriptions of literacy assessment tasks.) (RS)

# Does it matter what I think? - An exploration of teachers' constructions of literacy and their classroom practices.

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**Does it matter what I think? - An exploration of teachers' constructions of literacy and their classroom practices.**

The past decades have seen considerable changes in the ways of teaching language and literacy in early childhood classrooms. While contemporary approaches advocate language and literacy practices that reflect a socially constructed model of curriculum, there are large numbers of teachers who hold differing views on how language can be taught in early childhood classrooms. Often these differing views are based on years of classroom practice that reflects "what works for me" in teaching language and literacy. At one extreme end of a continuum are those who subscribe to the view that literacy education requires students to master hierarchies of subskills that are combined to produce a single composite of skills that constitutes "literacy". At the other end of the continuum are those teachers who view language and literacy learning in a holistic way and draw heavily on the views of Halliday (1975) and Cambourne (1988) among others to shape their understandings.

Whatever views are held about language and literacy teaching it is apparent from any reading of the contemporary discourse in this area that the prevailing pedagogies used by teachers in their classrooms are not ideologically neutral and in point of fact, reflect the socially constructed nature of language and literacy learning. Language and literacy learning is essentially a contested process where social interactions between the learner and the more literate adult or peer play a significant role in promoting language acquisition and the development of literacy skills and knowledge. In this process the teacher plays a pivotal role in shaping the classroom environment which may facilitate students' socialisation into literacy as well as their literacy beliefs, behaviours and outcomes (Gump, 1989; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). The teacher and any other adult engaged in the literacy process supports the student in moving from one level of understanding and performance to the next. The manipulation of these environments by skilled teachers can affect the quality and variety of a child's oral language use, engagement in literacy behaviours and story composition (Nielsen & Monson, 1996).

How do teachers decide to construct specific literacy learning environments? On-going research (Carter, 1990; Korthagen & Lagerwerf, 1996; Richardson, 1996) suggests that the ways in which teachers construct their classroom environments are influenced by their beliefs, though specific data on how this is done are somewhat scarce. Some researchers claim that for teachers, beliefs and their implementation in specific classroom instructional environments are more often than not closely interrelated and guide their pedagogical actions (Richardson, Anders, Tidwell & Lloyd, 1991). This has been shown to be the case in early childhood classrooms where teachers' views about teaching and curriculum directly impact on the construction of the classroom environments (Hill, Yinger & Robbins, 1981; Morrow & Rand, 1991).

If the role that the teachers' constructions of the classroom environments plays in promoting language and literacy development is so important, then the views that teachers hold about literacy and the ways in which their thinking shapes classroom practices constitutes an important area of investigation. Thus the purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationships between teachers' constructions of literacy and language learning, their classroom organisational and pedagogical practices and their possible effects on student

learning outcomes in a sample of early childhood classrooms. This analysis is based on the assumption that teachers' views influence their planning and structuring of many of the rules, routines and pedagogical moves that characterise classroom life. In carrying out the research notice was taken of the understandings advanced by Elbaz (1991) that all knowledge is not clearly articulated by teachers and that the tacit knowledge they possess is non-linear; has a holistic, integrated quality; is partly patterned or organized; and is imbued with personal meaning (1991:11). As the subsequent methodological elaborations present, the concern here is not with the processes teachers go through to create their knowledge, but with identifying what that knowledge is and how they apply it within their literacy classrooms.

**Teachers' beliefs and classroom practices**

Before going any further it is important to clarify what we are referring to when we discuss teachers' beliefs for there is considerable imprecision in the use of the term in the literature. A belief can he defined as a statement of a relationship among things accepted as being true (Fenstermacher, 1978). The teacher sees the beliefs as conceptually representing a valid reality which guides personal thought and actions, planning and decision making (Clark & Peterson, 1986). When synthesising the assumptions on beliefs Pajares (1992) noted that:

> beliefs are instrumental in defining tasks and selecting the cognitive tools with which to interpret, pal and make decisions about such tasks; hence they play a critical role in defining behaviour and organizing knowledge and information.

In the setting of this paper the focus is on teachers' beliefs about literacy teaching policies and practices that influence their construction of literacy teaching environments in a sample of Year Two Tasmanian early childhood classrooms. This specific contextual reference provides a valuable opportunity to consider teachers' beliefs about literacy teaching, as many studies on teachers' beliefs and the effects they may have on the construction of learning environments do not always provide a specific contextual reference. This means that attempted comparisons may refer to a variety of learning environments rather than focusing on one. The other advantage of providing a specific contextual reference is that possible interrelationships among beliefs, teachers' planning, decision-making, classroom practices and student outcomes, can be explored.

The elicitation of teachers' beliefs about say, literacy teaching, is at best a problematic process. Basing understanding about teachers' beliefs on predetermined theoretical positions may give some inkling of how these thoughts structure learning environments. However, to gain greater understanding it is necessary to interview the teachers in some depth about their beliefs and ideally to relate these elicited statements to specific instructional situations and to specific learners. In these interviews the purpose is to get the teachers to describe elements of their thought processes including their planning, decision making and theoretical understandings about teaching of literacy. Models of teacher thinking (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Shavelson & Stern, 1986) infer that teachers draw upon all these elements at all stages in their teaching. However, Korthagen & Lagerwerf (1996) comment that the images or conceptions that teachers portray are embedded in other knowledge, which cannot be easily separated from pedagogical knowledge.

In the early childhood classrooms these elements affect the ways in which the teachers plan their learning environments, curriculum experiences and the materials they use in their lessons. Teachers draw down their knowledge to guide practice and this knowledge is influenced by their own conceptualisation of their theoretical positions as well as their past classroom experiences. They are the "mixers" of the theoretical and environmental dough that develops into the well baked loaf.

**The setting of this study and data collection methods used**

Naturalistic inquiry, where research is based in the field, and whose methods are designed to describe patterns of social organisation from the viewpoints of the participants, is especially well suited to the purposes and focus of this research (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Erickson, 1986; Evertson & Green, 1986). Interview data were collected from the teachers concerning their beliefs about literacy teaching and these data were complemented by observational data collected from the classrooms where the teachers taught. The teachers' expressed beliefs elicited in the interviews were constructions of their individual views of reality and not the reality itself (Elbaz, 1991). On the other hand the observational data represent behaviours observed in the classrooms in which concrete universals (Erickson, 1986) are located and unique practices are able to be identified.

The study was conducted in 31 Year 2 classes in Tasmanian primary schools. Where there was more than one Year Two class in the school the classes chosen for the study were judged by the schools to be representative of Year Two classes in the school. The schools included in the sample were representative of Tasmanian schools and details about the sample are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample Details**

| Categories of Schools | | Number of Schools |
|---|---|---|
| Size of school: | | |
| | Large(>400) | 10 |
| | Medium (>200<400) | 13 |
| | Small (<200) | 8 |
| Geographical location: | | |
| | Urban | 25 |
| | Rural (>40 k from CBD*) | 6 |
| Educational Needs Indices** | | |
| | Disadvantaged | 8 |
| | Not Disadvantaged | 23 |
| Grouping Practices of Year 2 Classes | | |
| | Year2 | 12 |
| | Year 1-2 | 9 |
| | Year 2-3 | 10 |

*Based on DECCD data **based on DECCD indices

Some schools were classified by the Tasmanian Department of Education, Community and Cultural Development (DECCD) as disadvantaged schools and there was a mix of urban and rural schools, as well as large and small schools. There were 602 students in the 31 classrooms in this study.

Table 2 shows that over 40 percent of the classroom teachers had completed a four year B. Ed. degree.

**Table 2: Academic Qualifications of Teachers**

| Academic Qualifications | Classroom Teachers N | Classroom Teachers % |
|---|---|---|
| 2 yr trained | 4 | 12.9 |
| Dip. Teach | 6 | 19.4 |
| B.Ed | 14 | 45.2 |
| B. Ed. Hons | 4 | 12.9 |
| B. A. Dip.Ed | 3 | 9.6 |
| *Totals* | *31* | *100* |

Table 3 indicates the majority of teachers were initially trained as primary teachers rather than specialising as early childhood teachers.

**Table 3: Areas of Specialisation During Preservice Teacher Education**

| Areas of Initial Training | Classroom Teachers N | Classroom Teachers % |
|---|---|---|
| Early Childhood | 11 | 34.4 |
| Primary | 20 | 65.6 |
| *Totals* | *31* | *100* |

The classroom teachers had been teaching for a considerable period of time. Less than a fifth of teachers had been teaching for fewer than five years. (See Table 4)

**Table 4: Years of Teaching Experience of Teachers**

| Years of Teaching Experience | Classroom Teachers N | Classroom Teachers % |
|---|---|---|
| I -5years | 6 | 19.4 |
| 6-10 years | 4 | 12.9 |
| 11-15 years | 5 | 16.0 |
| 16-20 years | 10 | 32.3 |
| longer than 21 years | 6 | 19.4 |
| *Totals* | *31* | *100* |
| (had a break from teaching in last five years) | 1 | 3.1 |

Data were collected from the classes over an sixteen months period from February 1996 to April 1997. During this period the teachers were interviewed in Term Two, 1996 about their literacy teaching beliefs and teaching practices and observational data were collected from each classroom during Term Three 1997.

The instruments used to gather data were not framed by any particular construction of the ideal theoretical approach to literacy teaching but were eclectic in nature. Observational data of the classroom environments was set against descriptions of 'best" practice in literacy classrooms identified in *First Steps* (1996). Specific details about the interviews conducted and the observational data collection approaches used follow.

*Teacher interviews to elicit teachers' beliefs about literacy teaching*

The semi-structured interview schedule probed the following issues concerning the teaching of literacy:

- teachers' philosophical beliefs about literacy and the teaching of literacy;
- teaching methodologies used by the teachers in their classrooms;
- planning strategies used by teachers for their literacy teaching/learning lessons;
- resources used by teachers in their literacy teaching;
- evaluation approaches used by teachers in their literacy teaching/learning lessons.

Only the data from the first three issues are reported in this paper.

All the teachers were interviewed about their teaching beliefs away from their classrooms by the same interviewer. Each interview was audio taped with the teacher's approval and the resultant written and audio recordings analysed for their content and a matrix was developed based on the responses obtained in the interviews. For each interview question a series of sub-items was developed to reflect the recurring responses of the teachers during the interviews. Once the matrix of questions and sub items were developed the interview data were reviewed again to ensure that all of the points made by the teachers in the interviews could be accommodated in the content analysis contained in the matrix. Where data were 'lost' in fitting in the interview data into the matrix, additional sub items were added to include the 'lost' interview data.

As the interview data represent teachers' self reporting the question arises about the validity of the responses they make in the interview situation. While there is a body of literature that suggests that teachers' constructions of their teaching practices, by and large represents valid descriptions of their practice, there is a need to validate their responses. It was planned to do this through the collection of observational data about the teachers' classroom practices, and compare what they claim they do in the interview data with their observed behaviours in the classrooms.

Once the interview data were collected they were analysed following the processes described above. A random selection of scripts was read by more than two persons to ensure that the categorisation of the data was appropriate and reliable.

There are often potential dangers associated with the interpretation of interview data. For example, definitions of approaches about literacy teaching are problematical as terms that once conveyed clear-cut meanings have become confused and expanded so that the terms are now imprecise. *Genre* is a case in point as many of the interviewed teachers used this term in different ways. Consequently during the interview care was taken to ensure that a teacher's use of particular terms portrayed commonly accepted meanings rather than portraying personal meanings. Again there can be a lack of clarity on the teacher's part when she or he described the particular approach adopted in the classroom. Wherever possible this vagueness was explored with the teacher until a shared understanding was arrived at about what they teacher actually meant.

*Classroom observations*

The observation schedule was developed to collect data that portrayed the behaviours of students during literacy learning sessions. Actual observational data were supplemented by a classroom environment profile which recorded resources, seating patterns etc. in the classroom. As well, short descriptive statements were compiled about teacher behaviours and the general climate in the classrooms. Observations were followed by brief follow-up interviews with the classroom teachers regarding the primary aims for their lessons. These data enabled an environmental profile of each Year 2 class in the study sample to be established.

The observational schedule included four components: observations of student behaviour in the literacy classroom; teacher behaviour in the literacy classroom; classroom environment details; and the general climate in the classroom.

Observational data of student behaviours identified a number of variables these included where the student was in the classroom, whom the student was interacting with and the intended task the student was undertaking. Coupled with this information was a list of the materials being used by the student. Another variable considered was student and adult talk. The amount, purpose and audience of observed talk were recorded. Two other overall perceptions were also recorded during the observations. These were student attentiveness to their tasks and the general ambience or affect while the students were doing their literacy tasks.

While the predominant focus was on the observed student behaviours during the observational periods, records were also kept of the teachers' predominant activities during the observational periods. It was reasoned that by focussing on the children's behaviours the impact of the teachers' planning and decision making could be determined.

Classroom environment details recorded included a rating of the classroom's physical environment in terms of an exemplary literacy learning environment identified in *First Steps* (W.A. Ed. Dept., 1996:7). The classroom environment itinerary used, was an adaptation of a checklist included in *First Steps.* The checklist of physical layout and resources comprises a list of questions designed for classroom teachers to consider when evaluating their literacy learning environment.

The content validity of the observation instrument was established by comparing the categories with the suggested activities featured in the Tasmanian *DECCD's Key Intended Literacy Outcomes* (KILOs) and other major literacy publications such as *First Steps* (1996). Observational reliability came from writing categories (where appropriate) in behavioural terms so that the student behaviours could be readily identified. In addition the researcher who carried out all of the observations trialed the instrument with another observer to ensure that the record was a practical one to use and to ensure that there was no ambiguity when behaviours were recorded. Inter-rated reliability coefficients during this trialing period were 0.86 and higher. As the same researcher conducted all the observations, internal reliability, was judged to be high. External reliability was also enhanced by having observational data gathered on many students rather than having a greater number of observations focused on a comparatively small number of students.

The other situation that can contaminate observational data, the presence of a 'new' person in the classroom, was not believed to be an issue in this study. The researcher had worked with all the students previously and both students and teachers were accustomed to her presence in the classroom. Hence, it was believed that she was a regular visitor to the classrooms. However, to safeguard that she 'fitted into the background' as unobtrusively as possible, she recorded environmental scan data first and then spent some time generally observing classroom operations before observing the target students.

Observations of classrooms were conducted by the researcher during scheduled 'literacy-learning sessions', usually one morning 'block' of one and a half hours duration. The sessions were nominated by the classroom teacher as the key literacy-teaching-learning session. It should be noted that the majority of teachers claimed that they held sustained silent reading sessions at other times of the day.

Prior to visiting schools to collect observational data, a list of 14 randomly selected students from each class was drawn up. The list consisted of 12 students to be observed and 2 'reserves' to allow for absentees. The sample was equally divided into male and female subjects. As a proportion of whole class attendance this number ranged from 100% of the total Year 2 class enrolment down to 40% of the Year 2 class.

It was argued above that the observational data provide a reliable and valid 'snapshot' of student behaviours during the literacy lessons and provided sufficient contextual information in which to ground the collected data.

*Teacher interviews data about influences on literacy teaching*

The teacher interview data revealed a wide range of responses to the questions that were asked and the issues explored. Some of the highlights of these responses are presented below.

The data in Table 5 indicate that 27.6% of teachers perceived literacy in the same way as the proponents of the National Curriculum statement document, *viz.* literacy is the achievement of designated outcomes in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing. The functional focus on literacy was the next most cited view by teachers. Here, 24% of teachers viewed literacy as a means to achieve specific learning and communication outcomes. Such a view is more restricted than that described in the National Curriculum documents. However, 17% of teachers perceived literacy as being "everything" they do in the classroom. It is not possible to determine whether such a view represents a true belief of the encompassing nature of literacy within the school curriculum or represents an inability on the part of the teachers to describe what they mean by literacy.

**Table 5: Teachers' Responses to the Question "What Does the Term Literacy Mean to You?"**
(Ns= 31,30)

| Teachers' Responses | Percentages |
|---|---|
| Skills based focus | 12.4 |
| Functional | 24.0 |
| Comprehension | 12.0 |
| National Curriculum definition | 27.6 |
| 'Everything' | 17.0 |
| Not able to be categorised | 7.0 |
| *Total* | *100* |

12% of teachers held a more narrow construction of literacy than the viewpoint expressed in the previous statements. These teachers focused on the comprehension skills needed by students to function in today's society. Taking even a more restricted view were another 12.4% of teachers who viewed literacy as essentially teaching specific skills to students so that they could read.

Following this exploration of the meaning of literacy to teachers they were next asked what theoretical or philosophical frameworks informed their understanding. The data presented in Table 6 show that eclecticism is the most prevalent framework to guide teachers' constructions of literacy. A very small number of teachers in this sample claimed that a phonics approach only provided the framework for their literacy teaching.

**Table 6: Teachers' Theoretical or Philosophical Frameworks That Inform Their Literacy Teaching**
(Ns =31,30; Percentages shown)

| Teachers' Theoretical Frameworks | Teachers |
|---|---|
| Eclectic, drawing on different theories | 55.0 |
| Whole language with phonics | 20.0 |
| Phonics approach | 10.0 |
| Child-centred approach | 7.5 |
| Cambourne's whole language | 7.5 |
| *Total* | *100* |

The reasons the teachers gave for holding such views mainly reflected their perceptions that their frameworks matched the learning needs of the students in their classes and "it works".

Moving from the consideration of the broad meaning of the term literacy and the theoretical framework on which they based their literacy practices, teachers were then asked to reflect on what *practical* issues they thought about when they considered literacy teaching/learning practices. The data presented in Table 7 reveal the views of the classroom teachers about this issue.

**Table 7: Practical Influences on Literacy Teaching/ Learning**
(N =31: Percentages shown)

| Teachers' Perceptions | Teachers' Responses |
|---|---|
| Provide children with opportunities to speak, write, etc | 14.3 |
| Catering for individual styles of learning | - |
| Skills children have and need to develop | 18.7 |
| How to integrate literacy with technology | 5.7 |
| Fitting literacy learning into classroom foci | 5.7 |
| School literacy policies | - |
| Children's interests | 8.5 |
| Abilities and interests children have | 8.5 |
| Intervention | 8.5 |
| Developing critical thinking | 5.7 |
| Phonics | 5.7 |
| Reading, writing, spelling activities | 18.7 |
| *Total* | *100* |

The predominant focus of the teachers' views shown in Table 7 reflects a concern with establishing activities that promote skill development and opportunities to enable the students to apply the skills and knowledge they have gained.

Research (for example, Elbaz, 1983) has identified the relatively close relationship between student learning outcomes and teachers' planning. The assumption in this relationship is that the more effectively the teachers plan for their teaching/learning experiences the more likely are the students to achieve intended learning outcomes. Hence, during the interviews the teachers were asked to describe what they take into account when they plan for literacy teaching/learning in their overall classroom programming.

Table 8 lists the other most important factors teachers claim they take into account in their literacy planning. Integrating literacy with other curriculum areas was a factor considered by a fifth to a third of classroom and resource teachers. The two other frequently cited factors identified in Table 8, influencing planning concerned the provision of a variety of literacy experiences and ways of moving students "on".

**Table 8: Factors Influencing Teachers Literacy Planning**
(N=31 Percentages shown)*

| Planning Factors Considered by Teachers | Teachers' Responses |
|---|---|
| Providing a variety of literacy experiences | 17.1 |
| Integrating literacy with other areas | 22.9 |
| Individual learning styles | 8.6 |
| Current affairs | 11.4 |
| School/class themes | 8.6 |
| KILOs, National Curriculum | 2.9 |
| Providing meaningful contexts for literacy learning | 5.7 |
| Ways to move children 'on' | 5.7 |

* because of multiple responses percentages do not total 100.

The KILOs[1] documentation and the National Curriculum profiles did not feature as key sources of information when it came to teachers considering their teaching/learning strategies. Only 3% of the teachers claimed that they used these documents in this way. However, a different picture emerges when the teachers were asked about the usefulness of these documents for literacy evaluation. As the data in Table 9 show, the majority of teachers perceived these documents to be quite useful in this regard.

**Table 9: Teachers' Perceptions About the Usefulness of the KILOs Document and Support Materials**
(N= 31; Percentages shown)

| Views on KILOs and Support Documents | Teachers' Responses |
|---|---|
| Very useful as an evaluation tool | 50.0 |
| Useful as a prescriptive tool | 25.0 |
| Use occasionally | 7.2 |
| Not useful | 8.9 |

The data in Table 9 indicate that the majority of teachers view the KILOs as useful aids in shaping assessment judgements about student literacy performances. Indeed, this seems to be the major use that teachers in this sample made of the KILOs documents in this role KILOs have the potential to provide a very useful benchmark against which to judge student performances.

The above data reveal some of the views the teachers claimed influenced their literacy teaching. The key question for this paper *"what does the term literacy mean to you?*, elicited a range of responses and emphases.

[1] KILOs or *Key Intended Literacy Outcomes*, is a set of documents prepared by the Tasmanian Department of Education to guide teachers' literacy instruction. It features a stage based development of literacy outcomes.

Based on the responses to this question five categories of responses were identified. These were:

Skills based focus;
Functional focus;
Comprehension focus
National curriculum focus; and
Eclectic focus.

Elaborative comment on these categorisations may be found in Appendix A. These categories provided the bases for the examination of the observational data in the following section to determine whether the teachers implemented the views they held.

Table 10 presents the data showing the number of teachers in each of the five categories identified above. The primary data on which the teachers' responses were placed into the five categories were determined by their responses to the question *What does the term literacy mean to you?*. All the subsequent interview, observational and outcomes data were placed into these initial categories.

**Table 10: Categorisation of Teachers' Responses Concerning Their Approaches to Literacy Teaching**
(N= 31); Ns shown)

| Categorisation of Teachers' Responses | N of Classroom Teachers |
|---|---|
| Skills based focus | 4 |
| Functional | 7 |
| Comprehension | 4 |
| National Curriculum definition | 9 |
| 'Everything' | 5 |
| Not able to be categorised | 2 |
| *Total* | *31* |

*Observations of Classroom Behaviours*

The following sections presents the classroom observational data that illustrates how teachers holding specific views about literacy, implement their programs.

The first data analysed concerns the teachers' general classroom environments. Table 11 presents the data on the 31 classrooms in the study grouped according to the teachers' approaches to literacy teaching on aspects of classroom organisation and ways of giving instructions.

**Table 11: The Teachers' Classroom Environments - Ratings of Organisation & Giving Instructions**
(Percentages shown)

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy Teaching | General Organisation of Routines | | | | Ways of Giving Instructions | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Children unaware of routines | Some idea of routines but students generally follow teachers' advice | Routines well established and students work indepen-dently | Unclear | Instructions generally understood but not always totally clear | Clear, elaborated instructions. Teacher checks student understanding |
| Skills based focus | 25 | 50 | 25 | 0 | 50 | 50 |
| Functional focus | 0 | 71 | 29 | 0 | 71 | 29 |
| Comprehension focus | 25 | 0 | 75 | 0 | 25 | 75 |
| National Curriculum focus | 0 | 22 | 78 | 0 | 11 | 89 |
| Eclectic focus | 0 | 83 | 17 | 17 | 50 | 33 |
| *Total sample* | 6 | 45 | 49 | 6 | 36 | 58 |

The data in Table 11 indicate that in half of the classrooms observed the routines were well established and the students were able to work independently. In the "skills based" and the "comprehension" classes 25 per cent of the children appeared to be unaware of the routines. In the "national curriculum" classrooms the teachers gave clearer instructions than teachers in the other categories and more often than not, elaborated upon them. Comparatively few (17%) teachers continually gave what were judged to be unclear instructions.

Data from three apparently discrete but important areas are presented in Table 12. They are ratings of the teacher's enthusiasm about their literacy teaching, pupil mobility around the classroom and an overall judgment of the classroom as a community.

Examining the data relating to "teacher enthusiasm" it may be seen that overall 45 per cent of the teachers were rated as having high teacher enthusiasm in their classes. Examining the five categories teachers in the "skills based" and "national curriculum" categories were judged to be more enthusiastic than those in the other categories. Whether this is an artifact of their beliefs about teaching is not possible to discern at this stage. Further, teachers in the "skills based", "functional" and "eclectic" classrooms were more likely to have greater student mobility than teachers in the two other categories. Teachers in classrooms with the "comprehension" and "national curriculum" focus tended to have a higher sense of cohesiveness in their classrooms than teachers in the other classrooms.

## Table 12: The Teachers' Classroom Environments - Ratings of teacher enthusiasm, pupil mobility, classroom as a community

(Percentages shown)

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy Teaching | Adult Enthusiasm | | | Student Mobility | | | Classroom as a Community | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No sense of cohesiveness exists | Apparently A low sense of role | A high moderate teacher enthusiasm in teaching role | Apparently high teacher enthusiasm in teaching role | Apparently students spent the majority of their time in the one place | students spend majority of the session moving around the classroom | Low: students spend majority of 1/3-112 of session classroom | Medium: of cohesiveness between 1/2 of the exists the classroom | High: moderate sense more than exists in the classroom |
| Skills based focus | 0 | 50 | 50 | 25 | 25 | 50 | 25 | 50 | 25 |
| Functional focus | 11 | 57 | 32 | 0 | 43 | 57 | 14 | 71 | 15 |
| Comprehension focus | 0 | 75 | 25 | 25 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 50 | 50 |
| National curriculum focus | 0 | 33 | 67 | 0 | 78 | 22 | 0 | 56 | 44 |
| Eclectic focus | 33 | 33 | 34 | 17 | 33 | 50 | 17 | 67 | 16 |
| *Total sample* | *13* | *42* | *45* | *13* | *52* | *35* | *10* | *52* | *38* |

Table 13 presents the results of the analyses of the literacy tasks actually set by the teachers. It may be seen that there were comparatively few reading tasks set by the teachers in any of the observed classrooms. The two classrooms that set the most reading tasks were the "skills based" and "comprehension" classrooms but they represented only 12 per cent of the observations.

## Table 13: Intended Tasks Set by Teachers for Students

(Percentages shown)

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy Teaching | Reading | | | Writing | | | Spelling | | Listening | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | indepen-dently | with adult help | with peer help | indepen-dently | with adult help | with peer help | indepen-dently | with peer help | to teacher read | to instruct-ions | |
| Skills based focus | 12 | 4 | 0 | 47 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 26 |
| Functional focus | 5 | 2 | 1 | 62 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 10 | 11 |
| Comprehension focus | 12 | 7 | 1 | 46 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 20 |
| National curriculum focus | 2 | 0 | 0 | 53 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 29 |
| Eclectic focus | 3 | 4 | 1 | 61 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 22 |
| *Total sample* | *7* | *3* | *0.7* | *54* | *0.7* | *1* | *0.3* | *0* | *5* | *8* | *20* |

The majority of the intended tasks observed in the classrooms (54 per cent overall) involved the teacher setting specific writing tasks usually based on worksheets. The teachers in the "eclectic" and "functional" classrooms set more of these tasks than teachers in the other classes. Set spelling activities were seldom observed in any of the classrooms.

The comparatively heavy reliance on set worksheets may be noticed from the data presented in Table 14. Here reading and writing from and in worksheets and on loose sheets of paper were the materials used in the majority of classes. There was a difference between the materials used in the "comprehension" classrooms and the others.

**Table 14: Mean Scores on Student Task Attentiveness and Student Affect**

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy Teaching | Student Task Attentiveness<br>1=Off Task, 5=On task all the time | Student Affect<br>1=Not discernible, 5--High |
|---|---|---|
| Skills based focus | 3.34 | 2.89 |
| Functional focus | 3.06 | 2.70 |
| Comprehension focus | 3.09 | 2.66 |
| National curriculum focus | 3.54 | 3.86 |
| Eclectic focus | 3.66 | 2.89 |
| Total sample | 3.19 | 2.77 |

Turning to task attentiveness the data in Table 14 shows the mean ratings on a five point rating scale. Students in all classrooms were judged to be more on task than off task during their literacy lessons. Students in the "eclectic" and "national curriculum" classrooms were rated as being on task more than their peers in the other classes.

Student affect which represents a rating of how the students are enjoying their work or not is also reported in Table 14. While overall the student affect was judged to be positive the students in the "national curriculum" focused classrooms were rated more highly than their counterparts in the other classrooms.

Student and adult talk data are shown in Table 15 and a wide range of scores across the five categories may be noted. There was more than twice as much student talk in the "eclectic" classes than in the "skills based" ones and considerably more teacher talk in the "eclectic" and "national curriculum" focused classes than in the three other categories of classrooms.

## Table 15: Mean Ratings on Student and Adult Talk

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy | Amount of student talk 1--Low, 5=High | Amount of teacher talk 1=Low, 5=High |
|---|---|---|
| Skills based focus | 1.61 | 1.32 |
| Functional focus | 2.30 | 1.77 |
| Comprehension focus | 1.83 | 1.54 |
| National curriculum focus | 2.91 | 4.12 |
| Eclectic focus | 3.36 | 4.34 |
| *Total sample* | *1.81* | *1.55* |

Table 16 illustrates the materials used by the students in their literacy classrooms for reading, writing and spelling activities.

## Table 16: Materials Used by Students in Literacy Classrooms

(Percentages shown)*

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy Teaching | Reading materials | | | Writing materials | | Spelling materials | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| class | work-sheets | personal LSCWC fiction | children's books | Information | sheets of paper | in books list | on loose whole list | whole book |
| Skills based focus | 44 | 17 | 22 | 8 | 80 | 0 | 100 | 0 |
| Functional focus | 32 | 9 | 17 | 30 | 70 | 33 | 67 | 0 |
| Comprehension focus | 22 | 22 | 10 | 5 | 83 | 0 | 33 | 67 |
| National curriculum focus | 51 | 14 | 6 | 27 | 72 | 33 | 0 | 67 |
| Eclectic focus | 49 | 17 | 5 | 27 | 63 | 88 | 13 | 0 |
| *Total sample* | *38* | *17* | *9* | *22* | *73* | *27* | *25* | *47* |

Percentages do not total 100% as only main materials are featured

The most frequently observed literacy behaviour in the classroom featured writing activities involving the development of a story or responding to set questions on a loose sheet of paper (36.5%). A limited amount of writing in books was observed (22%). The general purpose of these writing activities identified by teachers in the interviews was to reinforce and extend upon specific knowledge and skills or to allow the students opportunities for creative writing. By providing such opportunities the teachers were able to spend focused time with individual students. Essentially teachers regard the provision of such writing activities as an essential strategy in managing their literacy classrooms.

Looking at the reading resources listed in Table 16 it can be seen that there was a restricted range of materials used by the students. The greatest percentage (38%) of observed use of resources involved the use of teacher or commercially prepared student worksheets. They were generally used to reinforce reading skills covering a wide range of activities. With so

much emphasis placed on the use of these worksheets compared with directed reading instruction from the teacher, the quality and relevance of the worksheets' contents will have a substantial impact on the attainment of quality literacy outcomes.

Directed spelling behaviours were not often recorded during the literacy lessons. Of those that were recorded the use of a *look, say, cover, write, check* (LSCWC) approach in journals or books constituted the main spelling resource used. The use of small personal dictionaries was also recorded in about a quarter of the situations where spelling behaviours were noted.

When the data in Table 16 are compared by the approaches it may be seen that some obvious differences among the approaches to material use are apparent. The greatest differences may be seen in the ways in which spelling is taught in the classes with the skills based, comprehension and eclectic approaches being quite different to each other and to the other approaches. In the area of reading the national curriculum approach teachers relied on the use of worksheets slightly more than teachers using the other approaches. There were not many differences of great consequence noted in the other areas of reading shown in the table.

*Relating practices to student literacy outcomes*

The results of the students on four measures of literacy were analysed to determine whether the performances of the students in the five groups were different in any significant ways. Details about the four measures are presented in Appendix B.

Analyses of variance (regression model) were used to determine whether there were any significant differences in student outcomes among the five different approaches to literacy teaching identified above.[2]. The students scores on the four measures at the beginning of Year 3 were analysed. Table 17 presents the results of these analyses.

**Table 17: Analysis of Variance on Four Literacy Task Outcomes**
(mean scores shown)

| Teachers' Approaches to Literacy Teaching | Running Record of Reading Accuracy | Cloze* | Dictation Spelling** | Dictation Phonemic** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Skills based focus | 80.19 | 2.08 | 21.64 | 66.51 |
| Functional focus | 80.58 | 2.60 | 20.66 | 65.15 |
| Comprehension focus | 79.94 | 2.22 | 22.74 | 68.92 |
| National curriculum focus | 69.70 | 2.43 | 20.88 | 66.25 |
| Eclectic focus | 81.07 | 2.40 | 21.14 | 66.06 |
| *F values* | 1.35 | 2.309 | 3.058 | 2.396 |
| *Significance levels* | 0.251 | 0.057 | 0.017 | 0.049 |

*N. of errors ** N of words correctly spelt or sounds identified

Examination of the data in Table 17 shows that there were significant differences among the mean scores on two of the four tasks at 0.05 level of significance. Scheffé post-hoc

[2] Analyses of the students scores at the beginning of Year 2 showed that there were no significant differences among the students placed in the six approaches. Pre-post correlations indicated that the measures were highly correlated ranging from 0.83 to 0.93

comparisons reveal that on the dictation-spelling task there were significant differences between the mean scores of the students in the *functional* and *comprehension* classes at .05 level.

There were also significant gender differences overall on the two reading tasks with boys scoring higher mean scores than the girls on both tasks ($p<.02$, $p<.001$). Post-hoc comparisons indicate that male students in the classes labeled as having a *national curriculum* focus scored higher than students in the classes labeled as having an *eclectic* focus.

Other comparisons such as between classes with the five approaches in disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools and between urban and rural schools did not reveal any significant differences on the outcome scores on the four tasks.

*Discussion and Conclusion*

The range of approaches to literacy teaching identified in this study would be typical of those found in Tasmanian schools and more than likely, in the majority of Australian schools. Australian schools, like those in most western countries, are under considerable pressure to improve students' literacy and numeracy outcomes. Recent survey data indicate that Australian principals report there is increased time being devoted to literacy instruction and that teachers' confidence about how to achieve successful literacy outcomes has grown (1998:7-8). If the national goal of having all students achieving acceptable literacy standards after four years of primary schooling is to be achieved, it appears to be essential that primary teachers portray and implement a clear understanding of their intended approach to literacy teaching.

The data presented in the previous sections of this paper indicate that the teachers tended to have a clear understanding of what literacy teaching/learning means to them. There was a spectrum of beliefs and philosophies identified from the interview data and it was apparent that teachers' beliefs influenced the ways in which they planned their lessons and structured their learning environments. It is unlikely that one single element determines the ways in which teachers teach. Rather, there appears to be process wherein all of the beliefs, settings and guiding philosophies contribute to the decision-making process in an interactive manner.

Pajares (1992) argues that there is a hierarchical relationship among beliefs, planning and decision-making. If this view is accepted then it is likely that the decision-making process is influenced by the beliefs held by teachers. The evidence obtained in this study indicates that teachers' beliefs do influence the processes and outcomes in classrooms. It is also apparent from the interview data that teachers' beliefs are formed by wholistic and dynamic elements rather than by singular and static elements. In the interviews the teachers were able more easily to discuss their views about literacy teaching when they were couched in the former mode rather than the latter.

In terms of belief formulations and the philosophies that guide this process, it is apparent that the age, years of teaching or academic qualifications do not differentially distinguish among the teachers. Teachers of different ages, years of teaching experience and qualifications may be found in each of the approaches to literacy teaching identified in this study. This suggests that there is no absolute relationship among these independent variables and the beliefs held by teachers. However, there is a clear need to explore this proposition further.

Turning to the literacy outcomes reported in this study it is apparent that the limited literacy outcomes examined suggest that there were few significant differences among the various literacy approaches. It would be a delight to report that approach "A" works best with student "Y" but that is not possible to determine from the data available from this study. Given the realities of every classroom it is essential that the teacher has a clear understanding of where she/he is planning to go in producing literacy outcomes. The teachers in this study reported varying beliefs and there was variety in the strength of these beliefs within each approach. Each teacher in this study could be classified as a maturing professional teacher who has taken up the challenge of making explicit his or her beliefs and working out ways of implementing them in their literacy classrooms. Taking the next step of identifying how well each teacher implements their beliefs and the effects of the variations of beliefs within each approach on individual students' literacy outcomes merits consideration.

The evidence gathered by this study suggested that external contextual factors influence do influence the ways in which teachers operate in their classrooms yet there were no significant differences among the teachers working in schools classified as disadvantaged compared with their peers teaching in non-disadvantaged schools. This finding applied irrespective of the approach adopted by the teacher. It appears to be an area worthy of further investigation as we endeavour to match literacy approaches to the needs of individual students.

It apparently does matter what teachers think. The evidence is that teaching is a complex and cognitively and attitudinally demanding task and that beliefs affect implementation processes and to some degree, student outcomes.

*Appendix A: Descriptions of the five categories identified during the teachers' interviews.*

I. *Skills based focus:* This focus represents a concentration on the acquisition of literacy skills by students. Responses included comments such as:

"...literacy is reading, writing, spelling - word attack skills";
"...giving children basic skills to build onto become competent, literate people"; and
"...the development of skills to operate effectively in society."

2. *Functional:* The functional focus generally goes beyond an emphasis on skills acquisition as it implies that the skills must be applied to performing specific literacy tasks. Other responses that were categorised as having a functional focus emphasised literacy as communication and/or an imperative social function e.g.

"...reading writing and spelling for a number of purposes";
"...communication, to be able to function well";
"...being able to read, write, speak and listen to a level at which you can function in society";
"...all children must have literacy skills to functions properly in society"; and "...you need it to get through life".

3. *Comprehension:* This focus emphasises obtaining meaning from literacy learning activities. Responses included:

"...making sense of language";
"The capacity for children to gain meaning from print and to give meaning through print"; and
"...providing children with strategies to find meaning".

4. *National Curriculum Definition:* Responses that described literacy in terms of reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing were placed into this category. Some respondents mentioned the National Curriculum English Profile as the source of their given definition, while others did not.

5. *"Eclectic":* For some respondents, the nature of literacy was seen to be all encompassing within the school curriculum. Some spoke of literacy being "too big to define adequately", or as simply "everything", while others mentioned aspects of integration with all areas of the curriculum. This depiction by the teachers of literacy as "everything" reflected either their perception that literacy was integrated into all of their curriculum experiences following Departmental policies and rhetoric, or their understanding of the term was too difficult to describe accurately:
e.g. (literacy means to me) ". .all facets of language - oral, written and read"; (literacy is) "..interconnected, all around us, in everything we do".

*Appendix B: Literacy Assessment Tasks*

Four assessment tasks were developed to gather data about young children's literacy development in this project. They included a Running Record of Reading; a Cloze passage and two Dictation tasks. The assessment of literacy learning in the early school years "needs to extend beyond the relatively superficial aspects of spelling, punctuation and grammatical correctness" (Derewianka, 1992: xiii). Such assessment needs to be concerned primarily with the identification of how young children understand and use written language as a resource for making meaning, and the extent of control that they have developed over this resource. The assessment tasks used to gather data about young children's literacy learning serve this purpose. Specifically, these tasks provide 'windows' into how children make sense *of* and *with* written language. In addition, the tasks provide some evidence of the children's control over the conventions of writing, namely spelling, punctuation and grammatical correctness.

In and of themselves, the assessment tasks used in this project have credibility as strategies for assessing and/or diagnosing literacy learning (see Clay, 1993). While they do not reveal the rich data that are available through "close observation of (authentic) language activities in a variety of different contexts" (Rivalland, in Derewianka, 1992:19), they do provide strong indications of whether children see sense-making as a central issue in their reading and writing, and of the kinds and range of strategies that children employ to make sense in and through written texts. In Clay's Running Records of Reading, for example, the focus is on mapping the child's attention to and perception of print as a resource for making meaning (see Clay, 1993). Similarly, a Cloze passage constitutes a tool for identifying the kind of information a child uses to make meaning from print (see Freebody and Austin, in Derewianka, 1993). In the analysis of a sample of a child's writing, both content or meaning and structure or syntax can be assessed, as and where one realises or finds expression in the other (see Rothery, in Derewianka, 1993). In the discussion that follows, each of the assessment tasks used in this project are described, in terms of their general form and function; how they were adapted for use in this project; and how they were administered in the first phase of the project.

***Running Record of Reading Accuracy***

Clay's Running Record of Reading (1979) is an adaptation of Goodman and Burke's miscue analysis (1972). It was designed to reveal something of the processes by which the child monitors and corrects his/her own reading performance. The nature of a child's reading errors can guide analysis of reading behaviours for teachers and/or researchers.

In this project, the Running Record of Reading strategy was applied by asking children to read a text specifically designed for the task. This text, *The Video Camera* was based on an actual child's experience of constructing a model of a video camera using 'junk' materials. The text was designed to present young readers with progressively more complex sentence structures, vocabulary, punctuation, and words per page. The field of the text was deliberately drawn from the technology learning area, and included both print and visual elements. The text was organised in two parts, the first being an instance of the Recount genre, with a strongly developed Description element (Derewianka, 1993). The second part of the text comprised a challenge for the reader to use the text as a springboard for their own design processes. In the main, only highly skilled/confident readers attempted to read this section of

the text. In total, the text comprised 327 running words (272 words in the first part of the text). In administering the Running Record, the research assistant provided assistance to those children experiencing levels of stress or frustration in reading the text. These assists were coded as miscues.

### *The Cloze task*

The Cloze passage developed for use in the project (*Kim's Robot*) was drawn from the technology learning area. Initially, a system of deleting every tenth word was applied to the passage. Trialling of the passage with two Year 2 classes not involved in the study indicated that the task was too difficult for the children, so a variable deletion strategy was used, based on both syntactical and semantic cues. These deletions represented a progression from 'highly predictable' to 'less readily retrievable' lexicogrammatical items. Like *The Video Camera* text, *Kim's Robot* comprised two parts, the first being a personal Recount, with a strongly developed Description element. The second part of *Kim's Robot* was an instance of the Procedure genre. The field of the text was deliberately 'technological', but was realised mainly through everyday language rather than high levels of technical vocabulary. Teacher assistance was allowed, to alleviate children's stress or frustration, and marked on the passage where it occurred. No score was recorded in these cases.

### *The Dictation Task*

The Dictation task used in the project (*Ben's Toy*) was an adaptation of the Dictation Task developed by Clay (1993). This text was more syntactically and lexically complex than the text used by Clay (1993), but again, was drawn from the technology learning area. Everyday language was used to construct the field of the text, which comprised 28 words in total. The first sentence was a single clause of seven words, while sentences two and three were clause complexes of 12 and 10 words respectively. Sentence three comprised two clauses linked by a contrastive conjunction. No children's requests for assistance in this task were noted.

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