The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by

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To investigate cost effective interventions to improve literacy outcomes of primary aged students - USA, UK, Ireland

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Acknowledgements

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To all the many wonderful people I met in the United States, Ireland and the United Kingdom, who were so willing and generous in sharing their time, research, ideas and hospitality, I thank you. It has solidified my faith in humanity, that we all want the best for our children and their future and that we can all strive for excellence through cooperation and collegiality.

Finally, love and deep thanks to my family. To my husband, Steve Cumper for his unerring faith in my abilities; to my eldest daughter Nina and son Archie who managed so brilliantly whilst I was away; and to my second daughter Lily, who accompanied me on my travels, preventing me from getting lost on numerous occasions.

In the words of the great man himself, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat" and I will continue to offer these in the pursuit of high quality literacy education for all our children.
Executive Summary

The purpose of my Churchill Fellowship was to meet with researchers, teachers and other service providers, whose work focuses on finding proven strategies or programs to support struggling young readers to ensure their opportunities for success are increased. Specifically I was investigating,

“cost effective interventions to improve literacy outcomes for primary aged children”.

Teaching is an incredibly complex pursuit. Every class is filled with a variety of students with different personalities, abilities and backgrounds and experiences. Classrooms pull together an extraordinary collection of human beings. At its core, teaching is a human activity. It’s about relationships built upon thousands of interactions and decisions. Teaching is not simply applying a practice, strategy or intervention in order to gain a particular outcome. Teaching is an art that weaves together so many complexities to contribute to the development of an individual.

Of course, we need to refer to research and we need to be cognisant about effective interventions, but education is not that simple. A good teacher takes their professional knowledge and uses it appropriately for the particular context in which they work. Those teachers that are the best, have a great understanding of their individual students and select and adapt strategies and interventions for their particular context, artfully encouraging students to take risks, to have a go and to make steps in their learning.

I have synthesised the ideas and knowledge I learnt on my Churchill Fellowship travels into eight major recommendations, discussing each below. Within these discussions I refer to the relevant contacts I visited. In this way I have been able to draw out the big ideas that are worthy of pursuit in Tasmania and more broadly across Australia. Due to the complexities of literacy development, I realised, during my travels, that I could not just simply focus on cost effective classroom interventions. As such, the recommendations not only include specific classroom literacy interventions, but also consider broader childhood developmental concepts that affect literacy acquisition.

Some of my recommendations do require considerable funds or at least a redistribution of current available funds. Some people may not consider them to be cost effective. I urge readers, to consider however, the costs of not supporting every single Australian child to become successfully literate people. Poor literacy often leads to poor life outcomes; lack of employment or low incomes, health problems, mental health issues and even imprisonment. The cost of supporting adults with low literacy skills is a burden on society and more importantly a great burden to those individuals. Supporting parents from birth as well as supporting teachers and students through primary school to become confident literate individuals is cost effective in the long term.
Highlights of my Churchill Travels

- DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools in Ireland to observe the positive effects of targeted funding to provide extra teachers and resources to successfully support children from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop literacy skills
- Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Services of Ireland, to discuss and see in action their research into literacy research and how they provide teacher friendly resources
- Associate Professor John Begeny, University of North Carolina, for his inspirational, altruistic programs to assist struggling readers, whatever their background
- Professor Timothy Rasinski for his enthusiasm about the English language and his generous sharing of knowledge
- Professor Howard Goldstein for his hospitality in welcoming me into his home and for the many stimulating conversations about language development and equity

Key recommendations

1. Provide support for parents from birth around literacy development
2. Cultivate community support initiatives for students' literacy learning
3. Support schools with disadvantaged populations
4. Build teacher capacity through the establishment of a cross sector institute for professional development
5. Use evidence based interventions and strategies
6. Strengthen oral language development in the early years
7. Develop stronger relationships between schools and universities to encourage appropriate evidence based practice
8. Bring it all together at the school level: the role of the Literacy Specialist

Dissemination

At present, I have returned to the classroom, continuing my pursuit to be the best teacher I can be. I have included a number of possible related actions for each of my recommendations. I have already begun to follow through with some of these and plan on pursuing others. My findings will be shared formally, through professional learning presentations at schools, education systems, conferences and through letters to relevant ministers. There are also many opportunities to share knowledge informally with teacher colleagues and parents, plus through meetings with other relevant organisations such as libraries and family and child centres. However I can not possibly work through all these actions on my own and welcome discussion from anyone who would like to support my recommendations.
Itinerary

Week 1: 16 - 22 October, 2017, Ohio, USA

- Hosted by Professor Timothy Rasinski, Professor of Literacy Education, Kent State University, Ohio
- Interviewed Dr Rasinski to discuss reading fluency and vocabulary development interventions
- Attended lectures with post graduate special education students
- Attended faculty meeting discussing direction and vision of faculty
- Visited a Charter School, Cleveland, Ohio to see authentic repeated reading through poetry intervention
- Visited Davey Elementary School, Kent, Ohio to observe the variety of literacy interventions available
- Visited Kent State University Pre-School to investigate the importance of a language rich preschool education
- Attended Doctoral Dissertation
- Attended Faculty Dinner
- Attended Columbus State School Conference, Columbus, Ohio to learn more about Dr Rasinski’s research

Week 2: 23 - 29 October, 2017, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

- Hosted by Dr John Begeny, Associate Professor, North Carolina, State University, Raleigh, North Carolina
- Attended lecture/discussion with post graduate psychology students discussing internationalism in education
- Attended lecture/discussion with post graduate educational psychology students discussing effects of educational outcomes due to racism and disadvantage in schools
- Interviewed Dr Begeny to discuss HELPS programs
- Visited to Partnership Elementary School to see HELPS program in action
- Interviewed Dr Begeny to discuss SOPAA for schools, a model to respond to students’ learning challenges

Week 3 30 November - 4 December, 2017, Tampa, Florida

- Hosted by Professor Howard Goldstein, Associate Dean, Department of Communication Science and Disorders, University of South Florida
- Interviewed Professor Goldstein to discuss current research around early language interventions

Churchill Fellowship Report

Cate Doherty
• Visited Professor Goldstein’s research laboratory to meet research team and observe work in preparation for major research project
• Attended meeting of the Sulphur Springs Neighbourhood of Promise team to observe a range of stakeholders come together to support disadvantaged families
• Toured Layla’s House, Sulphur Springs and observed sessions between speech and language pathologist and parents and preschool children
• Visited Ballast Point Elementary School to observe work of Speech and Language Pathologist supporting students with literacy development challenges

Week 4, 5, 6: December 5 - 25, 2017, Ireland

• Attended Professional Learning about the Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years Guide, presented by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Limerick Education Centre
• Visited St Michael’s Infant School, Limerick to observe the Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in action
• Visited the Presentation School, Limerick to interview Kaye Twomey, Literacy Specialist and observe the Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in action
• Attended Professional Learning presented by NEPS, about Vocabulary Development, Letterkenny
• Visited St Oran’s National School, Buncrana, Inishowen to see small group interventions
• Interviewed Grainne Fitzpatrick, SUAS (not for profit organisation providing literacy support), Dublin
• Interviewed Donald Ewing, Head of Psychological and Educational Services, Dyslexia Association of Ireland, Dublin
• Attended professional development about interventions for children with dyslexia, Dyslexia Association of Ireland
• Interviewed Mary Nugent, Regional Director, NEPS, South East/South Midlands, Waterford
• Visited the Presentation Secondary School to discuss Precision Teaching
• Visited St Ursula’s National School, Waterford to observe the ARROW Intervention Program in action
• Visited St John of God National School, Waterford
• Visited to Holy Cross National School, Tramore to see small group interventions in class and to observe the Toe by Toe intervention in action
• Interviewed Regina Dunne Professional Development Service for Teachers
Week 7: 26 November - 5 December, 2017, London, UK

- Interviewed Dr Fiona Kyle, Senior Lecturer in Language and Communication Science & Programme Director for BSc (Hons) Speech and Language Therapy City, University of London, Division of Language and Communication Science about her research into computer assisted reading interventions
- Interviewed Anji Wilson, Research Associate, Centre for Neuroscience in Education, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge about computer assisted reading interventions
- Video conference hosted by Fiona Kyle her PhD student Zahra Esmaeili about family connections and risk of reading difficulties
- Interviewed Catherine Harris, Researcher, Book Trust
Introduction

Purpose of Churchill Fellowship

There is a great deal of research that indicates that children who are identified in their first year of school as being at risk of having difficulties with learning to read, will continue to struggle with literacy throughout their education. Teachers know they need to do something to change this trajectory, but finding interventions that are effective, practical and sustainable in time poor, financially strained schools is challenging.

Thus, the purpose of my Churchill Fellowship was to meet with researchers, teachers and other services, whose work focuses on finding proven strategies or programs to support struggling young readers to ensure their opportunities for success are increased. Specifically I was investigating cost effective interventions to improve literacy outcomes for primary aged children.

The Australian Government has a focus on preparing students for the future through sustained improvements in literacy skills. Whilst Australia’s 2015 Program for International Assessment (PISA) reading literacy results were average for OECD countries, we have seen a steady decline in our results between 2000 and 2015. The Australian Education Act 2013 states that Australia must aim to be one of the five highest performing countries in PISA.

On the surface, Australia’s reading results seem positive. In 2015, Australian students achieved an average score of 503 points in reading literacy, which was significantly higher than the OECD average of 493 points. However, if you drill down further into the results you will find that only 61% of Australian students achieved the National Proficient Standard in reading literacy. This begs the question; ‘what’s going on with the other 39% of students who didn’t reach the benchmark standard?’ Looking more carefully at the results, we find that all Australian States and Territories performed significantly higher than the OECD average, except for Tasmania and the Northern Territory, whose performances were significantly lower than the OECD average, where only 48% of students reached the National benchmark. When considering, Australia’s indigenous population, we find that just 32% of 15 year old students reached the benchmark standard. Students from metropolitan schools achieved an average score of 511 points, which was 31 points (or around one year of schooling) higher than the average score of 480 points achieved by students from provincial schools and 46 points (or around one-and-a-half year of schooling) higher than the average score of 465 points achieved by students from remote schools. Students in the highest socioeconomic quartile achieved an
average score of 551 points, which was 89 points (or around three years of schooling) higher than the average score of 462 points for students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile. These results indicate that it does matter where you go to school in Australia. It points to an inequitable education system across the country. The PISA results interest me, as the achievements of 15 years is the result of the education throughout their life, not just of the education they have received as 15 year olds.

Many people look to Finland for answers, however unlike Finland, Australia has a greater disparity between schools. On starting school, 22% of children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains (physical, health and well being, social competence, emotional maturity). That’s 60,000 vulnerable children in 2016. For some population groups, the statistics are worse with 33% of children from the lowest socio-economic quartile rated as vulnerable compared with 15% in the highest quartile.

We need appropriate federal and state policy to support schools in the teaching of literacy, but this top down approach takes time. We need action on the ground now. Every individual child matters. Every child should be given the best opportunity to learn to read, write and communicate to a high standard. They are not a statistic.

**Importance of quality literacy teaching for all children**

Unfortunately, many models for intervention start with the deficits e.g. parents don’t read to their children enough, the children haven’t had enough experiences before they start school, they come from a poor background, they live in a bad suburb. Teachers can’t really do anything about children’s lives outside of school and there is no advantage to blaming parents or their circumstances. However, research tells us that quality teachers have the greatest impact on students’ learning.

Teachers need to be supported to assist children at their current level of skill and understanding, but teachers often complain of insufficient resources to meet students’ needs. These could include lack of physical resources as well as human and time resources. Taking research, turning this into classroom friendly practices, then building teacher capacity can have an impact on students’ learning.
Life long implications of low literacy

The impact of low literacy levels go beyond the classroom. Poor literacy levels often impact a person for the whole of their life. People with low literacy abilities have decreased employment opportunities, their health outcomes are often compromised and some will even end up in prison. In addition, people with poor literacy skills have low self-esteem, feeling ashamed, having to hide their struggles.

Complexities of becoming literate

Learning how to read is an incredibly complex process. Whilst it appears that some students naturally acquire the skills of reading, the reality for many students is that they need to be explicitly taught the many facets of reading. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2005) states that students learn best when teachers adapt an integrated approach to the teaching of reading that explicitly teaches phonics, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency and comprehension (Schubert, 2009). Planning learning experiences that gradually bring together these components of reading requires great understanding and skill. Teachers need to intimately know each individual student’s current level of knowledge, and have a suite of evidenced based approaches to respond to every students’ unique learning profile. This is where highly skilled teachers can have a significant impact.

Method

The itinerary for my Fellowship and context for visits, meetings and professional learning attendance was purposefully planned to meet with leading researchers, teachers and other service providers, undertaking research and/or implementing literacy interventions in schools. Additionally, valuable unscheduled meetings and visits also took place, as I was introduced to new contacts and organisations. This was an exciting aspect of the Churchill Fellowship, allowing me to discover some innovative and excellent practices that I would not have come across without traveling overseas.

I have synthesised my findings into major themes, discussing each below. Within these discussions I refer to the relevant Churchill Fellowship contacts I visited. In this way I have been able to draw out the big ideas that are worthy of pursuit in Tasmania and more broadly across Australia.
Recommendations

1. Provide support for parents from birth around literacy development

The first and most important educators of children are their parents or other main caregivers. Whilst my Churchill Fellowship project was to investigate literacy interventions for primary aged children, the birth to five year old period of childhood development is of prime importance to later literacy acquisition. During these early years, children develop emergent literacy skills that lay the foundation for reading and writing. Emergent literacy skills include oral language (receptive and expressive language and vocabulary development), phonological awareness and basic concepts of print (understanding how a book works e.g. identifying front and back covers, understanding the difference between illustrations and printed text, directionality of printed text, knowing when to turn the page). Also of importance, during the early phase of life is the relationship that children develop around reading. If they are participating in happy, exciting experiences when reading books, they will be more likely to develop a positive attitude to books and reading as they develop and be more motivated to become independent readers.

Unfortunately, the reality is that there are children who begin their formal education with underdeveloped emergent literacy skills. Research shows for example that there can be huge disparities in children’s vocabulary development. Children from language rich homes (often wealthier homes) have vocabularies two to three times larger than their more disadvantaged peers. This is of great concern as the long lasting effect of ‘language poverty’ has a cumulative impact on children’s developing reading skills. Children with poorer vocabularies go on to have lower reading comprehension results at Grade 3 level and beyond. Despite the best efforts of schools, it is very difficult to overcome the challenges of beginning school with poor emergent literacy skills.

About 85 percent of a human’s brain develops by age 5. So early learning is one of the most important keys to a child’s success. Subsequently, we should be seeking ways to support parents to understand their vital role in helping their children develop emergent literacy skills as well as other skills for school readiness.

HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters)

One such organisation that seeks to support parents of preschoolers is HIPPY. I visited their Hillsborough, Florida branch, based at the University of South Florida. HIPPY has its origins in Israel and has now spread throughout 70 countries around the world. All HIPPY programs are based on the same principles:
• All children want to learn – and, under proper conditions, all children can learn.
• All children mature across the same developmental areas and learning and development is multidimensional and interrelated.
• Parents want the best for their children.
• Parents are their children’s first and most important teachers.
• Parents can learn how to teach their children school readiness skills and knowledge
• Parents can be supported and taught by other parents.
• Children’s learning is enhanced when parents have knowledge and understanding of children’s growth and development.
• A parent’s role as first teacher is enhanced with access to appropriate materials, techniques and consistent support.
• Respect and acknowledgement of diversity enhance children’s and parents’ sense of belonging.
• When parents are active in their children’s early learning, a lifelong and ongoing process of parents’ supporting their children’s education begins.
• Programs that are integrated into a community context will better serve the families of that community

The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) program is a parent involvement, school readiness home visitation program to help parents prepare their 3-, 4- and 5-year old children for success in school and life. Parents get a set of carefully developed courses, books and materials to strengthen a child’s cognitive and early literacy skills, as well as social, emotional and physical development.

The program helps parents get involved in school and community life, which increases a child’s chances for positive early school experiences.

There are four essential features of the HIPPY model:

• Three developmentally appropriate home-based courses (HIPPY 3, HIPPY 4 and HIPPY 5) of pre-academic activities that parents can use with their 3-, 4- and 5-year-old children
• Role playing as an instructional technique for parents
• Professional coordinator and a staff of paraprofessional home visitors to provide services
• Home visits and group meetings
During my visit to HIPPY, Florida I met with Dr Mary Lindsey, Director of the Florida HIPPY Training and Technical Assistance Center. Dr Lindsey is passionate about her beliefs that all children can learn and should have access to quality preschool education. She and her staff are also great believers in empowering parents (or other main carers) to feel confident in raising their children and interacting with childcare, preschool and school institutions. She explained to me that many school teachers often comment to parents on how well their children adjust to their new school environment, having developed many school readiness skills. Dr Lindsey and the parents, attribute this to the HIPPY program.

I was very fortunate to attend a home visit and see a HIPPY tutor provide her weekly session to a carer (in this case, a grandparent who had full care of her four year old grandson). Each home visit takes about one hour each week. The tutor explicitly explains five different activities that the carer and child will participate in during the coming week. These activities are all engaging, developmentally appropriate and require minimal resources from around the home (eg a stuffed toy, flour and water) plus a few resources which the tutor provides, such as story books and scissors. The tutor first checks in with the carer about the previous week’s activities, discussing successes and challenges. The tutor then runs through each new activity, with the tutor and carer, taking it in turn to role play being the child or the carer. This not only creates a few laughs but is a non-threatening and fun way to teach the parent what to do. The tutor I observed was so respectful and encouraging of the carer, praising her with genuine positive comments, that I could see supported the carer to engage fully in all the activities (despite a stranger (me) being in the house). The tasks encourage lots of oral language, reading, singing, rhyme, craft, problem solving, fine and gross motor skill development. Having taught many five year olds in their first year of school, I could see how these activities would be most engaging for a young child and build their emergent literacy skills.

The success of the HIPPY program can be attributed to the following: it is a home based program and as such reaches out to parents/carers where they feel most comfortable - in their home; it accords parents/carers the respect as the first and most important educator of their children and helps to transform the home into a rich learning environment; the tutors come from the parents’ own community and so know and understand their situation. In fact, another positive consequence of the HIPPY program is that it builds parents’ self confidence, often leading them to further education and becoming a HIPPY tutor themself.

Book Trust

Another organisation I visited which promotes a love of early reading is the Book Trust charity, located in London but working throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Book
Trust which was established 25 years ago and offers a range of programs to inspire a love of reading in young children. I met with Catherine Harris, a researcher at Book Trust who explained how the programs are organised and the research that takes place to ensure the programs are having the desired impacts. The Trust offers a range of programs and I learnt about the three main programs directed at preschool and primary aged children.

The first program is Book Start. This is the world’s first book gifting program and is funded by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport via Arts Council England and the devolved government in Wales, with support from publishers. Book Start packs include two board books, a rhyme sheet and a booklet of tips and ideas for sharing books with children from a very young age. Book Start Baby Packs are distributed free to all parents of children between 0 - 12 months. A second free pack, the Book Start Treasure Pack is delivered to parents when their children are aged between 3 - 4 years of age. Not only are parents gifted the book pack, they are also provided with guidance and support around reading with their babies and young children.

The Book Start Baby Packs are distributed by a range of professionals such as Community Nursery Nurses, Health Professionals, Librarians, Early Years Outreach Teams and Children’s Centres. The idea is to not only present the gift pack but also to begin a conversation with parents about the joys of reading with their babies and the ways that parents can engage in reading with their young children. Research conducted by the Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities concluded there are many benefits to the Book Start Baby Packs. These include a prompt for talking to babies; an introduction and encouragement to join the library; a prompt for later conversations with parents and families about reading and language; an encouragement to spend ‘close and special’ times with babies; a physical reminder to share books; provision of ‘tools’ for talk; a way to start conversations with babies; a baby’s first, and sometimes only books; a reason, and sometimes an excuse, for fathers to interact; a script for talk to babies; and a ‘present’ to give to new parents to enhance the professional/parent relationship.

The Book Start Treasure Packs are distributed directly into the hands of 3-4 year old children through nursery school, children’s centre or other early years setting. Book Trust’s research shows that these packs continue to support children in the developing a love of reading. Sixty nine percent of practitioners said that it increased all or most children’s interest in and enjoyment of books.
The Book Start Program has had a particularly positive impact on working class families and families with unemployed parents. Thirty eight percent of these parents stating that they know more about how to read with their child since receiving the packs compared with 26% of upper middle and middle class parents. Similarly 32% of the working class and welfare dependent parents strongly agree or agree that they feel more confident reading with the child compared to 23% of the upper middle and middle class families. Additionally 73% of practitioners stated that the Book Start Packs helped direct families to accessing and joining their local libraries, participating not only in book borrowing activities but preschool activities such as ‘Rhyme Time’.

The final Book Trust program shared with me on my visit was the Letterbox Club. The program targets children in foster care and some other children identified by schools and authorities. Each child receives their own colourful parcel of books, maths games, stationery and other high quality materials once every month for six months, from May to October. For many children, it's the first time they have had a letter or a parcel through the post and for some it's the first time they have had books of their own. There are six different levelled packs aimed at preschoolers up to Year 8 children. The recipient children say how excited they feel upon receiving these packs. They feel like they have been ‘remembered’ and if they have to move house the packs will follow them to their new address. Other benefits of the Letterbox Club is that carers and families spend more time reading and playing games together and the children want to read and share their books.

Discussion & relevance to local context

Visiting the above organisations, cemented my belief in the importance of parents as children’s first and most important educators. It also strengthened my views that as a society we should be doing more to support parents during the critical first five years of their child’s life. Investing resources into this area will lead to children being more successful in school and throughout their education. Ultimately providing young children with an engaging, language rich environment in their first five years will positively impact their literacy development and in turn their success throughout life.

As a primary school teacher and through connections with Tasmanian Child and Family Centres I know that reaching families and developing long lasting relationships with them can sometimes be challenging. Building trusting relationships with parents is so important. Programs such as HIPPY help to build those relationships and benefit both the parents and the children. Dr Lindsey explained that parents of the program grow in confidence around their children’s education and feel much more equipped and motivated to interact with their child’s
professional carers and teachers. Strengthening these home school relationships is of great benefit to the child.

Whilst the HIPPY program exists in Tasmania and other states of Australia, I believe there is scope for expansion. For example there are currently no programs running in the New Norfolk or Huon Valley areas. There are families in these areas who would benefit from this program.

There are some organisations in Australia that include book gifting as part of their programs, however I believe there is enormous potential for such as charity to operate in many other areas. Through my discussions with the researchers at the UK Book Trust, I think a key to the success of such a program is in the delivery process of the book packs. Looking at the Book Trust’s research, it is apparent that the book gifting occurs through a wide variety of professionals associated with the parents and young children. The potential to build positive relationships with parents through such a book gifting program is great and I could see such a program running through our family and child health centres, neighbourhood houses, child care centres and kindergartens and schools. Additionally, such a program would be another avenue to raise awareness in parents to provide a language rich environment for their children and encourage them to read to their children.

Whilst in Tampa, Florida I visited Layla’s House, a neighbourhood house in Sulphur Springs, that supports local parents with children aged 0 - 5 years old. During my visits there, I attended a ‘Neighbourhood of Promise’ meeting. This group comprises a range of people representing a number of community organisations that work to support Layla’s House. The discussion focussed on attracting more families to participate in the programs at the neighbourhood house. One idea that really resonated with me was the talk around using ‘natural’ supports, an idea that could easily be applied here in Tasmania and other parts of Australia. They were identifying places where parents and children naturally congregate, such as sporting fields, schools, church communities, etc and then identifying significant people within those organisations who parents already know and trust. Layla’s House was exploring how these significant community members could support Layla’s House by casually raising the idea of visiting the local neighbourhood house and sharing the programs that might be of assistance to the parents.

The idea of seeking out parents where they already feel comfortable, is an idea that could be used here for promoting a range of services that ultimately will support parents and their children in their learning journeys. Child and family centres, schools and health services could
talk with parents out in the community, start to build a relationship and then get them to eventually visit their service.

Actions

- Contact various HIPPY organisations already operating in Tasmania and the Brotherhood of St Laurence Melbourne (who hold the licence for HIPPY in Australia) and investigate introducing this program to new regions such as New Norfolk and the Huon Valley (I have already visited the coordinator of the HIPPY program in Clarendon Valley, TAS)
- Contact Child Family Centres (CFC) in Tasmania about explicit literacy development support to parents, continuing to build strong relationships between CFCs and schools.
- Investigate setting up a BookTrust charity in Australia

2. Provide community support for students’ literacy learning

In Australia, teachers and schools work hard to differentiate their teaching to ensure that all children, whatever their abilities are being supported in their literacy learning. This is complex and demanding task and there is always room for more support, especially for those children who are finding literacy learning challenging and/or may not have enough support from home.

During my Churchill Fellowship travels, I visited two organisations who are providing extra literacy support to students; the Suas program in Ireland and the Helping Early Literacy with Practice Strategies (HELPS) program in Raleigh, North Carolina. They offer support by organising trained volunteers to go into schools to work one-to-one with children who have been identified as needing support to reach their reading goals, especially around reading fluency.

Fluency is an important aspect of reading, that is sometimes overlooked, but is integral to children becoming successful readers who can make meaning from what they are reading.
Fluency is about the ability to read with accuracy, at an appropriate speed and with prosody. Readers need to be able to decode and comprehend at the same time. Beginning readers labour over words and thus lose the meaning of what they are reading. Fluent readers can read with a level of automaticity that allows them to comprehend the text, which of course is the whole point of reading. Developing fluency does not come easily to all students, thus creating the need for intervention.

Suas

Suas (meaning ‘up’ in Irish) began in 2002 with the founding vision to address educational disadvantage. Within two years, a committed and energetic group of supporters, staff and volunteers had established projects in India and Kenya. Since then, they have directly supported over 12,000 children in India, Zambia and Kenya and trained over 1200 volunteers to work as teaching assistants in some of the world’s most disadvantaged communities. In Ireland they have helped over 3,300 children from disadvantaged communities and trained over 4,500 volunteer mentors to support them. Suas strive to find ways to improve children’s literacy that are sustainable, scalable and have a measurable impact. They identify the communities in need of support and work with local teachers to identify children who have the greatest needs.

I met with Grainne Fitzpatrick, Suas’s Ireland Education Project Manager to learn about the literacy support programs they offer in Ireland. In particular Suas, partners with Ireland’s DEIS (meaning ‘opportunity’ in Irish) schools. These are schools that have been ‘designated disadvantaged’ and consequently receive extra funding for teachers and resources. Trained volunteer mentors work one-to-one with students on two different programs; Paired Reading and Acceleread Accelewrite. There has been a lot of positive research around paired reading, some of which was carried out by another one of my Churchill contacts, Dr Timothy Rasinski, from Kent State University, Ohio.

Suas have found a method to turn research into practice, establishing systems of practice of pairing volunteers with schools. During paired reading the adults sits along-side the child and they read together; not taking it in turns but reading at the same time. Research has shown (Topping, 1987) that children involved in paired reading can make three times normal progress in reading accuracy and five times in reading comprehension. I was particularly interested in their Paired Reading Program as I have established a similar practice in my own school and I was very interested to explore how they have scaled up the organisation of this to cover many schools.
Suas have had some very positive results with the Paired Reading. Students participate in paired reading sessions twice a week for eight weeks. On average, students reading levels increased by 6 months over the eight weeks, a truly remarkable result. Additionally, the children felt happier to read out loud and recognised that they had become better readers. Suas is now working with a PhD student to conduct research into the social emotional benefits of the programs in helping children to become more literate, another important component in the complexities of learning to become literate.

Suas sources their volunteers from a variety of places. University students are an important part of their volunteer profile. There are Suas Societies at the universities and students from a variety of courses (not just education) make the commitment to become a volunteer, to support young learners in Ireland and abroad. Additionally, a number of companies operating in Ireland, support their employees, through the companies’ social responsibility programs to become volunteers. These companies are often financial supporters of Suas as well. Irish high school students have an extra transition year between their penultimate and final year of school. During this time they are encouraged to participate in volunteer community programs and as such, some of these students become Suas volunteers.

The volunteers participate in three days of training and are then matched with a student between the ages of 8 and 12 who has been assessed as a struggling reader. They visit the student at their school twice a week to participate in paired reading and Accelread/Accelwrite programs.

**Helping Early Literacy with Practice Strategies**

The HELPS (Helping Early Literacy with Practice Strategies) was developed by Associate Professor John Begeny from the School of Psychology at North Carolina State University. I visited him there to find out more about this program and to observe it in action at the Partnership Elementary School. The HELPS program focuses on improving students’ reading fluency.

Dr Begeny, through his research developed the HELPS program and offers it free of charge or at a very low cost to anyone that would like to use it. All materials can be downloaded from the HELPS website. This is quite remarkable given that the development and sales of educational resources is big business, especially in the United States. Dr Begeny genuinely wants to help students, rather than profiting from this endeavour himself.
Dr Begeny and his team have developed reading materials and procedures that provide one-on-one support to assist students to improve their fluency. Trained mentors work with students two to three times per week for about 10 - 15 minutes, following a very prescribed set of activities. The program has been designed so that a wide range of people can be trained to be mentors; classroom teachers, librarians, psychologists, teacher aides, university students and other community volunteers. I was privileged to watch one of the volunteers working with students at Partnership Elementary School in Raleigh. Students are provided with reading materials written especially for the HELPS program. The program follows specific steps that include repeated timed reading of set passages, phrase drill error correction, modelling by the mentor, performance feedback and goal setting and rewarding the students through a star chart and prize box.

Dr Begeny’s HELPS program is another excellent example of taking research (this time focused on using repeated reading to improve reading fluency) and designing practices that can be realistically implemented in schools. He has also completed his own research into reading fluency and the efficacy of the HELPS program.

Discussion & relevance to local context

There are two big ideas at play, with the Suas and HELPS programs, that are relevant to Tasmania and more broadly to Australia. Firstly these organisations are not for profit organisations that take a serious and active role in supporting children with their education. Some could argue that this should be wholly the responsibility of schools and that outside support from volunteers should not be necessary. I would take a more positive view and espouse that Suas and Dr John Begeny through HELPS have a fundamental belief that all children have a right to be become literate beings and that as a community we have a social responsibility to support this ideal. Often it is simply time given individually to a child that will make the difference in them learning to read. Whilst all teachers are committed to supporting their students, time pressures are something familiar to all teachers. If the community organisations recognise and offer research based support to teachers and students, then as a society we will all benefit. As the old saying states, ‘it takes a village to raise a child’.

There are already some Australian organisations that support students with their education offering support beyond the usual classroom teaching, but these are often supports offered outside school time. The difference with the Suas and HELPS models is that they provide the support during school time, yet with minimal disruption to the child’s day or to their class. If
enough volunteers could be mustered then, I believe this could be a highly effective intervention to improve reading in primary aged students.

I have already implemented a fluency program, similar to HELPS in my own school. Whilst this is on a small scale (approximately 12 students per term) we have seen some excellent results with improved reading. The challenge is to find willing and reliable volunteers. A lot of time is needed to recruit, train and monitor volunteers as well as organise the program with teachers, especially in small schools where staff numbers are low. I would argue that this could be part of a role of a literacy specialist, a position I believe that all schools should appoint. For further discussion around literacy specialists, see Recommendation 8.

### Actions

- Consider approaching existing charities and foundations to implement literacy support based on the Suas and/or HELPS models.
- Continue to work in my own school to develop and refine our fluency support program.
- Share my work around my school’s fluency program with other schools and school systems. (I have already presented my research and fluency work at the 2017 Australian Literacy Educators Association Annual Conference)
- Establish a new community not for profit foundation dedicated to supporting children’s literacy development

### 3. Support schools with disadvantaged populations

The PISA data encourages one to seek out countries with positive trends and consider their practices in order to improve our own. Once such country is Ireland. Hence, my decision to include Ireland in my Churchill Fellowship travels. Their reading results improved by 13 points between 2012 and 2015, whilst Australia’s decreased by 6 points during the same time frame. Ireland is currently ranked 5th in reading across all 72 countries that participated in PISA and scored just 4 points below Finland. Drilling down further into Irish schools, we find the differences between schools is small, thus indicating a far more equitable education system
across the country than in Australia. Other assessments, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted in 2011 show Ireland’s Year 4 students are performing above the OECD average.

In 2009 however, Ireland’s PISA and PIRLS reading literacy results had slipped dramatically, prompting a range of educational reforms. These included; creating dedicated literacy blocks in schools; boosting professional development for existing teachers with a focus on literacy as well as changing teacher training; providing a wider range of texts for students to read to stimulate their engagement; scaling up schools’ capacity to assess their own performance and set their own targets for improvement.

Whilst in Ireland, I visited a number of schools, attended professional learning, and met with national educational support services. The general feeling was that improvement has been possible through the gradual improvement of teacher capacity, support for disadvantaged schools and support services to teachers that conduct research and then provide classroom friendly, but evidenced based practices.

As discussed in an earlier part of this report many Australian students commence school with underdeveloped emergent literacy skills. Concurrently, there are other students in our classes who for a variety of reasons find great challenges in learning to read and write. Many schools have a high population of students with learning challenges. Helping students to develop these skills takes time and resources.

Ireland is addressing this disadvantage by identifying schools with higher numbers of disadvantaged students. In 2005 by the Department of Education and Skills of Ireland launched the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) program. Schools identified in this program are characterised by having a concentration of students from a low socio-economic background, taking into consideration factors such as parents’ educational background, ethnicity, employment and income of parents. A very significant element of DEIS is known as the School Support Programme (SSP) which is in place in about 340 urban primary schools, 340 rural primary schools, and 200 post-primary schools with the highest levels of disadvantage. All primary and post-primary schools participating in DEIS receive a range of additional resources including additional staffing, funding, access to literacy and numeracy programs, and assistance with activities such as school planning. As part of the SSP, interventions such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Program are available to DEIS urban primary schools and to DEIS post-primary schools.
There is clear evidence that the DEIS program is having a positive effect on tackling educational disadvantage. The research shows that improvement is taking place in the learning achievements of students in DEIS primary schools in urban areas. Ireland’s Educational Research Centre’s (ERC) research shows statistically significant improvements in the reading levels of students in 2nd, 3rd and 6th class. The research also shows that good or very good improvement in the literacy levels of students, as measured against the schools’ own targets, plans or expectations, was achieved in most DEIS schools.

I witnessed first hand the excellent work going on in some of Ireland’s DEIS schools. In Limerick, I visited two DEIS schools: St Michael’s Infant School and the Presentation School. These schools were characterised by low student teacher ratios especially in the early years classrooms. Typically students were taught in small groups, often just 4-6 students with one teacher. In one room there may have been three or four small groups running at once. Any teacher in Australia will confirm the challenges of attending to every child’s needs in every lesson. Some Australian schools work to decrease these ratios through the use of teacher assistants. Whilst many teacher assistants do an excellent job, under the guidance of teachers, they do not have the same knowledge, skills and understanding of literacy development as teachers.

Kaye Twomey from The Presentation School confirmed that having the additional funding to provide extra teachers has, over time, had a significant impact on their students’ literacy levels. Concurrently, being identified as a DEIS school has given them the opportunity and support to build teacher capacity, which will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion & relevance to local context

There are many lessons to be learned from the successes I observed in Ireland. There is a strong ground up approach to improving literacy levels by empowering schools to set their own targets for improvement, conduct their own professional learning to build teacher capacity and calling on support for professional development support when needed. Schools who know and understand their student cohort are entrusted by the government to professionally participate in this school improvement process. Government policy and funding reflects and supports this approach. The policies work to support, schools, teachers and students where they are at, rather than use a top down approach of enforcing a one size fits practice.
Some education systems in Australia and Tasmania are beginning to take a similar approach. School principals and their staff know their students better than any government department. They understand the culture of the communities in which they are embedded. This is incredibly valuable knowledge that can work to the benefit of all students.

The Federal Government’s Quality Schools funding package, developed by David Gonski, will provide funding to all schools and then provide additional loading to schools with students with disabilities, students for whom English is an additional language, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, plus extra funding for schools located in regional and rural areas and small schools. Currently, Gonski is conducting a review of his original 2009 report to advise how funding should be invested to support quality education in Australian schools. The terms of reference for this report seek to ensure that the funding is provided for evidenced based approaches to be used in schools. The Review, will be completed by March 2018.

The Australian Government’s policy to provide additional funding to schools in need seems similar to the identification of DEIS schools in Ireland. Assuming there will be requirements set by the government on how education systems and schools use this funding, I would hope that like the Irish Government, our Federal Government see the value of a ground up approach to school improvement, trusting the professionalism of school principals and their staff to set their own learning targets, plan their own professional development to build teacher capacity and tap into system support as needed. Undoubtedly, if schools are able to use this funding how they see fit, many, like Ireland would spend some of it on providing extra teachers to support literacy learning in classrooms, thus being able to support all students everyday on their literacy learning journey.

**Actions**

- Lobby the Minister for Education and other Federal Members of Parliament to allow for school based decisions to be made around the use the Quality Schools funding.
4. Build teacher capacity through the establishment of a cross sector institute for professional development

The importance of building teacher capacity should not be underestimated. Indeed, the Australian Educational Centre for Research (Rowe, 2014) acknowledges that students’ literacy skills, general academic achievements, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of schooling are influenced by their background, however that these effects ‘pale into insignificance compared with quality teaching. That is, the quality of teaching and learning provision are by far the most salient influences on students’ cognitive, affective, social and behavioural outcomes of schooling - regardless of their gender or backgrounds and the schools in which they are enrolled . . . what matters most . . . is quality teaching: by . . . competent teachers . . . supported by strategic, ongoing capacity building via teacher professional development’.

How best to support the teacher capacity is a topic of ongoing research. Whilst in Ireland I met with two providers of professional development aiming to build teaching capacity. The first of these organisations was the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), where I interviewed Regina Dunne, the Team Leader for Primary Literacy and the second was the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), where I interviewed Mary Nugent, the Chair of the NEPS Literacy Working Group.

Professional Development Service for Teachers

Regina Dunne explained PDST aimed to empower teachers, through the development of their knowledge of evidenced based practices and encourage teachers to change their practices through collaboration. PDST provide professional learning in a number of ways across the entire country. If there is a national directive that needs to be delivered to all schools, then they will close all schools for a day, so teachers can attend professional learning for the whole day. Secondly, PDST provide professional learning in the evenings and finally they provide in school support, where advisors visit schools for specific needs. This may occur on request of the school or it may be imposed after the school has been inspected by Ireland’s School Improvement Group and be found to be wanting in a specific area.

PDST have a range of publications available online, which they use as the basis for their professional development. Their literacy publications for primary teachers include, Effective Oral Language Instruction, The Reading Process and The Writing Genre.
What I found most interesting about the organisation of PDST is their model of seconding practising teachers from schools to work as advisors for a maximum of five years. In this way quality teachers, who are connected to schools, rather than educators who have been away from the ‘coal face’ for many years, provide support to teachers, with a clear understanding of the challenges that classroom teachers face everyday. For some providers of professional development who have been out of a classroom for many years, their support does not always acknowledge the business of teachers or the practical implications of implementing suggested practices. Having a rolling group of advisors can create challenges for the professional development service however, as Ms Dunne noted, with the loss of expertise when the seconded advisor returns to their school, but I think the benefits would outway this concern. The advisory support team stays fresh, they understand the workload of teachers and the issues around changing their practice and once back in schools, they can offer their own staff new knowledge and skills developed these whilst on secondment.

**National Educational Psychological Service**

Whilst in Ireland, I also visited Mary Nugent, the Chair of the Literacy Working Group from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). This is an excellent organisation that provides support to teachers for their students who are struggling with literacy development. Additionally, it has a strong belief that using evidence based good practice for all students will prevent reading difficulties, thus decreasing the number of students who later present with literacy challenges. As such, they have conducted their own research, based on world wide evidence applied to the Irish setting, developed a range of resources and deliver this knowledge through their own professional learning to groups of teachers and work with schools across the whole of Ireland to implement their suggested good practices.

I was fortunate enough to participate in two of professional development days run by NEPS. The first was to learn about the NEPS’ resource entitled ‘A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years’ presented by on the NEPS’ psychologist, Diarmuid O’Rourke. The second professional development day was run by Brid McGonagle who presented research that she and Stephanie O’Donaghue have completed around a dialogic reading and vocabulary development intervention.

I was most impressed with how NEPS conducts their own research, placing it in the Irish setting, using their own teachers, schools and available resources. In this way, not only are they investigating effective interventions to improve literacy development, they are ensuring that these interventions work within their own country’s setting. NEPS’ research and associated publications are of a very high standard. They are well written, precise and teacher friendly.
found this so impressive, having previously come across research based literacy interventions that are far too cumbersome to implement within a typical class or school setting. Additionally, teachers that were involved in the research were able to share their experiences of trialling these practices with their own students. Teachers generally find it very beneficial to learn from other teachers on the ground, hearing about the practicalities of implementing an intervention.

Discussion & relevance to local context

Professional organisations such as NEPS and PDST support the building of teacher capacity and are having a positive impact on Irish students’ literacy development. Having visited a number of schools, (such as The Presentation School and St Michael’s Infant School in Limerick), that have and continue to receive support from NEPS, I can see that the school wide approach they have been taking to build teacher capacity has had a positive impact on their students. NEPS psychologists have collected evidence from a number of Irish schools who are implementing a balanced approach to literacy development and the data supports this view.

As far I as can ascertain, a similar approach is not provided in Tasmanian schools. The Tasmanian Department of Education provides professional learning through their Professional Learning Institute, but I don’t believe they are conducting their own context driven research upon which to deliver their professional learning. They have however produced some of their own publications including the ‘Good Teaching for Literacy Guides’ which offer a range of practical strategies to use in classrooms.

I have spoken with Jenny Gale, the Deputy Secretary for Learning from the Department, who informed me that Departmental policies reflect the latest research. She also explained that to support the building of teacher capacity, the Tasmanian Department of Education employs seventy-six Literacy Coaches. These coaches have been placed in schools with the greatest literacy learning challenges. Their role is to strengthen classroom teachers provision of evidenced based strategies and interventions in improving literacy development for all students. These practices are constantly reviewed for effectiveness.

The Tasmanian Catholic Education Office (TCEO) provides professional learning to teachers through their system based education officers, who offer occasional professional learning days in which a variety of topics are usually covered and they also provide in school support as needed. They have a small number education officers dedicated specifically to literacy support in schools. They conduct professional learning around different aspects of literacy improvement, such as reading or writing, which run over a number of years, supporting schools
to implement, sustained and positive change. The TCEO can also tailor their support at a school's request. Like the Department of Education, the TCEO do not conduct their own context based research and they do not produce their own publications.

If we lived in a world where public and private institutions worked together, then I believe establishing a cross sector institute for professional development to support all teachers would seem like a common sense solution. In Tasmania (and in fact across Australia), all schools face similar challenges in increasing their teachers’ capacity to support their students’ literacy development. If an institute of teacher professional learning was established and supported by public, Catholic and independent schools, then we could share expertise and resources, working in a cost effective way to conduct context driven research to improve literacy outcomes for all Tasmanian students. Similarly, cross sector professional development institutes could be established in other Australian states and territories.

### Actions

- Contact Heads of Education Departments about the current state of professional development, use of best practice and the building of teacher capacity. *(I have already spoken with the Deputy Secretary Learning from the Tasmanian Department of Education).*
- Contact State and Federal Ministers for Education to discuss the establishment of cross sector institutes for professional development.

5. Use evidence based interventions and strategies

**A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years**

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is an excellent organisation that provides support to teachers and their students who are struggling with literacy development. Additionally, NEPS has a strong belief that using evidence based good practice for all students will prevent reading difficulties, thus decreasing the number of students who later present with literacy challenges. Their guide cites Vellutino, Snowling and Scanlon, (2004) who in a comprehensive review of dyslexia research, concluded that recent intervention studies have clearly demonstrated that reading difficulties in most beginning readers are not invariably caused by basic cognitive deficits or biological origin,’ rather suggesting that some struggling...
readers are ‘instructional casualties’ who unfortunately have not received quality literacy instruction.

NEPS have explored a range of successful evidence based practices from around the world and collated these together into a user friendly document, which is available to download for free from their website (see bibliography). This resource entitled, ‘A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years’, focuses on starting right with evidence based practice for all early years students, acknowledging that practices that are worthwhile for struggling literacy developers are worthwhile for all. This document has been developed in line with the Ireland’s National Literacy Strategy and Primary Language Curriculum, it is a relevant and useful to teachers here in Australia.

Whilst this Guide emphasises the need for evidence based practice, it also acknowledges the importance of teachers being provided with the freedom to use their skills, knowledge and professional judgement to make instructional decisions that enable students to achieve their full literacy potential.

The Guide introduces a model for understanding a balanced approach to literacy development in the form of the ‘Literacy Tree’ (see next page). This organic model covers the components of a balanced approach to literacy in the classroom: phonological awareness, phonics, sight words, word reading strategies, vocabulary development, fluency, comprehension, handwriting, spelling, meaningful writing and assessment. Each section of the Guide contains a clear explanation of the terms, some research around the importance of that particular component of literacy development and some evidence based practices teachers can use in their own classroom. The Guide has short videos embedded within it, with teachers demonstrating various practices with students. These practices use minimal concrete resources, however the most important resource and cost is that of quality teachers having the time to explicitly teach all the components of literacy.

The Guide also recognises the importance of having healthy roots, the essentials of reading that need to be present before reading begins. These roots need to be cultivated in the child’s home environment before they commence school and continue throughout their education. Oral language, access to books, reading at home and motivation are vital for a child’s literacy development to grow at school. The Literacy Tree also recognises the on going need to enrich the soil and continually feed the tree with quality teaching and ongoing teacher professional development.

Churchill Fellowship Report
Cate Doherty
31
There are too many good practices to detail in this report, however I would like to highlight a few.

Reading at home

It is vital to expose young children to high quality language and literacy environments in homes, child care centres, family day and kindergartens. In schools where children achieve high standards of literacy, parents are enthusiastic partners and read and talk to their children regularly. Conversely, children who struggle to read often have less access to books, limited conversations with adults, very few stories read to them and little or no exposure to rhymes and songs. Many of these same parents demonstrate poor experiences of reading and writing. Some schools in Ireland have a Home School Community Liaison Teacher, who meets with parents and encourages them to read and talk with their children. They provide a range of quality books and teach parents how to read these to their children. Additionally, they encourage families to join their local library, suggest age appropriate books and organise summer reading challenges. It was excellent to observe in Ireland, the importance placed on providing a teacher to build strong relationships with families specifically around reading and language development at home. This could be a responsibility of the literacy specialist as discussed in Recommendation 8 (see below).

Developing phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is about a child recognising the smallest units of sound at the level of letter sounds such as /b/, /sh/ etc. The Guide suggests five step for teaching phonemic awareness:

1. Provide young children with ample rhyming texts so they have opportunities to explore sounds.
2. Teach children to recognise the constituent sounds in spoken word, assisting them say these sounds correctly, noticing the similarities and differences in these sounds.
3. Teach children to blend sounds to form whole words.
4. Teach children the reverse skill, to hear a word and break it down into its individual sounds.
5. Teach children to manipulate phonemes in and out of words e.g. add /p/ to /late/ to form plate or take /l/ from /late/ to form ate.
Word study

Traditionally in Ireland there is an embedded practice of the Friday spelling test, which assesses students memorization of a list of words given to them on the previous Monday. Often all children in the class will have the same list of words, thus not recognising the need for differentiation within the class. The Guide suggests a shift away from this practice and moving to a word study approach instead. This encourages students to learn word patterns rather than memorising unconnected lists of words. For example, students may explore the words starting with ‘g’ and discover that usually if the ‘g’ is followed by the vowels ‘a’, ‘u’ (as in goat and gum) then is pronounced as a hard /g/. In contrast if the ‘g’ is followed by ‘i’ or ‘e’ is usually pronounced as a soft /g/ as in giant and gem.

Through Word Study, students are encouraged to compare and contrast features in words. This can be done through word sorts, hunting for words that fit the pattern being studied, constructing a word wall illustrating examples of different spelling patterns or through games, where their word knowledge must be applied.

Assessment is then completed not through a traditional spelling test, (an assessment of the students’ memory), but rather through assessing students’ knowledge of the patterns. Words that students haven’t worked on but follow the pattern they are investigating, can then be included, to check if students can generalise their knowledge.

I highly recommend this resource to all primary schools teachers and especially to those teaching the early years. Additionally, sharing the Literacy Tree model with parents, together with supporting them around developing oral language and reading at home could be useful in helping parents to understand the vital role they play in their child’s literacy development.

Interventions and strategies to improve reading fluency

Whilst most teachers could identify students who read with less fluency (their reading is often laboured and slow), it is a harder task to actually define fluency. Fluency can be simply defined as the rate of words one can read per minute, but fluency is far more complex than this. Fluency is about reading accuracy, reading at an appropriate speed and attending to and applying appropriate prosodic features of the text (Lowe, Hannet, Martens 2009; Whitherear, 2011; Smith et al, 2012; Samuels, 2012; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Samuels (2012) states that reading with accuracy, speed and prosody, are simply indicators of fluency, they are not fluency itself. The essence of fluency is the ability to decode and comprehend at the same time. When
students have to focus less on decoding skills, they are able to apply higher order thinking skills to make meaning from the text (Graham, Pegg, Alder, 2007).

I visited Kent State University, Ohio, to learn about interventions and strategies to improve reading fluency, from Dr Timothy Rasinski, Professor of Literacy Education. Dr Rasinski explains that fluency is the bridge between word recognition accuracy and text comprehension, but that is often a forgotten part of literacy instruction or is taught in disconnected ways to students’ other literacy experiences.

Dr Rasinski has researched many ways to assist students to improve reading fluency. He emphasises that teachers need to find authentic and engaging methods to incorporate fluency development in their classrooms. I will outline some of his suggested methods, all of which require no extra costs to the school.

**Authentic repeated reading through poetry and song**

Dr Rasinski has found that repeated reading of texts improves fluency, but teachers need to find authentic and engaging ways to encourage students to participate in the repeated reading of a text. He has many suggestions that teachers can incorporate into their daily literacy blocks. Dr Rasinski has researched these methods and has data demonstrating their effectiveness.

Dr Rasinski has become increasingly convinced that poetry offers one of the best—and often most underused—resources for developing foundational literacy skills. He states that poetry is fun and easy to learn, that poetry plays with the sounds of language and poetry make phonics more engaging.

I saw his repeated reading protocol in action at a Charter School in Cleveland Ohio. Dr Rasinski had previously presented professional learning to the teachers here on how to implement the repeated reading protocol. The student first listens to a mentor (teacher, volunteer, older student) modelling the fluent reading of the text. The student then sits by side the mentor and reads the text together with the mentor. The students then reads the poem to the mentor. Throughout the week the student reads the poem to whoever will listen and gathers signatures as proof. Finally the student reads the poem to the mentor the following week, hopefully in a more fluent way than the first reading. Dr Rasinski also emphasises the motivation that comes
from having to perform the poem and suggests setting up a poetry academy or poetry cafe, inviting guests and having students read their favourite poem to the audience.

Dr Rasinski’s research has found that significant gains are made in word recognition, automaticity and word recognition accuracy. His research also indicates improved motivation of students to participate in reading. He suggests that the shorter nature of poems and song lyrics, make the task of reading less daunting for less proficient readers who may be overwhelmed by longer texts.

Teaching phrasing through phrased text lessons

Many struggling readers tend to read in a stilted way, labouring over one word at a time, over using a monotone voice with little expression, often unable to comprehend anything they have read. The students can not break sentences into meaningful phrases. These phrases are not always indicated by punctuation and so even if a developing reader is noticing commas and full stops they can not easily make decisions about phrasing. Dr Rasinski’s research shows that struggling readers who are given explicit instruction in phrasing improve in fluency and comprehension. Teachers need to make the invisible punctuation in a text visible. Modelling fluent reading for students is vital, but also providing them with a copy of the text with phrases marked on it will help them to make the connections between small groups of words. After students hear the text read fluently they can practice themselves. After multiple practices throughout the week, they can be given an unmarked copy of the text to read with a partner and then out loud. They idea of this simple yet effective strategy is that students begin to see that phrases carry meaning and that they will begin to self correct when their phrasing is incorrect.

I saw a similar emphasis on phrasing, watching Kaye Twomey at the Presentation School in Limerick. She was working with a small guided reading group who were struggling with automatically reading some tricky sight words. Instead of just helping them with the word, she modelled the reading of the word in the phrase within a text. This simple procedure can provide much more meaning to words, such as ‘was’, ‘to’, ‘this’, than if they were merely read on their own. Kaye had the students reread the phrases numerous times before having a second attempt at reading the whole sentence. The students not only read the tricky word correctly, but they correctly read it in a phrase and understood the meaning of the sentence.
A precision teaching approach to learning sight words and improving fluency

Whilst in Waterford, Ireland I visited the Presentation Secondary School and met with Carol O’Shaunghnessy who works with small groups of students to improve the automaticity of reading sight words and other subject specific words. This intervention is based on the work of Carol and Phil Smart, U.K. educators, who work with dyslexic children. This intervention is suitable for students who have a reading age of at least 10 years, so is suitable for upper primary and lower secondary students. Carol often works with student who have been taught to read and spell through a synthetic phonics approach but still have gaps in their learning and need to try something new. Synthetic phonics is a highly effective method for most children to learn to read. However for older struggling readers, rather than repeating the same methods, a different approach may be more successful. It is a precision teaching method although precision monitoring may be a better term to use as it monitors precisely learners’ progress in acquiring sight vocabulary. It is about building a sight-vocabulary using a visual method. This is learning to read words by looking at them and remembering them, rather than sounding them out. The program approaches literacy acquisition at the word level and addresses the gaps in phonics knowledge through the application of analytic phonics (drawing students’ attention to the make up of words as they break up the target word).

In this method, students are introduced to a new list of words with the teacher reading them and analysing their sound composition. The students are then asked to read through the words three or four times. Next, the teacher administers a one minute speed test known as a ‘probe’. The probe consists of the words the child has just been taught. The probe gives information on the student’s accuracy and fluency. Probes are constructed by preparing a list of words just taught, which are repeated randomly. Students are aiming to automatically read 50 words on the probe within one minute with no more than two errors. Students need to practice reading the words for about ten minutes each day to reach this target by the end of the week.

Carol says that for her, building a trusting and positive relationship with her students is vital to the success of this program. Her students have struggled with literacy throughout their education and some are learning English as an additional language. She works to build her students self esteem, teaching them to cooperate and support each other. In this way, she has found success with this intervention and raised the confidence of her students.

Aural Read Respond Oral Write (ARROW)

I also visited St Ursula’s National School, Whilst in Waterford, Ireland, where I was lucky enough to have a Year 6 student and her teacher show me the ARROW program. This 1:1 computer program intervention, uses the student’s own voice recording. It was developed by Dr Colin...
Lane from the U.K. and is based on the understanding that as learners we think in the sound of our own voice. The St Ursula’s student, (who loves using the program and has seen success in her reading and spelling), demonstrated the different components that make up each session. First the student listens to speech on the headphones (aural); then the student reads the text of the spoken material (read); the student then responds to the stimulus (respond); the student repeats the spoken words, which are recorded on her microphone (oral); and finally the student writes down what is heard from her own self recording (write) and corrects her own work.

The ARROW program was being used at St Ursula’s to support students with a variety of speech and language problems and for a student with a cochlear implant. The students clearly enjoyed recording and listening to their own voice and were very engaged with the program.

St Ursula’s had great praise for the program, concurring with research showing the positive impact it has on reading and spelling. The latest independent research (Brooks, 2016), which included over one thousand students, demonstrates rapid, sustained improvements averaging eight months in reading and five months in spelling with just 6 - 8 hours of work usually delivered in 30 - 40 minute sessions, a couple of times per week. These are very positive results.

Toe By Toe

As I travelled around Ireland, I heard many mentions of the Toe by Toe intervention and finally saw it in action at Holy Cross National School in Tramore. This one on one intervention is used for children who continue to struggle with reading despite having received quality class interventions. In some cases the children may be dyslexic. The program name was chosen to indicate the tiny steps that students make using this program. Even though the steps are small the student’s progress is explicitly monitored and they can clearly see their improvement. Depending on the individual students, they can work through the program quite quickly. At Holy Cross, the program was delivered for about 20 minutes at least four times per week. In this instance the program was delivered by a teacher, but the producers of Toe by Toe, indicate it can be delivered by non teaching staff or other volunteers.

A workbook is used to deliver the program. The students are taught a new phoneme using nonsense words, this knowledge is then applied to multisyllabic words. Students are required to divide the word into syllables and then read them. When the student has correctly read a word three times, they are ready to move on to the next section.
This intervention was first developed in the mid nineties. Some of the research around its effectiveness includes a study conducted across 32 Scottish primary schools and included 91 students (MacKay, 2006). After 6-7 months of using the program, the average gain in reading levels was 14 months.

To me, the program seems somewhat dull, but the student I observed seem to be enjoying the process and if she makes similar progress to that shown in the research, then I’m sure her reading confidence will flourish, making the program very worthwhile.

**Computer Assisted Reading Interventions (CARIs)**

I visited Dr Fiona Kyle, Senior Lecturer in Language and Communication Science & Programme Director for BSc (Hons) Speech and Language Therapy City, University of London, Division of Language and Communication Science to discuss her current research into computer assisted reading interventions. These are computer games, Grapho Game Rime and Grapho Game Phoneme, adapted from Finnish versions. These games aim to enhance students’ learning through individualised instruction and practice, allowing students repeated practice if progress is slower. One challenge in the development of these games is adapting them from the Finnish language, with its transparent and simple orthography to the more complex, non-transparent orthography of English. CARIs are intended to be a supplementary tool to regular teaching. In Dr Kyle’s (et. al.) study the CARIs were introduced in the second year of schooling. Thus the students had already been exposed to a year of synthetic phonics instruction and were continuing with this. GG Phoneme offered supplementary practice of developing reading skills with which the students were already familiar, whilst GG Rime introduced the concept of rhyme families, targeting the largest families with the most consistent orthographic rime spellings first.

I experienced the CARIs myself when I visited Anji Wilson, Research Associate at the Centre for Neuroscience in Education, Department of Psychology at University of Cambridge. Anji allowed me to try out GG Phoneme and GG Rime. I could see that these would be most engaging for younger students. The developers of these CARIs have included built in rewards that motivates students even further.

Both versions of GraphoGame were found to be effective supplementary literacy activities, showing medium to large effect sizes on the outcome measures. Both games led to significant improvements in reading, spelling and phonological skills. The effect size data showed that these improvements were considerable in comparison with gains made over the same period by children who did not receive a supplementary intervention. As the effect sizes for the two
Interventions did not differ significantly from each other, it cannot be concluded that one CARI was more effective than the other. However, there were trends for the children playing GG Rime to show greater improvement’ (Kyle et. al, 2013). The researchers are currently conducting a larger scale research project and are hoping to find similarly positive results.

Identifying students with literacy challenges and using a problem solving approach to intervention

I was fortunate enough to meet with Donald Ewing, Head of Psychological and Educational Services, Dyslexia Association of Ireland whilst in Dublin and attend two days out of a three day professional learning workshop for Irish teachers wanting to learn more about dyslexia. The professional learning was excellent and covered all aspects of literacy development, plus issues around working memory and executive functioning. The details of this entire course are far too great to include in this report. However, I would highly recommend educators to attend similar courses here in Australia, not only for learning more about dyslexia but about literacy development in general.

What I would like to share here, is the problem solving approach recommended by the Dyslexia Association of Ireland to identify students with dyslexia and the plan for intervention. This approach could be used for any student facing literacy challenges, not just dyslexia. Interestingly, I interviewed Dr John Begeny, from the University of North Carolina about a similar approach. Dr Begeny, together with Ann Schulte and Kent Johnson have produced an excellent book, entitled, ‘Enhancing Instructional Problem Solving: An Efficient System for Assisting Struggling Learners’ (2012). The authors refer to this as SOPPA, the systems-oriented plan for academic achievement.

A problem solving approach helps teachers by encouraging reflective practice, allowing teachers to stand back and find a simple solution. It provides a focus on the student in question and helps a teacher to create a path forward. Using a problem solving approach, prompts a number of questions and steps:

Define the problem in just one clear sentence.

- What is the concern?
- Who is concerned?
- What changes would you like to see?

Gather observations and assessments.

- What is happening?

Churchill Fellowship Report
Cate Doherty
Why is the happening?
Have you created a student profile around this particular issue?

Generate ideas about what we can do to help

What can we do to help?
Which strategy or intervention is most appropriate?
What are our targets? What is our SMART goal? What does success look like?

Monitor and review the process

When will we review the effect of the intervention?
Did the intervention work?
What worked well?
What needs to change?

Dr Begeny’s book takes a similar but more comprehensive approach, through the suggestion of a framework that links assessment, evidence based intervention and targeted professional learning. It considers a school’s available time and resources (including human resources) and can applied across a variety of different primary schools.

Discussion & relevance to local context

There is a huge amount of research available around the best strategies to use in classrooms and additional interventions that could be used to further support students struggling with literacy development. All teachers need to offer all students quality literacy learning opportunities as described in NEPS’, ‘A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years’ as a start.

For students who are found to be in need extra support, then additional interventions should be used. Selecting the best interventions to use, can be overwhelming. There are many questions that need to be considered when selecting appropriate interventions.

Is there evidence that the intervention has proven success?
Does the intervention build upon the student’s existing strengths?
Does the intervention address the student’s greatest need?
Is the intervention appropriate for that student’s age?
Does the school have funding to buy a program (if there is a cost, such as ARROW)?
Does the school have space to conduct the intervention? Sometimes students need participate in an intervention in a quiet space.
Can the intervention fit into the timetable so the student is not missing out on other important learning experience?
And most importantly, are there available human resources; teachers, teacher assistants or volunteers to implement the intervention?

In the NEPS guide, entitled ‘Effective Interventions for Struggling Readers’, they suggest, as outlined by Brooks, (2007) using a ratio gain to measure the effectiveness of an intervention. A ratio gain is the amount of progress a student makes in reading age, divided by the time spent between pre and post intervention. ‘Calculating ratio gains . . . involves using a test that gives age equivalent scores. If a student makes one year’s progress in word reading over the course of one year, then the ratio gain is 12 months (progress) divided by 12 months (time spent) giving a ratio gain of 1’ (Brooks, 2017). Brooks suggest that we should consider interventions that make a ratio gain of 2, so the impact of an intervention is the doubling of standard progress. This implies that an intervention should assist students to make two years progress in one year. Certainly, something to which we should aspire! NEPS suggest it is easier to show this type of ratio gain over a shorter period of time (eg 6 months progress in a 3 month timeframe) than over an entire year.

To assist teachers, schools and education systems to select appropriate intervention it would be helpful to have greater access to academic research. Unless one belongs to the academic world, it can be very difficult and costly to access research databases. Additionally, wading through the research is incredibly time consuming and beyond the scope of a classroom teacher’s duties.

If there were some central type of institute for professional learning, it would make sense for that body to critique and bring together the relevant research. This body, as well, could then make recommendations for particular interventions and schools and teachers could select the most appropriate to weave into their particular context. Additionally, if each school had a literacy specialist (as detailed in Recommendation 8) she would be cognisant of the possible strategies and interventions and understanding the school context. She would then be able to bring this knowledge together to support teachers to make the best selection.
6. Strengthen oral language development in the early years

Developing literacy skills is very complex, but at its foundation are oral language skills. In fact, early oral language skills are considered an indicator of future success in reading, writing and general academic achievement (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). As students learn to read they draw upon their knowledge of oral language. Their understanding of oral vocabulary together with their knowledge of spoken sentence structure helps them make sense of the written word. The reciprocal relationship is also true; students can only write what they can say.

Oral language encompasses two components. Expressive language is the use of words (speaking) and non-verbal processes to share meaning with others. Receptive language (listening) is the process of understanding what has been expressed (Bayetto). Building a young child’s vocabulary is vital for them to develop sophisticated comprehension of both spoken and written texts.

For children who spend their first five years in a language rich environment, where parents and carers engage in conversation, offering a variety of experiences to expand their vocabulary and actively reading books; their oral language will naturally develop. For children who grow up in what some call ‘language poverty’, then they will need extra opportunities in child care and

Churchill Fellowship Report
Cate Doherty
43
preschool to develop their oral language skills. My Churchill Fellowship allowed me to observe some excellent interventions targeted at these children.

**Story Friends**

I was fortunate to visit Professor Howard Goldstein, Associate Dean from the Department of Communication Science and Disorders at the University of South Florida. Dr Goldstein, a speech and language pathologist, has developed a specific intervention to improve the vocabulary development of at risk preschoolers. Dr Goldstein is particularly interested in designing interventions that are not only effective, but can be delivered with high fidelity in preschool settings.

Most preschool teachers and child care workers are competent in delivering a shared storybook experience, however, extending this experience to explicitly teach and extend a young child’s vocabulary takes greater skill. Dr Goldstein and his team have taken this into consideration and to support a high fidelity vocabulary and comprehension intervention, they developed an instructional method using automated pre recorded lessons. Their program called ‘Story Friends’ consists of a series of story books, (written by Dr Goldstein’s team). The preschool is provided with hard copies of the books, together with recordings. At specific points throughout each recording, the narrator interrupts the story to highlight targeted words for vocabulary development or to stimulate children’s listening and viewing comprehension through a series of inferential questions. Targeted words were chosen for their common use by adult language users, rather than commonly used words that most children will naturally acquire without specific instruction. Additionally, the words needed to be defined with a child friendly definition. Throughout the recording, the narrator provides several opportunities for children to say the word and the definition. This vocabulary development intervention is delivered to small groups of children as they listen on headphones. Dr Goldstein suggests that the children listen to the same story three times throughout one week. Additionally, the children receive a small laminated card divided into four. In each box is a word and a picture. The child friendly definitions are on the reverse. The children hang these cards from a lanyard around their neck. The card asks people who see it to ask the child about the words, thus increasing the number of opportunities the child uses the word.

Dr Goldstein’s research shows that the preschoolers who received the embedded lessons demonstrated significant gains compared to the control group that did not receive the same intervention. In fact, the children who didn’t participate in the Story Friends intervention, but did participate in the usual listening to story books, demonstrated a virtual absence of learning of the same vocabulary words, suggesting that story book listening alone has little effect on the learning of challenging words (Goldstein et. al. 2016). Dr Goldstein suggested that if parents
and teachers provided similar vocabulary instruction for children during story book listening, then perhaps the effects would be greater.

**Vocabulary enrichment through storytelling and robust vocabulary instruction**

The idea of enhancing children’s vocabulary development has also been a topic of research for Brid McGonagle and Stephanie O’Donoghue, two educational psychologists from NEPS in Ireland. I attended a professional learning workshop in Letterkenny, where they shared the research they had conducted with teachers and students in the Irish setting. Students, in the early years of school, were identified for the study by poor results in a range of literacy tests. The research process included teaching and supporting teachers to implement interactive read alouds of narratives using dialogic reading, retelling and vocabulary building. Their research suggest that it is plausible for students to acquire 10 - 12 new word meanings per week through approximately 30 minutes of teacher reading and instruction per day. Interestingly, Brid explained that the data suggests that teaching more meanings per week in less depth (20-25 meanings) appears to result in the acquisition of more meanings than teaching fewer meanings in greater depth (5 -10 meanings).

Brid explained that story book sessions are an important and successful source of vocabulary development because the teacher does the decoding, taking the pressure of the students; the stories provide a natural context for the new vocabulary; and opportunities are created for discussion.

The learning of new vocabulary takes multiple exposures to the words and NEPS suggest reading the same text everyday for a week, as well as creating opportunities to use the targeted words outside the story. Like Dr Goldstein, the NEPS’ researchers suggested targeting new words for vocabulary instruction from Tier 2 words, that is high frequency words that occur across contexts. These words are used by mature language users and often occur more frequently in written rather than spoken language. The understanding of Tier 2 words enhances students’ reading comprehension. They could include words, such as hilarious, endure, compare and despise.

Brid and Stephanie have created a list of over thirty quality story books, filled with rich language to use for vocabulary development. They also have lists of possible targeted words for vocabulary enrichment, together with child friendly word meanings and questions to ask to assess students’ understandings of the new vocabulary.
Discussion & relevance to local context

The importance of oral language as the foundation of more complex literacy skills cannot be overstated. It is very challenging for children in the early years of school to catch up with oral language development if they have grown up in ‘language poverty’. The interventions detailed above are very classroom friendly. I personally believe most teachers are skilled storybook readers, highlighting new vocabulary for the students. However, I also believe it can be very useful having a structured approach to follow as suggested by the Irish initiative.

Dr Goldstein’s intervention, using pre-recorded stories, embedded with specific teaching points could be an excellent intervention in our child care centres, where many staff do not have the same level of literacy development knowledge as teachers.

Most importantly, this recommendation relates to my first recommendation, to support parents from the birth of their children. Helping new parents to engage in language rich activities is going to have the most impact of all, rather than having to play catch up when the children start preschool or school.

Actions

- Share the Irish strategy of dialogic reading and explicit vocabulary development with Tasmanian schools
- Trial this strategy in my own school as part of our current focus on vocabulary development
- Liaise with community service and libraries in supporting parents to provide language rich environments for their children
7. Develop stronger relationships between schools and universities to encourage appropriate evidence based practice

Whilst in the United States, I witnessed the generous sharing of knowledge by two university professors. The first was Dr Timothy Rasinski from Kent State University. I visited a charter school with him in Cleveland, Ohio. As an expert in reading fluency, he had been approached by the school for assistance in improving their students’ reading fluency. He had previously conducted professional learning with the school’s staff, introducing a repeated reading protocol using poetry. On this return visit, Dr Rasinski was visiting classrooms to see this reading fluency strategy in action and to check in with the teachers and the Principal to support them with any issues around this practice. He planned a future visit to analyse the data generating from using this strategy.

I was so impressed that a school could simply and directly contact a university professor, whom they had identified as an expert in the field with which the school’s students were struggling and ask for help. Yes, possibly into the future Dr Rasinski may take the data and write it up into an article or academic paper, but that was not his main motivation for assisting the school. He was there to share his wealth of knowledge and help the students become better readers.

A similar example, was seen in Raleigh, North Carolina, where Dr Begeny was working with local schools to implement his HELPS program to improve reading fluency. Not only does Dr Begeny assist local schools with setting up this intervention, he has established the HELPS Foundation, which provides free online access to all the materials needed to implement this intervention. Dr Begeny, has a strong, ethical imperative to support more children to become successful literate members of their community.

Discussion and relevance to local context

No doubt, across Australia there are connections between universities and schools. I wonder, however if most of these connections are initiated by universities, seeking to conduct research in the schools. This is an admirable relationship, as it generates current research in relevant Australian contexts and I’m sure the schools as well as the universities benefit in the building of knowledge.

I wonder though, does the reverse happen? Can a principal or a teacher contact a relevant academic expert to ask for help? Of course, university personnel, like school teachers are
incredibly busy and under pressure to produce academic research as well as teach their own students. I’m sure they are time poor, but I would just like to propose the idea that stronger relationships are developed between universities and schools as a vehicle for the promotion of evidence based practices and the general sharing of knowledge. After all, we all have the same motivation to support students on their journey to be literate, contributing members of our society.

### Actions

- Make connections with the University of Tasmania about strengthening professional relationships between schools and the University
- Contact the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment to discuss possible support around new relationships between schools and the University

### 8. Bring it all together at the school level: the role of the Literacy Specialist

Not only did my Churchill Fellowship provide me with the opportunity to witness first hand excellence and innovation in literacy interventions for primary aged students, it gave me the time to reflect on how to bring these learnings together and enact upon them in our schools back in Australia.

Classroom teachers are incredibly busy people and appreciate support in the form of quality professional learning, modelled lessons, assistance with planning and advice on specific interventions. Schools need someone to drive change and innovation. They need someone to coordinate the ‘bigger picture’ of literacy support in a school.

Therefore, I have created the role of Literacy Specialist. This person would provide support to the school community; Principals, Assistant Principals, Teachers, Teacher Assistants and Parents to ensure that all students are receiving the best possible instruction to become successful literate children, allowing them to be confident, creative and critical communicators.
Whilst I think that our teachers do an excellent job with teaching literacy, they are under a great deal of pressure to support the diverse needs of all students in their classes. During my Churchill Fellowship research I have visited many schools that have made great gains with their literacy learning over the last few years. These schools have a large number of support staff. These support staff are highly experienced teachers, not teacher assistants. They work in classrooms with teachers, most often with small groups of students. In some classrooms, I witnessed four teachers working with 25 - 30 students. Whilst it would be wonderful to follow this model, I am suggesting as a start that every school should have a dedicated Literacy Specialist.

I believe that as teachers we should all be working to be the best literacy teachers we can be to all students. We should always be striving to improve our practice in delivering literacy instruction, thus helping all children to improve and decreasing the number of students that require extra interventions. The Literacy Specialist role would support teachers to be active, reflective learners themselves.

The Literacy Specialist would be answerable to the Principal of the school. Her time would be spent working in the school and occasionally liaising with community organisations, on behalf of the schools. She would be part of the school’s staff rather than the education system’s staff. Having a Literacy Specialist working consistently in a school, would allow the Specialist to intimately know and understand the needs of both the students and teachers. The Specialist would work side by side with the classroom teachers, supporting them to achieve the best for their students. Being part of the staff and knowing the staff well, also means that classroom teachers would feel more comfortable having another teacher in their classroom. The Literacy Specialist would build up a positive relationship with teachers, which would help in introducing changes to their practice.

It can often take time to understand a student’s particular needs, set goals, investigate the best way to reach those goals, then assess and evaluate the goals. The Literacy Specialist would facilitate meetings with the teacher to discuss student needs, using the problem solving approach mentioned earlier and make suggestions for future action. If the best way forward is not immediately apparent, the specialist would have the time to investigate evidence based practices and present the options to the teacher. The Specialist’s role would be to support all students, not just those with the most challenges. High flying students would also be targeted, plus all students in the middle who often just need some focussed support, to make great gains.
I believe that this ground up approach is in the best interests of the teachers and students. I know that developing a whole school approach to literacy can result in positive changes in a school’s literacy data, having led a whole school approach to improve reading comprehension in my own school. Knowing my school’s students well and working collaboratively with the staff has been an integral part of this success.

The Literacy Specialist duties would include:

- Specifically work on literacy support
- Build upon the school’s existing practices, enhancing these, rather than moving towards completely new practices, thus strengthening the likelihood of successful implementation and sustainability, also limiting the stress associated with implementing new practices within the school
- Consider school’s current strengths and address learning deficits with consistency and integrity
- Work with the whole school to implement consistent school wide practices
- Support teachers to improve their classroom teaching, ensuring that core classroom teaching time is effective, thus preventing the need for so many interventions
- Develop a problem solving approach with classroom teachers; helping them to define challenges, plan an action, help deliver that action, collect data and review outcomes
- Work with classroom teachers to support students with extra needs (not just those that qualify for support from Special Learning Needs Coordinator, but those that are above this or those that need extension)
- Help teachers with setting up and planning a literacy block
- Work with teachers to integrate literacy across the curriculum
- Regularly plan for and teach small groups during literacy blocks (or other times as required)
- Support classroom teachers with ongoing assessment to evaluate progress of students
- Work with teachers to develop class SMART reading goals or other goals e.g. vocabulary development
- Recommend evidence based interventions to classroom teachers/ SLN/ Leadership
- Run book groups to support independent readers to select and discuss appropriate texts
- Group library books based on Lexile levels to help independent readers choose appropriate texts
- Collect and interpret data for each school
- Use data as the basis for instructional decisions
- Develop a list of possible interventions that are evidenced based
- Provide systematic implementation, documentation and evaluation of academic interventions
• Carry out all work associated with implementing these interventions eg training teachers/teacher assistants/volunteers, organising resources, including physical resources, space, timetabling etc
• Develop instruction manuals for interventions so they can easily be applied by others and thus assist in the sustainability of these practices.
• Regularly evaluate interventions to ensure they are working for targeted students
• Provide targeted professional learning for teachers and teacher assistants
• Provide teachers/SLNs with data/assessments/intervention plans and evidence to assist in the paperwork associated with referrals, Individual Learning Plans, the National Consistent Collection of Data
• Foster a culture of collegiality across the school and between schools, so teachers can support, share and learn from each other
• Facilitate Professional Learning Communities within the school and within a small cluster of schools
• Foster a culture that all staff in the school are responsible and supportive of all students, not just those in their class and that each year builds upon the next
• Work with staff to develop a school literacy vision statement
• Work with staff to develop a school literacy policy
• Create and foster partnerships with community organisations eg libraries, child and health centres, local businesses, foundations, charities, universities
• Apply for funding grants to support literacy learning
• Advise schools on resources to purchase and use
• Communicate with Principal regularly, giving details of completed work, progress reports on students, feedback about teachers’ interventions, planning etc.
• Liaise Special Learning Needs Coordinator
• Work with parents to support literacy learning
• Provide and develop resources, (eg literacy games, short instructional videos to show how to use games, read to children) and information sessions to parents
• Liaise with researchers at universities to ensure we are using evidence based best practice
• Encourage universities staff to work with teachers
• Attend universities’ lectures/tutorials to encourage students to volunteer in schools

Example of a Literacy Specialist timetable

Below is an example of what a Literacy Specialist day might look like. This of course would depend on the needs of the school. It could be possible for the Specialist to work across two small schools, working two days in one school and three days in the other school and then reverse this the following week.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morning</td>
<td>Work in classrooms with teachers and students during literacy block.</td>
<td>Work in classrooms with teachers and students during literacy block.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support early years teachers during the literacy block.</td>
<td>Support early years teachers during the literacy block.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Model new practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Assess students to monitor progress.</td>
<td>Plan with teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work with data</td>
<td>Conduct book groups with students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write up goals/plans</td>
<td>Provide additional literacy support to small groups of students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Document evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organise resources</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide additional literacy support to small groups of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afternoon</td>
<td>Meet with Principal/SLN.</td>
<td>Train TAs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write funding applications</td>
<td>Plan PL</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicate with parents</td>
<td>Research interventions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Source new volunteers</td>
<td>Write manuals of practice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Train volunteers</td>
<td>Visit/liaise community organisations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create resource videos for teachers and parents</td>
<td>Run parent information sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>After School</td>
<td>Check in with teachers</td>
<td>Deliver PL</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitate problem solving meetings to address individual student needs</td>
<td>Work with staff to plan whole school challenges and plans of action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitate PLCs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Conclusion

The purpose of my Churchill Fellowship was to meet with researchers, teachers and other service providers, whose work focuses on finding proven strategies or programs to support struggling young readers to ensure their opportunities for success are increased. Specifically I was investigating, cost effective interventions to improve literacy outcomes for primary aged children.

There are many examples of excellence in our Australian schools. We have a national curriculum that provides consistency across the nation, whilst at the same time being flexible enough to adapt to local contexts. We have registration boards ensuring teachers are suitably qualified. We have incredibly dedicated, hard working professional teachers, that passionately care about children’s education.

I travelled overseas to seek excellence and innovation in literacy interventions for primary aged children, however I realised I needed to consider the bigger picture of children’s education. Supporting children to become successful literate people, needs a strong collective; parents, teachers, school leadership, community organisations, volunteers, education systems, state and federal governments. However, the complex journey of literacy education cannot and should not be considered in separate silos of responsibilities. We need to work together, to ensure all children, especially those from more disadvantaged families are supported from birth, throughout their school education.

Thus, I have synthesised the ideas and knowledge I learnt on my Churchill Fellowship travels into eight major recommendations. In this way I have been able to draw out the big ideas that are worthy of pursuit in Tasmania and more broadly across Australia. These recommendations not only include specific classroom literacy interventions, but also consider broader childhood developmental concepts that affect literacy acquisition.

Key recommendations

1. Provide support for parents from birth around literacy development
2. Cultivate community support initiatives for students’ literacy learning
3. Support schools with disadvantaged populations

Churchill Fellowship Report

Cate Doherty
4. Build teacher capacity through the establishment of a cross sector institute for professional development

5. Use evidence based interventions and strategies

6. Strengthen oral language development in the early years

7. Develop stronger relationships between schools and universities to encourage appropriate evidence based practice

8. Bring it all together at the school level: the role of the Literacy Specialist

Some of my recommendations do require considerable funds or at least a redistribution of current available funds. Some people may not consider them to be cost effective. I urge readers, to consider however, the costs of not supporting every single Australian child to become a successfully literate person. Poor literacy often leads to poor life outcomes; lack of employment or low incomes, health problems, mental health issues and even imprisonment. The cost of supporting adults with low literacy skills is a burden on society and more importantly a great burden to those individuals. Supporting parents from birth as well as supporting teachers to assist students through primary school to become confident literate individuals, is cost effective in the long term. However I can not possibly work through all these actions on my own and welcome discussion from anyone who would like to support my recommendations.

My Churchill Fellowship has strengthened my faith in humanity. I believe that we all want the best for our children and their future and that we can all strive for excellence through cooperation and collegiality.
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Churchill Fellowship Report
Cate Doherty


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