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EDITORIAL

Appropriate supports. This is a term we hear often in our work places, policy documents and in the research literature. Like diversity, our theme for last issue, it has powerful implications in terms of the needs of our students. However, teachers have diverse needs and require appropriate supports, in every aspect of our lives.

In this issue, we announce some changes in direction for Special Education Perspectives (SEP) journal, centred around the concept of providing appropriate supports for all members of AASE. The NSW Chapter is concerned to ensure that readers have a range of professional supports, including a newsletter (for NSW members), a practitioner-focused journal and the research journal of the association, the Australasian Journal of Special Education (AJSE).

To this end, this issue reflects our new format, with Practically Speaking contributions at the front, followed by a selection of fully refereed papers and book reviews. The goal is to highlight practical and concrete support ideas, reflections and materials for people engaged in delivering effective supports for students with diverse needs in educational programs. In future, I will be liaising closely with Dr Jennifer Stephenson to ensure a continuing emphasis upon the inclusion of research reports and other types of academic materials in AJSE, and the development of research-based practitioner-friendly reviews, program descriptions and reflections in this journal, as well as some research pieces from time to time. Authors writing a paper for SEP can ask for a full review of their paper by members of the editorial committee (Refereed section), or editorial review with feedback from members of the AASE NSW Chapter Committee, co-ordinated by Jennifer Stephenson (Practically Speaking).

This will be a tricky balance to achieve. WE WILL NEED PRACTICAL ITEMS! Do consider writing a teacher-friendly review of best practices, topics in schools or research priorities. For more information, see the Call for Practically Speaking contributions later in this issue, as well as the revised committee memberships and guidelines for authors. If you get a minute, take a look at an American journal, Teaching Exceptional Children, as a model for what we are aiming to achieve in our Australian context.

Might I just take this opportunity to thank all who have so strongly supported the production of the journal to this point, and especially note the skills in administration, journal design and layout demonstrated by Genevieve Wallace, the leadership of Sue McGarrity with Book Reviews and Jennifer Stephenson with Practically Speaking (and of course AJSE).

All feedback welcome: PLEASE!!

And so to this issue. Dolly Bhargava and Ylana Bloom provide us with invaluable insights into
how to enhance literacy processes using AAC supports. Note the focus on motivation and participation. In our second Practically Speaking piece, Toni Hopper describes a very personal insight into the integration experiences of a student with moderate to high support needs.

In our first refereed paper, Brian Hemmings, Doug Hill and Sue Davies report on the evaluation of an early childhood intervention service in rural NSW. Their detailed findings and discussion in the context of the wider literature make for valuable reading. Alison Madelaine and Kevin Wheldall then explore the reports of teachers who used curriculum-based testing in reading to inform their teaching, and place these findings in the context of world-wide developments in the use of these important assessment techniques.

Next, Jennifer Stephenson provides us with a fairly challenging overview and critique of some controversial practices in special education, followed by a paper that describes connections made by Stephen Winn and Lucia Zundans between emerging teachers and primary students with literacy needs. We finish the issue with two book reviews, thanks to Helen Wheatley and an anonymous reviewer.

Looking forward to hearing from you, especially with reactions to our new emphases and perhaps with a contribution to the various aspects of the journal.

Best regards

Michael Arthur-Kelly
Editor
One of the roles of AASE, and thus of this journal, is to disseminate information about good practice in special education. One way we do this is by publishing research and review articles about special education in Australia. However, many practitioners have asked for more practical information as well as these academic articles.

PRACTICALLY SPEAKING is a new part of Special Education Perspectives. It includes descriptions of programs, teaching resources and strategies, curricula, technology, school or classroom organisation, or other aspects of educational services to students with special education needs that illustrate good practice. We are looking for descriptions from practitioners about how they implement good practice. These contributions will not be formally refereed in the same way as the more academic content, however, they will be reviewed by the editor and others to ensure they do reflect good, research based practice. As with refereed contributions, writers may be asked to make revisions to their contributions.

We are now calling for contributions to this section. Its success obviously depends on readers who are prepared to describe their experiences. Contributions may be of any length, from a short description of a useful resource to an article length description of a program. Detailed referencing is not required, although for some descriptions writers might like to indicate one or two sources from the research literature which supports the practices or procedures described. Support will be available to help with writing if you have a good idea, but are unsure about how to go about contributing it to the journal.

WHO TO CONTACT
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Posthumous award for CSU academic:
Dr Christopher Gordon

30 March 2004

In a first for the state, former Newcastle boy Dr Christopher Gordon has received a Highly Commended posthumous award in the NSW Meritorious Service to Public Education Awards.

Dr Gordon, a senior lecturer in school counselling at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, died from renal cancer in April 2003. However, his educational legacy continues to benefit thousands of school students across the state.

Dr Gordon was integral in establishing a high quality and innovative training program for school counsellors in NSW, ensuring that students with learning and emotional needs had access to professional services at their local school.

According to Deputy Premier, and Minister for Education and Training, Dr Andrew Refshauge, more than 500 applications for the prestigious awards were received, with the ultimate award being shared amongst three candidates due to the high calibre of contribution made by those nominated.

“Dr Gordon’s involvement in the training of a generation of school counsellors through his work at Charles Sturt University has had an enduring influence on schools and school students which will undoubtedly continue for many years,” Dr Refshauge said.

“Dr Gordon’s nomination clearly reflects the very high esteem in which Dr Gordon was held, and the tremendous dedication that he had to public education in this state,” he concluded.

Born in Newcastle, Dr Gordon attended Adamstown Public School, then Newcastle Technical High School. He concluded his Teaching Certificate in social sciences at Newcastle Teacher’s College in 1972, and then completed a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Educational Psychology at the University of Newcastle.

After a career teaching social science in high schools around Newcastle, Dr Gordon trained to become a school counsellor with the Department of Education and Training, which took him to Broken Hill, where he worked at the District Guidance Officer from 1984-86.

In 1992, Dr Gordon was offered the position of Lecturer in Special Education in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, which started his fruitful career in tertiary education. During his ten-year career at Charles Sturt University (CSU), Dr Gordon researched heavily in the areas of learning approaches and self-efficacy; classroom management and behaviour; and innovative teaching methods for counselling skills. In 2000 he was promoted to Senior Lecturer in the School, and took on the coordination for the training of all school counsellors for the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Chris is survived by his daughters Kirsty and Chelsea, sisters Jenny and Judy, brother Geoff, his life partner, Jane, and a vast wealth of friends.

For CSU comment, please ring Dean of Education, Professor Bob Meyenn, on (02) 6338 4477. For more information, contact Jane Dillon on 0412 733116.
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**SOFTPICS with FANTASTIC PICS**

Softpics with Fantastic Pics is a flexible and easy to use software package for creating stunning Augmentative Communication Displays. It contains over 1800 images and a large range of design tools, which allow you to create displays that can be tailored to individual and classroom needs. It has been designed by Australians for Australians and has images associated with the disability standards. The Softpics and Fantastic Pics images can be used in Boardmaker, Writing with Symbols 2000 (using the JPEG version) and Microsoft platforms eg Word and PowerPoint. It is also possible to import images from other packages into Softpics. You can either get **Softpics Professional**, which includes pictures and a platform on which you can create your displays, or you can get the **Softpics library** which has pictures only.

**SUCCESS AT WORK**

*By Carolyn McMurtrie*

This is an excellent and extremely useful new set of Australian manuals presented as Blackline Masters, for use with Transition Education students. Book 1 is available now.

**Book 1: Looking Good** (65pp) covers all aspects of personal appearance and grooming, including: The Daily Shower, Hair Care, Cleaning Teeth, Shaving, Hands and Nails, Clothing. There are tips and ideas for teachers, puzzle sheets, mini posters, competency check lists and points for instruction and discussion.

Cost is $50, plus postage and packaging.

*For further information and to order, contact Innovative Communication Programming (address shown above)*
Learning literacy is a valuable life activity that enables students to enter into an exciting world of discovery, mystery, exploration, entertainment and knowledge, which helps them make sense of their experiences, relationships and environment (Watkins, 1999).

All students with and without disabilities need to be provided with opportunities to develop literacy. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) offers one option for making a variety of classroom activities accessible to students with disabilities. AAC refers to strategies used to enhance, support and facilitate communication and literacy skills in students with limited oral skills. These students may have a hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder, multiple disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy), or dual sensory impairments. In conjunction with this, the student may have an intellectual disability. AAC includes the use of object symbols, photographs, pictographs (such as Softpics with Fantasticpics, Picture Communication Symbols), signs and written words. When thinking of literacy development we need to think of literacy as being more than the ability to use alphabet letters. A much broader view of literacy includes the use of these AAC methods to read, write, listen and communicate.
An approach that we have found useful for developing literacy skills in students with a disability is using the “Let’s Read Together (LRT) – Circle of Literacy” (Bloom & Bhargava, 2003a, b). The LRT Circle of Literacy is an adapted version of Cunningham’s Four Block Model specifically designed for developing literacy skills in students who use AAC.

The LRT Circle of Literacy is made up of four areas: Sharing the Reading, Building Meaning, Sight Words and Phonological Awareness, with writing instruction incorporated within each of the four areas. These four areas contribute to the student’s development of reading, writing, listening and communication skills. To introduce the LRT Circle of Literacy to students, we have suggested the use of four platforms on which the student can develop their literacy skills. They include:

1. **Commercially available books.** A commercially available book is defined as a book that has been published and is available to the general public for purchase.

2. **Chat system.** The “Let’s Chat” system is represented as a book that is divided into two sections. The first section is an “About
Me” section, which documents the student’s background, interests, hobbies and achievements. The second section is the “My Experience” section, which is a record of the student’s experiences, activities and events they have participated in. Both sections in this system are recorded using symbols such as objects, photos, pictographs and written words. The text used in the “Let’s Chat” system is comprised of Dolch words and words they are exposed to within their environment. As the content of the “Let’s Chat” system is based on the student’s life, it gives the student a sense of authorship, ownership and personal connection to the written material. The creation of interesting, meaningful and motivating literacy material for the student will contribute to them developing a positive attitude towards literacy.

3. **Individualised stories.** Sometimes it can be difficult to find a book that relates to the student’s life and is suited to their skills. By writing a story for the student based on their wealth of experiences, interests and environment, we can make it appropriate and meaningful for them. Their understanding of the story, which is the purpose of reading, will be aided by AAC methods such as objects, photos or pictographs.

4. **Simple sentence books.** These are books made up of sentences that describe what is going on in an illustration. They consist of predictable and repetitive patterns of words/phrases that match the student’s reading level with a few new words. The repetitive patterns encourage prediction, phrasing and word recognition, making it easier for the student to read, which will develop their confidence in their ability to read.

Thus, these four platforms promote the use of material that is meaningful, relevant, interesting and motivating for the student, as these are at the heart of learning.
In this article we will discuss how you can use a commercially available book to develop the student’s literacy skills. The Very Hungry Caterpillar in Bloom and Bhargava (2003a) has been used to demonstrate how the content of a commercially available story book can be used to introduce the four areas of the LRT Circle of Literacy. You can easily adapt the ideas and suggestions discussed in the book for any other book that is meaningful and of interest to the student you work with.

1. Sharing the Reading. The term “sharing” refers to two things. Firstly, sharing the act of choice making so that the student is involved in the process of selecting the book. Secondly, the sharing of the actual reading of the book, with the aim for the student to read independently.

(a) Sharing the act of choice making. To achieve the goal of helping the student become a better reader, it is important they read often. However, motivating the student to do this can be a challenge. One way to make reading a motivating activity is to offer students a choice of what they would like to read, and respecting their choice. This will help them maintain their attention, interest and motivation.

When offering books it can be difficult to know which books are appropriate for independent reading. We have found Schirmer’s (2000) Readability Checklist helpful, as it summarises the factors that need to be considered, such as predictable text, rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and familiar and meaningful content.

When reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar the use of additional supports, such as signs, pictures and props, to illustrate the content of the story is extremely beneficial. The additional support gives the student a visual reference for
the story content that will aid their understanding, along with promoting active participation. For example, they can manipulate and use a prop to actively participate in the reading of the story.

(b) Developing the student’s ability to read independently. The student’s ability to read is developed through three stages. The first stage involves modeling the reading, then reading the book together, and then lastly encouraging the student to read independently. Through repeated readings of the book your student can become familiar with what they see and hear. This familiarity will give them confidence and help them make sense of the reading process. The rate at which the student progresses through any of the three stages will depend on the student.

In order for the communication partner to ensure that the additional supports are being used consistently, writing a script is a useful strategy. The benefit of a script is that it will enable any communication partner reading the book to your student to read the book in a similar manner without compromising on their ability to understand. Below is an example of a script for reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* in which the use of the
different types of supports (e.g., signs, pictures, and props) have been highlighted.

2. Building Meaning. This focuses on helping the student learn the purpose of reading and writing by doing activities that require them to reflect upon what they have read. A variety of activities and communication systems can be used within the environment to reinforce some of the concepts covered in The Very Hungry Caterpillar. For example, to teach time concepts (e.g., days of the week, morning, night) a daily schedule and a calendar system can be used. Number concepts can be reinforced by doing a comprehension type activity where the student records the number of food items the caterpillar ate. Food concepts can be revised by the student having their own food diary to record what they ate during the week. They can also have a food category book where all the different types of foods are stored under the different categories (e.g., fruits, desserts, dairy products). Providing students with choices of what colour they would
like to use in a variety of activities can help them learn about colours.

By asking questions, we can help the student learn that they will be expected to respond to questions about the reading material, that their opinion is important and that it will be sought. Questions can range form literal comprehension through to questions which require the student to make inferences and draw on their own experiences. Below is an example of an AAC display that shows how the material is aimed at teaching AAC use as part of literacy.

3. **Sight Words.** This focuses on developing the student’s ability to learn words by sight to make reading and writing easier. There are a wide variety of activities that can be used to enable the student to encounter words several times so that they can begin to recognise some of the words more automatically.

We have designed two processes called Question Maps and Visual Connectors that enable the communication partner to provide of a range of appropriate AAC communication systems that will allow the student to communicate effectively within an activity (Bloom & Bhargava, 2003c). At the same time, these AAC communication systems help make the environment print rich, where the student encounters the
same vocabulary several times in a functional and meaningful manner. Also, refer to Bloom and Bhargava (2003a) for information on how to incorporate AAC methods into a variety of sight word teaching activities.

4. **Phonological Awareness.** This focuses on developing the student’s ability to identify and manipulate the sound-symbols of language, and is crucial for literacy success. To be able to read and write words, the student must be able to recognise the letters, know the sound-symbol relationship, and learn the rules, patterns and sequences that govern our language. Refer to Bloom and Bhargava (2003a) for information on how to incorporate AAC methods into a variety of phonological awareness teaching activities.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, literacy skills can be built within four different platforms by using the Let’s Read Together Circle of Literacy. Our primary goal for our students is to share our enthusiasm for literacy by discovering its purpose and getting started on their literacy learning journey. We need to keep in mind that each student has their own unique path to learning literacy. Using commercially available books is only one of the many avenues for helping a student develop literacy skills. For other students, the use of commercially available books, along with offering students personalised material, such as the chat system, individualised stories and simple sentence books, may be beneficial. The lifeblood of learning is motivation, and our greatest challenge as educators is providing the student with material that is meaningful, interesting and relevant to them.
REFERENCES


Further information about the materials and programs offered by Bloom and Bhargava may be obtained at http://www.innovativeprogramming.net.au
Practically Speaking

INTEGRATION AT A COST

Toni Hopper

Inclusion of students with special education needs is one option for educational placement. This article describes a young girl, GC, with moderate to high support needs, who has always been in a mainstream educational setting with varying amounts of individual support. Her parents chose this option because they felt that she would benefit from the stimulus provided by more able students, and there was always the chance that this student’s support needs may have actually declined as she matured. No specific diagnosis has been given for this student, apart from global delays, and no firm prognosis as to her future prospects have been offered by the specialists who have seen her. Speech and occupational therapy were begun before she entered preschool. She was found to be very short sighted and has worn prescription lenses since before preschool. She can become overly anxious at times.

Primary school
This student first attended a regular preschool and then was enrolled in a small co-educational K-6 independent school. During her preschool and primary school years, she received a range of therapies addressing language difficulties and gross and fine motor problems. At the same time, she also received educational support outside school and some support was provided for her by her school.

I first met GC at the beginning of Grade 3, when I was asked to provide educational support for her outside of school. At this point in time, she was experiencing difficulties across all
curriculum areas, although she had built up a good early sight word vocabulary. GC was extremely concrete in her thinking, and was further hampered by her difficulties with expressive and receptive language. For the next two years, I worked with her for approximately 4 hours a week and often in the holidays.

**Tutoring outside school**

Her tutoring took place early in the mornings before school, beginning often before 7:00 a.m. She and I were both early risers, and she certainly worked much better when she was "fresh". Her parents or grandparents dropped her off at my home and then took her on to school when we had finished. Starting so early meant that she could be at school in time to start the school day with the rest of the children.

The parents had asked if I could come into school with her, but the principal declined to give permission. I had no contact with her classroom teachers, although there was some contact with the school support teacher, who provided suggestions as to the areas that I might concentrate on in my time with GC, but she did not provide any actual material. I worked out a program based on what this student already knew and what was contained in the K-6 syllabus.

One aim was to teach GC her tables, and we did this with the help of her parents. They were said in the car on the way to school, and she almost ruined the springs on her bed by jumping up and down reciting her tables. I found that movement could be quite helpful when trying to learn things, such as times tables, and she loved the idea of bouncing on the bed.

There had to be a certain amount of flexibility in subject matter and delivery mode because the student’s attention span was variable and some concepts, such as time and money, were very hard for her to grasp. There was constant repetition using a
variety of means to encourage retention of material and to try to stimulate interest. I often used visual material and concrete material to aid in understanding. GC found it hard to imagine things and having a picture, even if it was a hand drawn one, helped on many occasions.

Time, distance and money were areas which we spent a lot of time on. We walked around the school measuring things and working out how long it took to get from one place to another. We used GC’s own height to compare the height of other things. We measured her fingers and used them to measure small things. I tried to relate as many things as possible to everyday objects and events. When teaching money I used real money and we shopped for things that she might buy if she were out, such as ice cream and lollies. Calculating change was a challenge and still remains so.

**In-school support – withdrawal**
At the beginning of 5th Grade, the school principal reluctantly allowed me to come into the school and withdraw GC each morning (2-3 hours) for one-on-one support. The school also provided two small group withdrawal sessions most weeks. The Grade 5 teacher was very supportive and helpful. He introduced me to the class, who called me by my first name, and explained to the class why I was there. I was able to work closely with this teacher to provide a suitable program for GC.

I began by revising Grade 2 and 3 concepts in Maths, and included some Grade 5 work. For Maths, I gave her a grid book with 1 cm squares. GC had difficulty lining up the numbers in the algorithms and the book used by the school had much smaller squares, which meant that because she had some fine motor problems her digits never fitted into the smaller squares, and her work became quite untidy and difficult to follow. The 1 cm squares provided yet another source of measurement practice.
At the same time, the occupational therapist was working on drawing straight lines, simple shapes and margins using a ruler. Although GC was still using Base 10 blocks, she was also using the ruler as a number line.

The classroom teacher would provide me with material, such as the class Science tasks or English tasks, which I would work on with GC. He was very encouraging to GC, and I would often send her down to show him her work. Although these tasks were Grade 5 level, GC was not expected to achieve at the same level as the class but she was expected to make an attempt. I tried to encourage independent work and when this was achieved GC got a big “I” next to her work. This extra special work resulted in a sweet and/or stickers, which she loved.

When there were interesting things going on in the classroom or excursions, she joined in with the rest of her class. Grade 6 paralleled Grade 5 and we also had the same teacher, which was a real plus.

During Grade 6 it was decided that this young girl should repeat. She was still lagging behind her peers academically, and was quite immature for her age. One option was to repeat at her current school, or find a K-12 school that would be willing to take both of us as a “package”. The latter option seemed the best because it would give her a chance to settle into a new school, which would be larger than her current school, and she could spend more time in the classroom with me close at hand.

New school and in-class support
A local K-12 school (co-educational) agreed to take us both and see how it worked out for the school, the student and me. The school had not been involved in a situation like this before. There were 20 new students spread across two Grade 6 classes,
entering with us. These students had been encouraged to join the school in Grade 6 rather than wait for the Grade 7 intake.

The principal at her new school agreed that I could spend as much time as I wanted with her in the classroom, although from time to time I withdrew her when she required more and longer assistance, or on the advice of the classroom teacher. Writing tasks, English and Maths were continuing problem areas, and I found that a quiet area was more beneficial for some of this work. GC could be easily distracted in the classroom and go off task. I should stress at this point that this child does not have behavioral difficulties, but finds it difficult to sustain attention over time and gets quite tired when having to copy material from the board.

When we began at the new school the development and amendment of material was largely left up to me, with some consultation with the classroom teacher. The amendment of material usually meant that not as much output was required on a given task, or a slightly easier task was substituted. We were fortunate to have a very experienced teacher on this Grade 6 class, who welcomed both of us into her class. The class was not without some difficult children, both at an academic and behavior level, and abilities ranged from superior to struggling.

It was decided that I would attend four mornings a week and the school would provide some support one morning a week in the form of a small group withdrawal for extra work on comprehension and reading. At this stage, a small amount of funding had been obtained for GC and I felt it should benefit her in some way. The afternoons were largely devoted to non academic subjects, including sport. Periods when the class undertook foreign language study were used for one-to-one tuition in the library or elsewhere.
In the classroom I worked towards increasing my student’s independence. I would make sure that she understood what was required, and then ask her to attempt the task on her own if she felt able to. If she was willing to make an attempt on her own I would move away and help other children, always keeping my eye on my student and being ready to help her if she called me over. This worked well in the classroom, and by giving support to other students they got to know me and it encouraged my student to see that there were others who also needed support apart from her.

**In-class group work**
The Grade 6 teacher initially sat the children in rows till she got to know them all, and then they sat in groups of six around the room. The teacher changed the groupings periodically, which benefited my student who did not contribute very well in group tasks, and prevented other students getting “fed up” because one of their group was not pulling their weight or needed constantly to be told what to do. When we were in groups, I joined GC’s group and allowed the students to bounce their ideas off me while at the same time encouraging contribution from GC when I felt that she was able. I also moved around to other groups doing the same kind of thing. I might make suggestions for a group, as did the classroom teacher, but the finished work had to belong to the group. Joining in with GC’s group enabled me to keep her focused on the task. Individual assignments were completed at home, but often provided too much of a challenge, and family and I would all have some input. Overall, Grade 6 was a positive experience and my student settled well into the school and was certainly better equipped to enter Grade 7 than she would have been a year earlier.

**Modified work and homework**
There is no doubt that students who are academically challenged need modified work, and this is not always easy
when a teacher has a full class and there are other students in the class who also require support. Attempting to get a student to participate in a task that is beyond them is stressful for all concerned, including parents who often have to juggle time and other siblings to complete assignments that are beyond their child’s capabilities. Homework should be at the level that the child can manage largely on their own, and thought should be given to the amount of homework which is set. I do think that a child such as GC should be encouraged to complete some homework each night so that they are taking some responsibility for their learning. When there are other siblings some antagonism can arise if one child is perceived not to have to do any homework.

Whilst it is excellent to have expectations for every student, they have to be realistic in terms of what the student is capable of. GC had poor handwriting and pencil grip, and no amount of practice appeared to result in change. Thus, there are some things that will probably never change, and it is better to leave them alone and concentrate on those things which may be amenable to change, such as social skills.

**Social skills and social interaction**

Social skills development can never start too early, not just for students such as GC but for all students. GC always sought out younger children to play with at recess and lunch. This was not so evident at her first primary school where she had younger siblings and cousins, but when she came to her new primary school she did not have this social network. Consequently, she tended to attach herself to a particular peer, which usually led to lack of interest by the peer after a short period of time. The classroom teacher and I tried to encourage the other students to take it in turns to include GC at recess and lunch. This was reasonably successful. I did not shadow her around during recess or lunch,
but kept a distant eye on proceedings and, from time to time, spoke to GC about making friends and relating to others.

Integrating a child with special needs into a regular classroom can not be done without the support of all those who come in contact with the child. The greater the needs of the student, the less easy it is to integrate them into a regular classroom and so the need for someone to support the child in the classroom, and even in the playground, increases considerably. It is unfair to expect a regular classroom teacher to be able to provide the level of support required for these students.

**Secondary school**

Grade 7 meant timetables, different teachers and room changes. It also meant that I would not withdraw her from the classroom for any subjects, and that we had to put in place workable strategies for assignments and homework. I requested an extra set of handouts for myself, and took down any notes from the board or that were dictated so that I had a copy of everything. Having a copy of everything enabled me to keep her notes and practical work up to date in her books, so when we had to study for exams we had all the relevant material.

Initially, I sat fairly close to GC in class, but in Term 2 I sat off to the side or down the back of the room. This was to encourage her to participate more in class without prompting from me. However, when she had to read material and answer questions she would bring her work down to me. This was preferable to her rote copying off the student next to her.

I explained to her teachers that if she put up her hand to answer a question she probably knew the answer, and it was best to ask her fairly quickly or else she forgot what she wanted to say. I also alerted staff that she was a reasonable reader and was quite happy to read aloud in class. In fact, she enjoyed reading aloud and would always volunteer. I attended every
morning, and in this way was present at most English, Maths, Science, History and Geography classes. For those I missed in the afternoons, staff left me a note or told me about what was to be covered and, as I had a separate set of text books, I was easily able to keep continuity with the class. I did not attend Music, Art, PDHPE and D&T, although these teachers did liaise with me if the need arose, such as for assignments.

Assignments
When GC received an assignment, we broke it down into manageable parts and she was encouraged to do those parts she could manage. The rest of the assignment was completed with help from me or her parents. Each Saturday morning I spent about two hours with this student going over the week’s work and revising those areas that had caused difficulty. We completed any homework which would be due the following week. At this time I also spoke with her mother and father about any assignments or special tasks, which would have to be done, and generally discussed how their child was progressing. This was an important time for her parents because they were concerned as to how she was coping, and there is always the constant worry that you may not have made the right choice for your child. I also made a point of calling them when this student had received a positive comment in class, or had contributed positively over the course of the day.

High school – Grade 8 and 9
In Grade 8 the school decided to stream students for English and Maths, and went to a two week rotating timetable. Streaming resulted in smaller classes for the lower levels in English and Maths. In Grade 8 every student studied a foreign language (as mandated by the Board of Studies). It was felt that this time could be more productively used for one-to-one tuition, and that the foreign language could be studied outside school hours.
by my student. This then gave us three sessions a fortnight one-on-one, which was invaluable. In these sessions we completed homework, went over concepts that were difficult and worked on assignments.

Academically, the work was becoming more challenging, and there were times when it was necessary to reduce the amount of homework and to modify some topic areas that were just too difficult for the student to understand. These areas included Maths and English, particularly areas relating to analysis of set texts and problems in Maths. She was quite capable of learning a lot of concrete material, but could not always apply this material when the time came, such as in exams or when asked a question in class. For example, she could name the major divisions of the plant kingdom, but had difficulty applying this knowledge to classify a plant.

The free periods in Grades 8 and 9, which allowed us to go over work that was covered in class and not well understood, or to prepare assignments and reports, were very useful. Around examination time, Saturday morning tutoring resumed as well. Initially, the school had provided readers/writers for those students who required them in Grade 7, but this ceased and will not again be available until the School Certificate. I was allowed to provide this service for my student, although she would often refuse any support for her exams. Special Provisions for the School Certificate have been applied for via the Board of Studies. Application for special provisions does not imply that even if these are approved GC will necessarily benefit from them.

Social issues in high school
On a social level, the going has got tougher. The other students are not unkind, but they do not always include GC in general conversation in the play ground, and she often sits or stands on the fringes of a group. Nor does she get invited to events outside
school. She is not readily included in groups within the classroom unless the teacher specifically nominates the groups. There have been several occasions when students have said they would prefer to work with someone else, and it has been necessary to intervene and suggest that she and I and one other “obliging” student might make our own group. (Some students like being in our group, particularly in Science because our experiments always worked!). In other subject areas, the teachers have been quite supportive in selecting different group combinations so that other students don’t feel that they are always the one having to support GC.

Group work is a perennial problem no matter what grade students are in, but it is becoming more of a problem in the later years of high school as students have to share the mark awarded to the group and are therefore keen to be in a group where everyone contributes equally. GC is developing some very good computer skills as a result of taking some of the IT subjects offered as electives in Grade 9 and 10, and this has led other students to ask her for her expertise on a number of occasions. This has provided a welcome boost to her self-esteem. Her IT skills have given her an excuse to use the library at lunchtime, and this has alleviated some of the socialising problems in the playground. However, it has not provided any real opportunity for social interaction because the students are not allowed to play games on the computer.

Small social issues I dealt with as they arose, either with the help of the school counsellor or by myself. Larger social or behavioral issues were discussed with her parents and with her, and we always sought ways to minimise these issues. Behavioral issues were more to do with inappropriateness than disruptive behavior, such as when GC frequented the wrong playground which resulted in some embarrassment for a student.
Educational strategies and problem areas
Her lack of concentration and interest in the classroom is a problem, and I frequently feel that I am watching videos and listening to the teacher for two of us (no daydreaming for me in class!). Homework is not always written in a legible manner, or at all in her diary, which has obvious pitfalls. Nor is she particularly willing to do homework after school, so the extra free periods which she has at school have been particularly helpful in this respect.

Although the material such as novels and plays were chosen to suit those students who found reading challenging, my student was never particularly interested in any of the material for study in English, and so her family and I read her novels and any other material and then talked her through them. Some reading of her novels was shared reading in our tutorial periods, and I sometimes read chapters of her texts to her. We wrote summaries of chapters in novels and plays, and discussed the characters and where they all fitted into the story.

GC also found it hard to write stories and essays, and much time has gone into providing schemas for essays, book reports and other necessary writing. One method I found helpful was to use a “spider”. This was an oval with four vertical lines on top and four on the bottom. In the centre of the oval we wrote the topic, and then thought about all the things we should include (similar to brainstorming). These ideas we placed on one of the vertical legs. We numbered our ideas in sequence and wrote a sentence or paragraph around the idea. We had used this strategy in primary school and it still worked for us in high school. I also made good use of a book called Graphic Organisers & Planning Outlines for Authentic Instruction and Assessment. The Grade 8 English teacher borrowed a lot of this material and used it successfully in the lowest English class.
This student is a very concrete thinker and finds it difficult to answer inferential questions on a piece of writing, or to use her imagination to produce a narrative. History was a subject that she did not enjoy and was reluctant to do very much work in. Geography, on the other hand, was more “here” and “now”, and she enjoyed this and was more inclined to work for this subject. Whilst this student likes mathematics, she struggles with many of the concepts and applying those concepts to problem solving.

**Academic skills**
The schoolwork is getting harder and the level of cognitive skills required is increasing. As I have mentioned earlier, the amount of group work expected in Grades 9 and 10 provides a challenge to the staff in selecting appropriate groups in which to include my student. For example, in Grade 10 we are producing a group magazine and GC finds it quite challenging to write suitable articles for this task. In Science, we are researching a group topic that we also have to debate. This is a really big challenge because GC has no interest in the topic and will be able to contribute little to the debate, thus affecting the overall group mark. There are many things in the syllabus that are beyond her understanding, and one wonders at her need to participate in these areas. The only real alternative at this time would be enrolment in the Life Skills program. However, whilst she is in mainstream she is expected to participate as the curriculum directs, even though at times the ratio of student to tutor/parent input is quite skewed, particularly for assignments and those assessable tasks as required by a particular subject’s curriculum. It is not easy to modify the mainstream curriculum to accommodate this student and still meet the objectives of the course content.

In spite of her difficulties, this student tries her very best and, in some areas such as IT, she is more than holding her own. It is
a very rewarding experience to watch her progress and each year see another milestone reached. This year she is in Grade 10, and again we will have some free periods in which to revise, do homework and get assignments and other tasks underway.

Support from the school
The principal of her school has been very supportive throughout our time there, and nothing has been too much trouble in providing an education for this young girl. There has been no antagonism (which I am aware of) from the staff at having me in their class, and some staff have actually said they appreciate my presence. I have gone out of my way to ensure that we do not disrupt any class we are part of.

The request for an extra set of notes or other material has been readily agreed to, and most teachers have indicated what their program is for a given subject so that I have been able to prepare ahead, particularly by reading novels and plays and reviewing work to come. The need for feedback and reassurance for the parents of this student, and any other similar student, is most important, and being in school has enabled me to provide constructive feedback both to the parents and the staff. At the same time, it is important not to be seen as “carrying tales”.

Providing this level of support for this student is a heavy expense for her parents, and there is little support from the government in the way of integration funding to ease their costs. Each year the school submits a request for funding for this student, but little is forthcoming. Until this changes, there will be many students, such as this young girl, who will not be adequately catered for in the regular classroom because of lack of funding and resources, and any potential that they may have demonstrated will never become apparent.
Primary and secondary school comparison
The differences between primary and secondary school on a social level is that primary students are generally more accepting and less critical of someone they perceive as “different”. In high school, social issues are really important as is the need to be included in some social group. The lack of a Life Skills program at GC’s current school has meant that she has been expected to participate in a mainstream program, which has been quite challenging for her. The amount of work expected to be done by the parents of these children is quite considerable because the child expects that they will hand in their assignments like the rest of their class. This, in turn, can lead to lots of stress even in the most supportive families, of which GC’s is one. The programming of a lower level class, which works at a slower pace and with easier texts and extra visual material, can be beneficial, not just for GC but for other students as well. These classes are usually smaller, which means more attention for each student. I have now been at the school for five years and, in that time, I have built up a good rapport with the students so that they accept me as “part of the furniture” and as someone who will always lend an ear or give help when required. I think this has been a plus for GC, and has contributed to her acceptance within the school.

What works
Ultimately, what has worked for GC has been a supportive caring school environment, integration support as and when required, and a supportive family. The fact that I have been with GC for such a long time has given GC continuity of support and has enabled us to build up a strong relationship. I know that this has provided her family with a degree of security about their daughter and the chance to get useful feedback when required.
EVALUATING A RURAL-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION SERVICE

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ABSTRACT
This article describes the evaluation of an early childhood intervention centre operating in a rural location. The centre had adopted an integrated model of service delivery to address issues of cost, staffing, and service to families in both centre-based and outreach settings. The evaluation gathered information from key stakeholders (including parents, centre staff, and other practitioners in the field), and used a variety of research methods. The results of the evaluation are discussed, recommendations are made, and insights shared for the benefit of those conducting future evaluative studies in this area.

INTRODUCTION
There have been few evaluations in the field of early childhood intervention services in Australia reported in the research literature. This article attempts to fill such a void by discussing what a team of researchers learnt from their involvement in a recent evaluation of an early childhood intervention service in rural Australia. The evaluation was informed by an extensive literature review and involved the use of a mix of inquiry methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, and discussions) with a range of key stakeholders. Many of the questions asked of the stakeholders were drawn from the 1998 Evaluation Guidelines established by the New South Wales (NSW) Chapter of the Australian Early Childhood Intervention Association.

A literature review, based mainly on materials either identified in the Australian Education Index or the ERIC database, revealed six main issues that need to be considered when evaluating...
an early childhood intervention service in a rural location. These issues are referred to as constraints, family-centred practice, social support, a paucity of relevant local research, evaluating rural-based services, and benchmarking, and are summarised below.

1. Constraints
There are always significant constraints that apply to the evaluation of early childhood intervention programs due, in part, to the great diversity of programs that has made uniform and meaningful benchmarking difficult. Early childhood intervention programs can encompass educationally-based programs, therapy-based programs, family support-based programs or, more commonly, a blend of some or all of these features. The lack of appropriate measurement instruments for early childhood programs operating in different locations, such as the city and rural or remote areas, has continued to make effective evaluation of early childhood intervention programs difficult. Moreover, professionals working in early childhood intervention services have been limited in the resources that they have to evaluate their services as most of the staff time is allocated to direct service delivery. Nevertheless, Fallon (2000) pointed out, no matter how difficult evaluations of early childhood intervention services are, there is a strong need for well-planned evaluations to be used as a key management tool.

2. Family-centred practice
In evaluating the effectiveness of early intervention services, there has been much written about the importance of family-centred practice as it has been a principal component of early childhood intervention services in Australia and elsewhere for more than a decade. Rosenbaum et al. (1998), as cited in Moore (2001), considered efficiency studies of family-centred practice and found that all of the studies reviewed demonstrated considerable evidence of the effectiveness of a family-centred approach to service delivery in terms of positive outcomes for both the child and the family. However, Dunst, Trivette, and Jodry (1997) have found that services differ in the degree to which these services implement all the components of family-centred practice. They also found that these variations are significantly related to a wide range of parent and family outcomes, including the parents’ satisfaction with the services received and family empowerment.

In reviewing family-centred practice from an Australian perspective only, Moore (2001) concluded that:
- early childhood intervention services should continue to be based upon the philosophy of family-centred practice; and,
- all professionals working with families of young children with disabilities should be trained in the proper use of family-centred practice, incorporating three basic elements of effective helping (viz., technical skills, personal qualities and attributions, and participatory involvement).

3. Social support
Research has shown another important factor to be taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of early childhood intervention
programs is how well services provide social support to families of young children with disabilities. Dunst et al. (1997) define social support as a complex, on-going transactional process that involves the exchange of resources between an individual and his or her social network members. These co-workers proposed that, because social support influences child, parent and family functioning, social support is a form of early intervention. Crnic and Stormshak (1997) studied the effects of social support and found that the majority of studies of “at risk” families have shown that social support directly influences the well-being of children and families.

Sloper (1999) reviewed the British evidence regarding social support and found that, for professionals working in early childhood intervention, there were three primary features for providing effective support for families: providing families with a key worker; training workers in basic counselling skills; and, parent-partnership service delivery models.

4. A paucity of relevant local research
In Australia, there has been limited research into the area of early childhood intervention, with much of the work being done in a more informal way. The research findings tend to have been described in papers presented at early childhood intervention conferences. One such paper, “Early childhood intervention: What we need to know”, was presented by Moore at the Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW) August 2001 conference. Moore considered the evidence regarding the short- and long-term effects of early childhood intervention services on “at risk” youngsters and the disability population.

In his paper, Moore emphasised that support to families of young children with disabilities should include services designed to relieve four potential sources of stress: the need for information about their child’s health and development; interpersonal and family distress that can result from having a child with a disability; threats to parenting confidence in their ability to meet their child’s needs; and, additional resource needs resulting from having a child with a disability. Moore also stressed that professionals working with families of young children with disabilities should seek to help parents mobilise informal support networks and resources.

5. Evaluating rural-based services
There does not appear to be much research into the evaluation of early intervention programs in either rural areas in the United States of America (USA) or Australia. One of the few Australian studies undertaken was a review by Linfoot (1997). In his paper, entitled “Early childhood special education: Recent trends in service delivery”, he explored recent trends in the delivery of early childhood intervention services in Australia, and also took into account research into the needs of children with disabilities in isolated areas. He drew on some research by Brentnall and Dunlop (1985) that had implications for service delivery in rural and isolated areas. These researchers had surveyed the extent, the characteristics, and the needs of families of children with disabilities in isolated areas of Australia. The recommendations from
their study were for the provision of services, especially those involving communication/counselling services, to parents and the availability of therapy services to children. An issue of some concern that the Brentnall and Dunlop (1985) national survey identified was that best use may not have been made of the services that were available in rural areas. As highlighted by Linfoot (1997), poor coordination between various service providers and a lack of communication between professionals could have contributed to the problems identified by Brentnall and Dunlop.

Linfoot (1997) also noted that, in some cases, families in rurally isolated areas have not accessed early childhood intervention services. The reasons given were that there was often a limited range of early childhood intervention services or, in some cases, that families were unaware of the services available to them.

6. Bench marking
Kempner (1993) defined bench marking as an on-going, systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organisation with those of another, by bringing an external focus to internal activities and functions. Organisational performance indicators can form an important part of the bench marking process. Therefore, when evaluating an early childhood intervention program, it is important not only to measure the satisfaction levels of the clients (and the families), but also to look at broader measures such as the overall health of the organisation that offers the services.

While recognised bench marks are useful in evaluating an organisation’s climate and performance (Owens, 2003), suitable standards are not always available. In such circumstances, the relative well-being of an organisation can be appraised by using a range of performance indicators. These include rates of staff absenteeism, the number of work disputes or complaints, staff turnover, and staff satisfaction levels. Some specific bench marking criteria for early childhood intervention services include such things as staff-children ratio and floor space per child.

One of the greatest difficulties in early childhood intervention services operating in rural areas is attracting and retaining therapists in country areas. A lack of therapists affects the effective functioning of an early intervention team in providing services that meet the needs of families with young children with disabilities. Therefore, one suitable bench mark of success in evaluating the effectiveness of early childhood intervention services, is the ability of the service to attract and retain therapists in the service. As the Review of Therapy Services for the NSW Department of Ageing and Disability stated: “[t]herapists regard disability as a specialist area and lack peer support and professional development to support them in their role” (Mather & Associates, 1998, p.32). For early childhood intervention services operating in rural areas, this difficulty of attracting and retaining therapists is compounded - “[m]ajor gaps in services exist, particularly in rural areas, due to difficulties in recruitment and retention” (Mather & Associates, 1998, p.18).
Beamish and Bryer (1999a) carried out a research project in Queensland and found that the evaluation practices for early childhood intervention services in Australia have been largely based on work and standards from overseas, mainly from the USA. They noted that, while recommendations from these evaluations may apply to the Australian setting, there is a need to adapt the knowledge to our own specific contexts and establish our own reference points. As Ashman (1990) noted, “[t]here is nothing wrong with basing our efforts on the accumulated knowledge. The error (if there is one) is not validating this knowledge in our own political, legal and service provision structures” (1990, p.180).

Beamish and Bryer (1999b) did not adopt recommended practices from other established communities, but developed a relevant listing of program quality indicators based on the early childhood intervention context for Queensland. Significant differences between the ratings of staff and parents occurred for seven indicators, namely, family support networks, professional competencies, ascertainment categories, staff training and feedback, community service information, personnel solution, and case management.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS
As alluded to in the literature review, any evaluation of an early childhood intervention service needs to address a number of issues, involve a range of stakeholders, and be exhaustive. Such an approach needs to be adopted so that its findings can be used, not only by the specific service under review, but by a wider audience such as the research community.

The early childhood intervention centre evaluated in the study reported here was based in a regional NSW city with a population of 55,000 persons and offered outreach to the surrounding region. The centre falls under the umbrella of a charitable organisation that relies mainly on government funding to support the delivery of its services. The market for such services in regional Australia is thin, with the need to travel to outlying areas, making it difficult to achieve the same level of services as in metropolitan areas with equivalent funding. The centre has responded to this challenge by developing an integrated service delivery model in which teams of professionals in the fields of both health and education work with client families. This particular model is a viable alternative to the ubiquitous separate services model. In this latter model, speech pathologists, psychologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, family support workers, and educators work out of different offices.

The evaluation was conducted over a period of ten months and set out to:
- determine the level of satisfaction client families felt with the services they received;
- ascertain the level of satisfaction of staff involved in the delivery of these services;
- describe the perceptions of the early childhood intervention program held by others who provide services to the same clients;
• compare the centre with other regional centres with some common features; and,
• provide findings that can be used in making informed decisions relating to future directions for the centre.

This evaluation employed a number of research methods to gather and analyse data. These methods are summarised below:

1. A survey of 120 client families using items based on the 1998 Evaluation Guidelines established by the NSW Chapter of the Australian Early Childhood Intervention Association was adapted to meet the purposes and needs of this evaluation. These surveys were posted to families at their home address. Several weeks after the closing date for the return of the completed surveys a telephone call was made to those who had not responded. This improved the response rate to approximately 50% and provided additional information from client families. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

2. A survey of all centre staff, except three who had recently been appointed, was conducted. This survey also drew on items from the 1998 Evaluation Guidelines. In addition to these items, a number of open-ended questions were framed so that staff members could offer comments about their responsibilities and workplace. The return rate was about 70%. See Appendix B for a copy of the staff survey.

3. A series of two staff discussions that took the form of focus groups with pre-circulated discussion questions. The centre’s manager was not involved in these discussions. This decision was made to eliminate the possibility that the presence of the manager might have a significant influence on the staff discussions. Two of the members of the research team acted as facilitator and recorder for the two hour-long sessions. The discussion questions can be found in Appendix C. Staff members were given a summary of the findings of both the Family and Staff Surveys before the discussions were held. The field notes were analysed to identify themes and issues that relate to the purposes established for the evaluation.

4. A survey of comparable regional early intervention services seeking information on a limited number of performance indicators was conducted by post, with responses returned anonymously. An indicator, such as staff turnover or absenteeism rate, points to or provides limited evidence about the work situation. When a number of these indicators point in the same direction, inferences made about the performance of an organisation or group can be made with greater confidence. It should be noted that it was difficult to identify comparable centres.

5. A survey of other providers of services to the children associated with the centre. This survey was conducted by telephone and included paediatricians, pre-school directors, and staff from relevant agencies in the local area. Those surveyed were selected on the basis of having: (i) a detailed understanding of the centre and the early intervention services it provides; (ii) regular contact with centre staff members; and (iii) a shared responsibility for some clients. The three questions asked in the survey were: How
would you rate the services provided by the centre [1. Excellent 2. Good 3. Satisfactory 4. Poor]? What led you to give the services provided by that centre that rating? Are there any other comments you would like to make about your experience with the centre?

6. Analysis of relevant documents concerned with the history, procedures, information to client families, and other matters to gain insights into the way in which the centre had developed its operations and communications with stakeholders. The centre’s manager acted as the conduit for this information flow.

FINDINGS
This section outlines the main findings obtained from the data collection described previously.

Family survey
The average time that the children encapsulated by the survey had been involved with the centre was just over two years. The majority of children had regular contact with the centre either once per week or once per fortnight. Three quarters of the children visited the centre and one quarter saw staff members elsewhere. The majority of parents were quite satisfied with their contacts with the centre and indicated that staff members gave them the support and information needed. A significant number of respondents provided additional comments indicating just how much they valued the service offered by the centre. There appeared to be some differences among families in understanding the development of an individual family service plan (IFSP). However, only a minority of respondents was not satisfied with the process of their plan. These tended to be first-time parents or parents new to the centre who were not familiar with the goal-setting process and the associated jargon. The centre now provides parents with suitable information to overcome this problem.

Parents were generally happy with the way in which centre staff members implemented a program for their children. They considered that these programs were beneficial for the children, parents and family with the greatest benefit to the child and the least to the family.

Group sessions were considered valuable by the majority of families, but less valuable than individual services. Almost all of the parents surveyed indicated satisfaction with individual services. Some parents commented that they would like to see groups on a more regular basis e.g., weekly not fortnightly. Two typical comments follow.

“Group sessions were great to meet other parents and to see the children interact and make friends. Individual sessions are absolutely essential for the child and are worth their weight in gold.”

“I believe individual sessions are more beneficial to my severely disabled child as some parts of the group session she finds it difficult to participate.”

Eighty percent of parents of children moving on to school in 2002 felt that the centre had helped
prepare their child to make this transition. However, there was a level of concern as to how families would cope without the centre’s support, with families indicating that they would like services to continue on in the school years. This is illustrated in the quote below:

“Our child would not be where they are today without [the centre]. Thank you! We wish there was a service for the 5+ group as we now feel we are on our own.”

Overall, the results of this survey indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the service by most parents. However, a few respondents did indicate dissatisfaction with particular aspects of their experience of the service. The dissatisfaction usually centred around particular incidents such as an unfortunate misunderstanding, a change in staffing, a lack of information about their child’s specific disability, and unrealistic expectations concerning the amount of contact and support.

Staff survey
Overall, the responses to the staff survey were predominantly positive as reflected in the points below. These staff members:

- were well satisfied with their work;
- valued the transdisciplinary team approach;
- were challenged by some aspects of the work they do;
- felt they need and do get support;
- recognised the value of the outcomes achieved;
- would like additional staff development;
- were relatively inexperienced and had not worked in a similar centre; and
- perceived that aspects of the service could be further improved.

Staff members, in general, indicated a desire to develop their own professional practice in a number of areas including teamwork, working with families, counselling, and accessing community resources. Many of the comments made by staff members resonate with the issues identified in the literature. Some representative comments by staff to the open-ended questions are included below. The positive and negative comments are noted separately.

Positives

- “Good support system.”
- “Team commitment to the service and families.”
- “Everyone working for the same purpose.”

Negatives

- “Not enough time to implement new ideas.”
- “Financial restrictions in terms of equipment, case loads.”
- “More therapy staff – the case load at certain times (generally terms 2, 3, and 4) is too large to provide a comprehensive therapy service for the families.”
- “The current award for payment [is generally low but more so for therapists].”

Staff discussions
The two groups were somewhat different in terms of the views expressed. Group one tended to focus directly on the pre-circulated questions
and overcoming perceived difficulties, while some in group two tended to be more critical and less constructive. However, this analysis did not dwell on such differences but sought to identify themes and issues that relate to the purposes established for the evaluation which are essentially utilitarian.

The themes and issues that emerged from the analysis of the staff discussions are as follows:

1. Staff members agree that present workloads are such that it is difficult to achieve all of the stated aims of the centre. Staff members currently give priority to the needs of the children and pay less attention to their families. While staff members wish to empower families, current resources do not always allow this to happen to the extent they see as appropriate.

2. The value of IFSPs is questioned in terms of the staff time and effort required, and the degree to which families are able to have significant input compared to the actual outcomes where follow up and parent support is often difficult.

3. Families have established preferences about what they want from, and they how wish to relate to, the centre. Staff members have to respect these preferences and to respond sensitively and flexibly in a counselling role. This can create a dilemma for staff where it appears necessary to seek to change these preferences in the interests of the children concerned. Some families do not have the capacity to identify and access the services they need, or to apply the strategies that the centre’s staff members suggest when the children are in the home environment. This situation is exacerbated when families choose not to participate in group activities, and contact, as a consequence, is minimal.

4. The role of the family support worker is seen as critical to the success of the programs. However, at the time the position was only a part-time one and the outcomes were less than optimal. The family support worker could have a role in helping prepare families for assessment and for sharing relevant information with other staff members on a regular basis.

5. Group two participants were concerned with the level of staff turnover, particularly in the year 2000, and the subsequent discontinuity for families. Staff turnover was seen as a consequence of a number of individual and organisational factors, such as the current award for payment of therapists and lack of infrastructure for promotion within the organisation.

6. Staff members feel valued and trusted in their workplace. They are able to work flexibly and productively in teams with appropriate delegation of responsibility, sharing of relevant information, and mutual support.

7. Staff members would like to see some extension of services in the future, such as in assisting children in their transition to school. However, extra funding would be necessary to enable this to occur.

**Comparative survey**

The results of the survey of eight similar regional early interventional centres revealed a number of important points and these are
highlighted below.

1. The eight centres that responded are similar and can be legitimately compared.
2. All centres work in teams that include a mixture of disciplines.
3. Centres are staffed in two ways, with three having only part-time staff members and five with a mix of full-time and part-time staff members.
4. The rate of staff turnover is low.
5. Staff absenteeism is variable, with an average of 3.3 days per annum per staff member for the five centres that provided data. This figure must be interpreted with caution as the total of full-time and part-time staff was used in the calculation, and it was assumed that staffing levels were similar across the four-year period. The latter assumption holds true for all but the centre being evaluated where staff numbers increased. For this centre, the absenteeism rate is 1.5 days per person per annum.
6. The official complaint rate at all centres was very low, with five centres, including this centre, having zero complaints.

Survey of other local service providers

Three paediatricians, six pre-school directors, and three workers in other agencies, who were surveyed, rated the centre very highly. The reasons given for this rating included:

“Reports clear and easily understood by all.”

“[Centre] staff are happy to help with information, visits and resources.”

“Responsive to our needs.”

“Good case follow up.”

“Very well run and efficient service”.

“Family-centred practice at its best.”

“Very proactive in terms of identifying and addressing future needs.”

“Generally poor access to EI services in rural and regional areas and so [this centre] stands out.”

“Wait time with [the centre] is short but elsewhere there are long waits.”

“Very good compared with other providers in the region.”

These findings are important, as the survey involved all the paediatricians and outside agency representatives who were associated with the centre and half of the pre-school directors. It needs to be noted, however, that these other local service providers did provide some additional comments worthy of noting. For example, one stakeholder reported that the centre needs to demonstrate greater caution in not over-extending its outreach and country travel. A different respondent argued that the centre would be improved if it had a psychiatrist as part of its designated staff profile. Several other stakeholders commented on the real constraint of funding and its implications.

DISCUSSION

This evaluation study has fulfilled the basic aims identified earlier in this paper. In short,
the results gleaned from the surveys, staff discussions, and document analysis support the following claims:

1. There is a high level of satisfaction felt by client families with regard to the service they receive.
2. Generally speaking, staff members employed by the service are well satisfied with their work roles and responsibilities.
3. Other stakeholders offering services to the same clients as the centre, see the centre in a very favourable light.
4. Indicators, such as absenteeism, staff satisfaction, and complaint rate, suggest that the service has an above average performance as an organisation.
5. The centre has established an excellent reputation, but needs to address a series of issues that pertain to staffing, funding, family involvement, and programming if it is to move forward as a service provider.

The findings of this evaluation have important implications for the service as an organisation. To begin with, it is important that new staff members have an induction program that helps them understand the history, philosophy, purposes, policies, and practices of the centre. This is essential as most new staff members have not had previous professional experience in an early childhood intervention service, and those who had would not have worked in a similar setting. It is also important that the issues raised at the time of induction are subject to ongoing dialogue and review. Second, it is essential to consider and develop the understandings, generic skills, and dispositions needed for staff to work effectively in teams in family-centred practice as these are critical to the quality of services offered by the centre. This has particular implications for staff recruitment, development, appraisal and performance review procedures. Third, it is crucial to consider and develop the understandings and skills needed by families to participate effectively in the development of their children. This should be achieved in a variety of ways and at different times. In particular, parents need to know the purpose of group sessions and the opportunities they present in terms of demonstrating a range of useful strategies that promote learning and development. Lastly, the service must seek to maintain and enhance its reputation as a regional centre of best practice and to ensure that this reputation is widely recognised. Such an effort will not only assist in gaining further funding and support, but also make working for and with the centre more rewarding for those concerned.

Although this evaluation study was limited and exploratory, it has made a contribution by adding depth to the available data on Australian early childhood intervention services and filling an obvious gap in the research literature relating to rural services. There is a need for further Australian-based research in the area of early childhood intervention services in general, and the evaluation of centres employing an integrated approach to the delivery of such services in particular. As a consequence, it is recommended that future researchers:

- further refine the instruments used in this evaluation study, but continue to draw on the 1998 Evaluation Guidelines established
by representatives of the NSW Chapter of the Australian Early Childhood Intervention Association;
• adopt a case-study approach in which legitimate comparisons between services can be made in a variety of aspects including stakeholder satisfaction and cost of service delivery;
• identify a greater number of appropriate benchmarks; and,
• consider including the service evaluated in this study in their investigation.

Future researchers should also keep in mind the following points, highlighting further insights gained by the current researchers during the course of this study.

1. The value of using a variety of data-gathering methods and triangulating the information obtained from different stakeholders. This evaluation demonstrated that such an approach gave a complete and well-grounded account that underscored where improvements could be made that would meet with approval from key stakeholders. It should be noted that the recommendations made in the final evaluation report have, to a large extent, been acted upon by the appropriate Board of Management. This action is testimony to the credibility of the current findings.

2. The advantage of an external evaluation where the various stakeholders could express opinions and share experiences in confidence in an environment of trust and anonymity, and avoid the embarrassment that may be involved in discussing controversial or personal issues and concerns with those directly involved with the delivery of the services concerned.

3. The need to customise evaluation instruments to suit the various stakeholder groups. It was found that although the 1998 Evaluation Guidelines recommended the use of the same questionnaire items to stakeholders – staff and parents – this was not appropriate as there were considerable differences in the nature of concerns, depth and breadth of understanding of the issues, motivation, and general appreciation of the organisation, purpose and function of early intervention services.

4. The difficulty of avoiding some response bias on the part of stakeholders – particularly parents. Many parents in this study seemed to be over-burdened by the additional care required by one or more children with special needs, particularly in one-parent families or families in which one parent took little responsibility for childcare. These parents saw little personal return in completing the parent survey. These aspects came to light in the telephone follow-up that was conducted to improve the response rate. The parents who coped best tended to be the ones who returned surveys. Formal checking for response bias was not possible as responses were anonymous.

5. The importance of a detailed understanding of the environment (i.e., cultural, political, financial and professional aspects) in which the organisation operated was crucial when interpreting the findings and making recommendations. In particular, the options available to organisations operating in areas where clients are few
and far between (i.e., thin markets) and the consequences of taking up specific options had to be fully appreciated. The chances of people being satisfied with the choice of services, level of service, or cost of services in thin markets are less than those in more densely populated areas. In regional and rural locations, where the number of clients is small and/or relatively scattered, there have been attempts to deliver services in a manner that overcomes these problems. Examples can be found in the areas of communication, health, welfare, transport, education and training. Drawing from these examples, it is obvious that the delivery of individual services, in some rural settings, by separate agencies is neither cost-effective nor viable. The successful solution to the problem of service delivery in the areas nominated above involved bringing together a range of services that could be delivered by a small staff “under one roof”, whereby the fixed and variable costs are shared. The solution is not only an economic one, but one that provides a focus for the community and facilitates interaction and fosters community spirit. However, the situation in early childhood intervention services, even in a regional centre, is somewhat different. Here the incidence of children with significant disabilities in the community is very low. Additionally, early childhood intervention service providers usually work only with children in the 0-5 year range. This means the market for such services is much thinner than in the fields listed above. The development of an integrated service delivery model in response to the very thin market created its own difficulties, not the least of which was the development of the competencies needed for effective teamwork among professionals with very different orientations. The centre, like most regional centres, was only able to afford to attract and hold relatively inexperienced and less costly staff. That means the centre has to bear the responsibility for initially training staff to work in this particular way, and for keeping staff abreast of developments in both their own specialist disciplines and in the broader field of early childhood intervention.

6. The need for appropriate performance indicators in the area of early childhood intervention. It would be useful, as Griffin and Gillis (2000) have suggested, for performance indicators to be organised in ascending order, from least demanding to most. This would simplify the task of assessment of performance. The availability of an appropriate rubric (i.e., scoring guidelines) for the delivery of early childhood intervention services would have been very helpful in this evaluation.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Family Survey

This survey is being conducted by Dr XXXXX from XXX University. He is working with xxxx to help find out about the quality of the service you and your child have received from xxxx. The survey will take you about 7-10 minutes to complete. Please take the time to give us your feedback. This feedback will help us improve our service to your child, your family and the community. The information on your survey will remain confidential.

Instructions
Please do not write your name on this survey.
Fill in the spaces marked like this ................
If there are several alternatives listed, circle the one which best fits with your opinion.

About you and your child

1. How old is your child?
   (i) 0-1 year       (ii) 1-2 years       (iii) 3-4 years       (iv) 4+ years

2. How long has he or she been involved with xxxx?
   ..........years ..........months

3. How often does your child have contact with xxxx?
   (i) once per week       (ii) once per fortnight       (iii) once per month

4. Does your child?
   (i) come to xxxx at xxxx       (ii) see xxxx staff outside xxxx

About your contact with xxxx

5. After your first contact with xxxx did you feel you knew what would happen next?
   (i) yes       (ii) to some extent       (iii) no

6. Does xxxx give you sufficient information to allow you to make informed choices?
   (i) yes       (ii) to some extent       (iii) no
7. Does xxxx offer information which helps you to better understand your child’s disability?

(i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no

8. Does xxxx help you to be more aware of how to access community resources which are available to assist you and your child?

(i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no

Please add any comments that you would like to make about your contact with xxxx.

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.................................................................
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About assessment

9. When your child was last assessed did xxxx staff:

a. inform you about the assessment?

(i) yes  (ii) no

b. explain what would happen during the assessment?

(i) yes  (ii) no

c. discuss the results of the assessment with you?

(i) yes  (ii) no

d. give you an opportunity to express your point of view?

(i) yes  (ii) no

e. take notice of what you said?

(i) yes  (ii) no

Please add any comments that you would like to make about assessment.

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.................................................................
.................................................................
About developing an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)

10. When your IFSP was developed at the assessment were:
   
   a. you asked about what you wanted for your child?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
   
   b. your child's achievements discussed?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
   
   c. your child's needs discussed?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
   
   d. your values and beliefs respected?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
   
   e. you confident that the plan was what you wanted?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no

Please add any comments that you would like to make about developing a program.

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About implementing the program for your child

11. When xxxx staff are working with you to implement your program:

   a. do staff really listen to your family's concerns?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
   
   b. are these concerns taken into account?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
   
   c. are other services you use taken into account?
      
      (i) yes  (ii) to some extent  (iii) no
d. are arrangements sufficiently flexible for you?

   (i) yes   (ii) to some extent   (iii) no

12. Are the programs developed beneficial for:

   a. your child

      (i) yes   (ii) to some extent   (iii) no

   b. you

      (i) yes   (ii) to some extent   (iii) no

   c. your family

      (i) yes   (ii) to some extent   (iii) no

13. Has your child attended group sessions?

      (i) yes   (ii) no

14. Are group sessions valuable?

      (i) yes   (ii) to some extent   (iii) no

15. Has your child received individual services?

      (i) yes   (ii) no

16. Are individual services valuable?

      (i) yes   (ii) to some extent   (iii) no

Please add any comments that you would like to make about implementing programs.

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About transition from xxxx

17. Is your child moving or expecting to move to school next year?

      (i) yes   (ii) no
18. Has xxxx helped to prepare for this move?  
   (i) yes (ii) to some extent (iii) no

Please add any comments that you would like to make about transition to school.

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Please add any further comments on how the service could be improved.

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

**Please return your survey in the envelope provided.**
APPENDIX B: Staff Survey

Introduction
The purpose of this survey is to find out how satisfied you are in working at xxxx and obtain your ideas on our strengths and weaknesses. This information will be used in future planning.

1. Have you experienced another early intervention model other than the integrated one at xxxx?
   Yes         No

2. If you have experienced working in an early intervention model that differs from the one used at xxxx what significant differences did you notice when you began working at xxxx?

3. How comfortable are you now in working within the xxxx Model?
   a. very comfortable
   b. quite comfortable
   c. comfortable
   d. not very comfortable

4. How satisfied are you with the way the xxxx Model operates?
   a. very well satisfied
   b. well satisfied
   c. satisfied
   d. not satisfied

5. How would you rate the success of the xxxx model as it currently operates?
   a. excellent
   b. good
   c. satisfactory
   d. unsatisfactory

6. What aspects of the model, as it currently operates, do you think
   i. contribute to its success?
   ii. reduce its effectiveness?

7. How could the model and its operation be improved?
8. How **satisfied** are you that you are learning and developing professionally in your current position?
   a. very well satisfied
   b. well satisfied
   c. satisfied
   d. not satisfied

9. What additional support do you need to help you operate more effectively in your present role?

10. How competent do you feel in working with your families in setting goals?
    a. most competent
    b. moderately competent
    c. just competent
    d. not yet competent

11. How competent do you feel in working with your families in developing and reviewing comprehensive family service plans?
    a. most competent
    b. moderately competent
    c. just competent
    d. not yet competent

12. How well do you think you address the issues of the whole family as well as the child?
    a. extremely well
    b. very well
    c. fairly well
    d. not very well

13. How satisfied are you with the child/family progress made over the last year?
    a. very well satisfied
    b. well satisfied
    c. satisfied
    d. not satisfied

14. To what extent are you satisfied that you give each family most of the information they require on:
    (i) Child’s progress
    a. very well satisfied
    b. well satisfied
    c. satisfied
    d. not satisfied
(ii) Disability
   a. very well satisfied
   b. well satisfied
   c. satisfied
   d. not satisfied

(iii) Other services
   a. very well satisfied
   b. well satisfied
   c. satisfied
   d. not satisfied

15. Do you feel comfortable in working in a team situation?
   a. very comfortable
   b. quite comfortable
   c. comfortable
   d. not very comfortable

16. From your perspective what are the main advantages/disadvantages in working in a team environment?

17. How satisfied are you with the support you receive from:

   (i) your team members?
      a. very well satisfied
      b. well satisfied
      c. satisfied
      d. not satisfied

   (ii) your manager?
      a. very well satisfied
      b. well satisfied
      c. satisfied
      d. not satisfied

   (iii) the service e.g., training/development?
      a. very well satisfied
      b. well satisfied
      c. satisfied
      d. not satisfied
18. What aspects of your job responsibilities and working conditions are
   a. positive?
   b. negative?

19. Please add any further comments that you feel would be useful.
APPENDIX C: Staff Discussion Questions

The following pre-circulated questions were discussed with staff over a period of approximately one hour.

1. What factors make our service work for:
   * Families
   * Staff?

2. What are your areas of key concerns?

3. What aspects of family-centred practice are working well?

4. What aspects of family-centred practice can be improved?

5. How can the IFSP be made more meaningful?

6. How can we ensure that families are provided with all the information and are linked in with community resources?

7. What directions would it be beneficial for xxxx to move in the next few years?
TEACHERS' REACTIONS TO CURRICULUM-BASED PASSAGE READING TEST DATA

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ABSTRACT
Low face validity is one of the biggest problems with curriculum-based measurement of oral reading fluency. Following administration of a series of passage reading tests to students in their classes, 65 Australian teachers commented on the usefulness of the data. Results indicated that most teachers found the passage reading test data useful, but that some expressed reservations about the face validity of the measures. Other issues identified by teachers included the relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension, time taken to administer passage reading tests, and usefulness for programming, monitoring and reporting to parents.

INTRODUCTION
Curriculum-based measurement is a method of indexing progress in basic skill areas and of tracking progress towards long-term goals. In the area of reading, this can be done using a passage reading test. A passage reading test requires students to read aloud from a passage of text for one minute. The behaviour measured is oral reading fluency and is used as an indicator of general reading performance, including reading comprehension. A substantial body of literature supporting the reliability and validity of curriculum-based measurement of oral reading fluency has been published since the 1980s (Deno, 1985, 1992; Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982; Fuchs & Deno, 1991; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988; Jenkins & Jewell, 1993; Madelaine & Wheldall, 1999).

Several authors have discussed the lack of face validity of curriculum-based measurement of reading (Deno, 1985; Faykus & McCurdy, 1998; Foegen, Espin, Allinder, & Markell, 2001; Fuchs et al., 1988; Parker, Hasbrouk, & Tindal, 1992; Potter & Wamre, 1990). There has not, however, been a great deal of empirical research into this (Allinder & Oats, 1997). In
addition, there is little evidence that curriculum-based measurement is being widely used by teachers and related professionals (Eckert, Shapiro, & Lutz, 1995; Hasbrouk, Woldbeck, Ihnot, & Parker, 1999). The fact that a passage reading test is such a simple test seems to be the reason why teachers find it hard to accept that overall reading ability, including reading comprehension, is reflected in oral reading fluency scores. In addition to this, there are issues involving the acceptability of curriculum-based measurement in general. Despite the very solid empirical base on which curriculum-based measurement of reading rests (for example, Deno, 1985; Deno et al., 1982; Madelaine & Wheldall, 1999), there exists a large gap between research and practice (Foegen et al., 2001).

Many reasons for this gap have been put forward. One of the main reasons is time, that is, using curriculum-based measurement in the classroom takes up too much of the teacher’s time (Eckert et al., 1995; Faykus & McCurdy, 1998; Foegen et al., 2001; Hasbrouk et al., 1999; Marston, Diment, Allen, & Allen, 1992; Pemberton, Dyck, Horton, & Kaff, 2002). This problem has been addressed to some extent by Fuchs and Fuchs in their program of research aimed at using a computerised maze to monitor reading progress (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1992). Faykus and McCurdy (1998) investigated the acceptability of oral reading fluency and maze in three teachers using a rating scale and found no difference in the acceptability ratings, with the exception of the item on time. As would be expected, this was in favour of the maze task. While maze is a good option, it does not have the advantages of the very high validity of oral reading fluency. Oral reading fluency has the most theoretical and empirical support of any form of curriculum-based measurement (Kranzler, Brownell, & Miller, 1998). If time is a significant problem in the classroom, perhaps teachers need to focus on the simplicity of oral reading fluency as measured using passage reading tests, and to be more creative in allocating human resources to administer them. As they are so simple to administer, it is possible for classroom aides, parents or other volunteers to be involved in regular data collection. Hasbrouk et al. (1999) suggest the use of packaged curriculum-based measurement materials to save teacher time.

Time is not the only factor affecting teachers’ use of curriculum-based measurement. Other factors include uncertainty about their validity and resistance to change (Swain & Allinder, 1997). In addition, Foegen et al. (2001) suggest other reasons for the research to practice gap in curriculum-based measurement. One is insufficient mastery of the skills needed to implement curriculum-based measurement, and the other is the lack of face validity (Foegen et al., 2001), particularly as a measure of reading comprehension (Faykus & McCurdy, 1998).

As stated above, research addressing the face validity issue is limited. Foegen et al. (2001) measured pre-service teachers’ beliefs about curriculum-based measurement after watching one of two videotaped presentations
on curriculum-based measurement. One group watched a presentation in which statistical information about the reliability and validity of curriculum-based measurement was given. The other group watched an anecdotal presentation of a teacher who supposedly used curriculum-based measurement in her classroom. Results indicated no differences in pre-service teachers’ beliefs about curriculum-based measurement based on presentation format (statistical versus anecdotal). Overall, the study found that pre-service teachers believed the information in the presentations. Perhaps the most interesting, but not unexpected, finding of this study was that although the pre-service teachers believed that oral reading fluency measured overall reading ability, they did not believe it measured reading comprehension (Foegen et al., 2001).

Hasbrouk et al. (1999) presented a series of case studies that followed one teacher from scepticism regarding the use of curriculum-based measurement to a strong advocacy for its use. As this teacher was forced to use curriculum-based measurement, she identified the following reasons for her change of opinion: first, the immediacy and accuracy of feedback to teachers, students and parents; second, the speed with which lack of progress can be identified with curriculum-based measurement; and third, the ease with which graphed results indicate the effectiveness (or otherwise) of each student’s program (Hasbrouk et al., 1999).

Eckert et al. (1995) argued for the increased use of curriculum-based assessment methods generally (i.e., not curriculum-based measurement specifically) as, according to these authors, school psychologists spend more than half of their time on assessment. In their study of 234 regular and special education teachers, they investigated the acceptability of curriculum-based assessment methods over norm-referenced methods. Using an assessment rating profile, Eckert et al. (1995) found that both groups of teachers rated curriculum-based assessment methods significantly higher than norm-referenced methods. Although it is clear that teachers in the study found curriculum-based assessment methods more effective and appropriate for students with academic problems, it is still not an indication of how teachers feel about curriculum-based measurement per se and, in particular, curriculum-based measurement using oral reading fluency.

In a study aimed at examining how teachers used performance charted data provided by a technical support agency, Pemberton et al. (2002) noted that most teachers found the data useful in some way. This study indicated that although teachers did not use the data extensively to make instructional decisions, they did use it for verifying their own observations about the reading progress of their students and as a tool for reporting to parents.

There is no empirical evidence on how widespread the use of curriculum-based measurement using passage reading test data is in Australia, or how Australian teachers feel
about this method of assessment of reading. The purpose of the present study is to identify some issues that Australian teachers find important with respect to the usefulness of passage reading test data in the classroom.

**METHOD**

**Participants**
The participants in this study came from two separate but similar studies on the relationship of teacher judgement of reading to the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (WARP – detailed below). In the first study, a group of 42 postgraduate university students each asked one regular classroom teacher of years two to six, to divide their classes into three groups. In the second study, 26 postgraduate university students each approached one regular classroom teacher of years one to five, and randomly selected ten students from their class. The teachers were then asked to divide the students into three groups. The groups in both studies were based on teacher judgment of reading ability, and the results of these analyses have been reported elsewhere (Madelaine & Wheldall, 2002a).

Due to similarities in the methodology and results of these studies (Madelaine & Wheldall, 2002a), the teacher participants were combined into one group for the current study. The final sample comprised 65 primary school teachers of years one to six (3 teachers did not provide data for this study). All 65 teachers taught regular classes across the State, Catholic and Independent school sectors in Sydney.

**Instrument**

**Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (Wheldall, 1996)**
The WARP consists of a set of curriculum-based passage reading tests, each comprising an entire story (200 words each). The five (WARP) passages used were chosen as a result of previous research, as they have been found to correlate highly with each other and have similar means and standard deviations (Madelaine & Wheldall, 1998; Wheldall & Madelaine, 2000).

As with passage reading tests in general, the reliability and validity of this specific set of passages has been repeatedly empirically established (Madelaine & Wheldall, 1998; Wheldall & Madelaine, 2000). Very high alternate forms reliability has been found, ranging from 0.94 to 0.98 (Madelaine & Wheldall, 1998, 2002b; Wheldall & Madelaine, 2000), while high validity coefficients have been found with the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability – Revised (Neale, 1988) (0.87 and 0.71 for reading accuracy and reading comprehension respectively) and the Burt Word Reading Test (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1981) (0.85) (Madelaine & Wheldall, 1998). In addition, a strong relationship between the WARP and the New South Wales Basic Skills Test (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2000) was found, particularly at the Year 3 level, with correlations ranging from 0.78 to 0.85 for Year 3 and 0.54 to 0.66 for Year 5 (Madelaine & Wheldall, 2002c).
Tentative grade-based norms have been reported for the WARP in two papers (Madelaine & Wheldall, 2002b, 2002c), and the WARP has also been shown to be sensitive to changes in reading performance as a result of an intensive literacy intervention (Wheldall & Beaman, 2000).

**Procedures**

As stated above, this data was collected as part of two studies examining the relationship between teacher judgement of reading performance, and a curriculum-based passage reading test (WARP). In the first study, teachers were asked to divide their whole classes into three groups based on teacher judgement of overall reading ability: the top 25%, the middle 50% and the bottom 25%. Teachers in study two were required to divide a randomly selected group of 10 students into three groups: the top three, the middle four and the bottom three.

Following administration of the WARP, the university students compared the teacher’s categorisation with the WARP categorisation and presented the teachers with the data. The teachers were then asked to comment (in writing) on the usefulness of the data. They received no prompts as to what to comment on, and were given a proforma with approximately one half of an A4 page in which to make their comment. The teachers were not asked any specific questions about the usefulness of the data, and they were not given any supporting information (for example, norms).

Comments were then categorised as being in one of three groups:

1. **Useful.** In these comments, the teachers said that they found the data useful and/or helpful, and/or gave reasons why it was useful. For example, some teachers said the data reinforced their ability as a teacher. Teachers frequently commented on the data being helpful for teaching, reporting or forming instructional groups. Some teachers said the data gave them good information.

2. **Neutral.** Here, the teachers made no comment on the usefulness of the data. Teachers in this group tended to comment on the performance of individual students without indicating whether they found the data useful in any way.

3. **Not Useful.** These teachers specifically said they did not find the data useful or helpful and/or they gave reasons why it was not useful. Some of these teachers stated that they did not consider oral reading fluency to be a good indicator of general reading ability and/or reading comprehension. In addition, some teachers suggested how the data could be more useful without stating that they found it useful.

**Reliability**

A measure of interrater agreement for categorisation of each comment as either useful, neutral or not useful was calculated. The comments were classified by the first author and also by a trained and experienced research assistant. Agreement was calculated using the formula:
Agreement between the two sets of classifications was high at 89%.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, 77% of teachers said that they found the data provided by the WARP useful. Only 6% said that they did not find it useful. The remaining 17% made neutral comments regarding the usefulness of the data. This finding is in agreement with Pemberton et al. (2002) who reported that most teachers who received data of this kind found it useful.

The 65 comments in this study were examined individually to determine any recurring themes or issues, which might be important for Australian teachers regarding the usefulness of passage reading test data. Several issues arose from this exercise.

**Comments on the link between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension**

Twenty five percent of the entire sample made comments relating to the link between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. Most of these (88%) expressed disbelief in the relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. These teachers comprised 22% of the total sample. Examples of comments expressing this follow:

“…I find it difficult to accept that such a simple test is a good measure of reading comprehension.”

“...The data is useful in that it gives some idea of the fluency of their reading but does not really indicate comprehension.”

“One has to remember that fluency is not the key element of the reading process. Reading for meaning is!!!”

These comments reflect the poor face validity oral reading fluency is said to possess, particularly with respect to reading comprehension. A similar result was found by Foegen et al. (2001) in their study examining pre-service teachers’ beliefs about curriculum-based measurement. In that study, the participants believed that oral reading fluency was a measure of overall reading proficiency, but they did not believe that it also measured reading comprehension. Two teachers made comments indicating that they believed there is a link between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension and, in one case, also indicated that they understood this relationship:

“The data correlates fairly closely to the students experiencing difficulty in comprehension tasks. These children are not fluent, therefore losing the main idea of the story as they concentrate on decoding words.”

“Always important to remember the link between oral reading and the individual’s understanding of what is being read.”

**Passage reading test data for forming instructional groups**

Nine teachers (14%) commented on the
usefulness of passage reading test data for forming or modifying instructional groups. The following are some examples of these comments:

“I may decide to readjust my reading groups in light of this information.”

“It has made me consider changing the reading groups.”

“Assists in the formation of reading groups.”

According to Wesson (1992), studies using curriculum-based measurement data to form instructional groups have reported successful group placement in about 90% of cases.

Promoting/instructional decision-making
The issue most frequently elicited was the usefulness of passage reading test data for programming or instructional decision-making. Eighteen teachers (28%) commented upon this. As can be seen from the examples below, most comments were directed towards providing programs for low-progress readers:

“I can now seriously develop an individual reading program for the children in the bottom 25%.”

“I found the data very useful and changed some parts of the reading program to accommodate those children with specific needs.”

“The feedback from the data gave me insight into what personalised instruction would be useful in each student’s case.”

“…will be very useful to:
* identify specific reading weaknesses
* develop a program for remediation”

Requesting more information
In their comments on the usefulness of passage reading test data, some teachers identified a need for more information. In most cases, comments related to a request for norms or standards against which they could compare the oral reading fluency of students in their class. Six teachers (9%) commented in this way, as shown in the examples below:

“The data would be more useful if we had a standard to compare with (which is in the pipeline I believe).”

“Can we compare our results with other schools? That might be useful to do.”

“An average across the state would be helpful for the upper primary as this would help me gauge the level of my children with those in the state.”

Passage reading test data for monitoring reading progress
Six teachers (9%) made comments on the usefulness of passage reading test data for monitoring reading progress:

“It will be useful…to redo the test at some later stage to see if there are improvements.”
“This data would perhaps be more useful if administered twice a year in say April and December. That would enable us to use the data as a comparison, showing student improvement.”

“Would have to do the test at least once per term to monitor student progress.”

“Very useful as the test procedure could be used on a regular basis to monitor growth/improvement, again due to quick procedure and accuracy.”

**Passage reading test data for reporting student progress**

Some teachers (8%) commented on how useful passage reading test results could be for reporting to parents:

“I will use the data to help me compile the end of year results for each child.”

“The testing will be useful in upcoming reports.”

“The test will be a useful tool for reporting to parents…”

**Concerns regarding teacher time**

Comments relating to concerns about the amount of time taken to administer these tests were made by approximately 8% of teachers in the sample, as reflected in the examples below:

“The testing was very time consuming – possibly unrealistic for a class teacher to spend.”

“In the reality of a teaching situation, collecting the data would be a lengthy process. Attempting to fit in yet another assessment process would cause the children to have even less teaching and learning time.”

“The assessment was very thorough – something I would be unable to do due to lack of time and the responsibility of the whole class.”

The comments regarding time reflect the findings of others in the area of acceptability or face validity of curriculum-based measurement of reading (Eckert et al., 1995; Hasbrouk et al., 1999; Pemberton et al., 2002).

**CONCLUSIONS**

These data can only be used as an initial indication of some of the possible issues regarding the face validity of curriculum-based measurement in Australia. The teachers in this sample found passage reading test data useful overall. They expressed concern as to the time it would take to administer passage reading tests in a regular class, and whether oral reading fluency was a good measure of overall reading ability, especially reading comprehension. Some of the ways in which they found the data useful were for programming or making instructional decisions, forming instructional groups, monitoring the reading progress of their students, particularly those experiencing difficulty in reading, and for reporting to parents.
One limitation is the data relating to the teachers’ views of curriculum-based measurement as an indicator of reading comprehension. In this study, the teachers were not specifically asked about this, they were simply asked to comment on the usefulness of the data. Any comments relating to reading comprehension in particular, reflect the fact that teachers chose to comment on reading comprehension. In addition, applying the results of this study to curriculum-based measurement in general, would be a little premature. The teachers were not exposed to curriculum-based measurement as a measure of reading progress, they were only exposed to the results of one testing session aimed at looking at the relationship between teacher judgment of reading and a curriculum-based measure of reading.

Although this study shows that Australian teachers found passage reading test data useful, this does not mean that they would use this system in their classroom, or that they would do so effectively. Green (2001) found that an adapted form of curriculum-based measurement may be feasible for regular classroom teachers, that it may fill an assessment gap and that the information gained could be used in student portfolios. More research into the acceptability of curriculum-based measurement is needed. This study provides a useful starting point for further research on the face validity of curriculum-based measurement of reading in Australia. In times of increasing accountability in education, curriculum-based measurement presents an excellent assessment alternative for teachers in Australia.

**REFERENCES**


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO CONTROVERSIAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Information promoting controversial and unsupported interventions and therapies for students with special education needs seems to abound on the Internet. However, there are many sites that appear to offer a more balanced, evidence-based assessment of the efficacy of interventions and treatments. This article provides a guide to such sites in regard to a number of controversial treatments in order to assist teachers and families make informed decisions about the practices they adopt.

Any teacher in search of information about teaching students with special education needs who visits the Internet will immediately be confronted with a plethora of programs and therapies that are claimed to be effective. Similarly, families of these students, who are searching for help with the education and treatment of their child, are likely to locate the same range of programs and therapies. Families may then approach teachers and schools and request that particular strategies be used with their child. How do teachers and families make informed decisions about which practices to pursue and which to ignore? The use of ineffective therapies may not only cause harm, but may mean that children do not receive interventions that are known to be effective. This article will review some of the controversial practices advocated on Internet sites (and elsewhere), and provide Internet sites that publish more sober advice on these practices.

Several authors (Herbert, Sharp, & Gaudino, 2002; McWilliam, 1999; Park, 2003; Scheuermann & Evans, 1997; Simpson, 1995; Worrall, 1990), concerned with the uptake and use of interventions and therapies that may be regarded as frauds or fads, have developed a set of indicators that may serve as warning signs that a practice has not been shown to be effective:

- The practice is supported by anecdotes and testimonies, not by the results of scientific studies reported in refereed journals.
- The practice is reported directly to the mass media and does not appear in professional, refereed journals.
- The treatment recommended does not have a logical connection to the presumed cause of the difficulty.
• The practice is not supported by established, related bodies of knowledge.

• Proponents claim they are conspired against by the “establishment”.

• Proponents make exaggerated claims about effectiveness and may claim to cure a condition.

• Proponents may have a financial stake in the treatment.

• Those completing the assessment to determine if the treatment is suitable, are the same people who will gain financially by selling the treatment.

• Practice can only be implemented by specially trained people.

• May require the interventionist to have “faith” in the treatment.

• Proponents claim the practice cannot be properly evaluated using scientific methods.

• Marketing is based on strong emotional appeals.

• The practice should be used exclusively.

• The treatment is very intense.

• Legal action has been taken over the treatment.

There are several useful Internet sites that guide you through a set of questions, which should reveal if any of these warning signs apply to the therapy in question. These include the Autism Association of South Australia (2003) and Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital (2003).

Writers who have used these criteria have identified a number of educational and therapeutic practices as controversial and unsupported by scientific research. The following list is drawn from a number of refereed publications: conductive education, facilitated communication, sensory integration, Doman-Delacato patterning, auditory integration therapies, Irlen lenses and coloured overlays, and multisensory environments (MSEs) or snoezelen approaches (Arendt, MacLean, & Baumeister 1988; Dawson & Watling, 2000; Herbart et al., 2002; Hogg, Cavet, Lambe, & Smeddle, 2001; Jacobson, Mulick, & Schwartz, 1995; McWilliam, 1999; New York State Health Department, 1999; Shaw, 2002; Simpson, 1995; Stephenson, 2002; Worrall, 2001). This knowledge base contained in the research literature is, however, largely inaccessible to families and practitioners who may have neither the skills nor the time and interest to search, read and understand this literature. Fortunately however, just as the Internet has brought increased access to information promoting controversial and unproved practices, it has also provided access to more balanced evaluations of these practices. The next section of this paper will briefly review some controversial therapies and include sources such as position papers, policies and fact sheets from professional organisations, special interest organisations and individuals that are readily available on the Internet. The URLs are provided in the reference list.

**Auditory Integration Therapies (AIT)**

This label covers strategies such as the Berard method, Samonas Sound Therapy, and the Tomatis method. The American Academy of Paediatrics Committee on Children with Disabilities (1998, Recommendations, para. 12) reviewed auditory integration training as a
therapy for children with autism and concluded that although AIT “may help some children with autism, as yet there are no good controlled studies to support its use.” More recently, The American Speech-Language Hearing Association (2004) produced both a technical report and a position paper which found that Auditory Integration training is “experimental in nature and has not yet met scientific standards as a mainstream treatment” (p.1). The American Academy of Audiology (n.d.) position statement on Auditory Integration Training states that the technique should be regarded as “purely investigational” because of the lack of published research showing its effectiveness, and that consumers should understand this before they begin treatment. The Educational Audiology Association (n.d.) supports the position taken by the American Academy of Audiology and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association that “Auditory Integration Therapy has not been proven to be a viable treatment for any disability”.

**Vision therapies**

These include the use of eye exercises, filters, and coloured lenses which purport to improve a child’s reading. The American Academy of Paediatrics, the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus and the American Academy of Ophthalmology (1998) produced a joint policy statement on these approaches in relation to students with learning disabilities, especially those who have difficulty learning to read. The policy states, “Visual problems are rarely responsible for learning difficulties. No scientific evidence exists for the efficacy of eye exercises (“vision therapy”), or the use of special tinted lenses in the remediation of these complex paediatric neurologic conditions” (Policy, para. 2). They note that studies of these practices, which claim improvements, have usually included educational remedial techniques, and these most likely explain reported benefits. The use of tinted lenses for reading difficulties purportedly caused by Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome named by Irlen (American Optometric Association, 2003) has been assessed by the American Optometric Association (2003) who found that “there is currently no scientific research to support the ‘scotopic sensitivity’ syndrome hypothesis”, and that the use of coloured lenses requires further investigation.

**Sensory Integration Therapy**

Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT) was developed by Jean Ayres in the 60s and 70s, with the aim of improving the way “the brain processes and organises sensations” (Ayres, 1979 cited in Arendt et al., 1988, p.402.). The therapy involves providing sensory stimulation in various ways, such as by providing deep pressure sensations, vestibular stimulation, having students wear weighted vests, and/or use scooter boards (Arendt et al., 1988; Shaw, 2002). Arendt et al. (1988) reviewed its use with people with intellectual disability and concluded “until the therapeutic effectiveness of sensory integration therapy with mentally retarded persons is demonstrated, there exists no convincing empirical or theoretical support
Refereed paper: Controversial practices

for the continued use of this therapy with that population outside of a research context” (p. 409). Hoehn and Baumeister (1994) critiqued the theory and practice of SIT with children with learning disabilities and supported the findings of Arendt et al. (1988), concluding (p.348) that “the current fund of research findings may well be sufficient to declare SI therapy not only merely an unproven, but a demonstrably ineffective, primary or adjunctive remedial treatment for learning disabilities and other disorders.” More recent reviews continue to support this conclusion. Pollock (2000) concluded that its use is contentious, and Shaw (2002) concluded that there is no evidence of its effectiveness with students with autism, learning difficulties or other developmental disabilities. In a response to Shaw’s critique, Miller (2003), although supporting sensory integration therapy within a broader framework of occupational therapy, conceded that the approach remains unproven from a scientific perspective.

**Doman-Delacato Patterning Treatment**
This technique involves a demanding regimen of daily exercises (often carried out with a team of volunteers) that is claimed to improve neurological organisation. The Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential who offer the program state because of the intensive nature of the program “there is no time for the child to engage in other programs or school while enrolled in the Intensive Treatment Program” (Brain Injury and Early Childhood Education Resources: IAHP, n.d., Content, para. 8). Cummins (1988) offers a review and critique of this treatment. More recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Children with Disabilities (1999) has issued a position paper that concluded that the efficacy is unproven and the demands on families may be harmful. This position paper was endorsed by the National Down Syndrome Congress (n.d.).

**Facilitated Communication (FC)**
FC is a method whereby a person is assisted to type or to use a communication device by a facilitator who may provide full support to the hand, wrist or arm, or who may provide emotional support. It has been shown that for the vast majority of users with autism or intellectual disability, the content of the communication comes from the facilitator (Jacobson et al., 1995). The American Speech-Hearing Association (1994) has produced a lengthy and thorough review that concluded that “neither the reliability nor the validity of techniques associated with facilitated communication have been demonstrated satisfactorily at this time” (p. 127). This position is supported by the American Psychological Association (1994) and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1997).

**Conductive Education (CE)**
CE aims to teach children with cerebral palsy or other movement disorders to achieve personal goals, increase their independence and exercise choice (Ludwig, Leggett, & Harstall, 2000). Ludwig et al. (2000) carried out a comprehensive review and concluded that the effectiveness of CE is not established for children with cerebral
palsy. They note that there are many local adaptations of conductive education, which have moved away from the full-time, intensive residential approach originally developed in Hungary, and that these adapted approaches also need rigorous evaluation. United Cerebral Palsy National (1995, 1997), in two fact sheets, similarly call for more research to demonstrate the superior efficacy of conductive education over more traditional approaches.

**Multisensory Environments (MSEs) or Snoezelen**

These approaches were originally designed as a leisure option for people with severe and multiple disabilities. Current proponents have gone beyond their use as a potentially enjoyable leisure option, and make a wide range of claims for the benefits of sensory stimulation as delivered by these environments (Stephenson, 2002). Unfortunately, review articles, or materials based on them, which suggest these claims are unfounded, have yet to reach Internet sites. However, two review articles (Hogg et al., 2001 and Stephenson, 2002) which, between them, located only five studies on children with intellectual disabilities and none on children with autism, suggest that the use of MSEs to achieve educational or therapeutic goals with school aged children is currently without a firm research base.

With the increasing demand for evidence based practices in medicine and in the therapies allied with special education, practitioners have a responsibility to make careful decisions about the interventions they use or endorse (Bennett & Bennett, 2000). The URLs provided above are easily accessible and provide information that assists balanced decision making. In addition to these sites, there are other sites that provide more general advice or lead into more specific sites. A very useful bibliography of controversial practices that includes both published and Internet sources is available from Lakehead University (n.d.). A more general site, which also contains user-friendly information, along with references to the professional literature, is Stephen Barrett’s Quackwatch site that is directed at quackery in general, but includes information of relevance to therapists and educators. The National Council Against Health Fraud has a newsletter, which is available online and which provides brief articles on relevant topics such as quackery in autism treatments (2001).

It is fair to acknowledge, of course, that any intervention starts as an unsubstantiated treatment before it is researched and its efficacy tested. It is also true that even a strategy with a firm research base may not work for all students in all contexts. This is one of the reasons why accepted best practice in special education involves the setting of clear outcomes and careful monitoring of student responses to interventions (Westling & Fox, 2000). The advice provided by Pollock (2000) in relation to sensory integration provides sensible guidelines for those wishing to trial unsupported therapies. She suggests that “clear, measurable, functional outcomes should be established”, and then the treatment should be assessed against those outcomes after an eight to ten week trial. Similar guidance is provided by the American Speech-Language Association.
In relation to facilitated communication, and they also suggest informed consent should be obtained before implementing unsupported practices.

Teachers have a responsibility to select interventions that are likely to be effective, and to monitor the impact of the interventions they do select to ensure that their students are learning. This is especially so for children with special education needs who, because they have difficulty learning, have less time to be wasted on poor interventions. Teachers can make better decisions if they are fully informed about the nature of the interventions they choose. They can also help families make fully informed decisions if they are aware of easily accessible information based on sound research. This article has attempted to provide a brief overview of more common controversial therapies, and inform readers about accessible Internet sites that counteract the claims made by promotional Internet sites.

REFERENCES


UNIVERSITY AND SCHOOL CONNECTIONS: ENHANCING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF PRIMARY AGED CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGING NEEDS AND THE SKILLS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

This paper details a project undertaken by staff at Charles Sturt University (Bathurst), that involved two State Public Schools, in the central west of New South Wales. The project ran for more than two years. It was designed to enhance literacy development of primary aged children, who were considered to be at risk in regards to their literacy and literacy development. In addition, it aimed to develop skills and competencies in the university students majoring in special education, specifically in relation to developing their ability to plan and implement a literacy program for children with challenging needs.

A key issue in establishing such a program was collaboration between the schools and the university, as well as the explicit links between the theory and practice in a non-practicum subject.

Overall, the results indicate that such an exercise, although time-consuming to set up, put into place and monitor, is a worthwhile and valuable experience for university students. It has also enhanced connections between the university and local schools.

The program promoted collaboration between university students, with an overall goal of developing a positive environment for reading, spelling and writing for the children involved in the program.

A similar project is now being undertaken at Griffith University in Brisbane, with special education students undertaking a literacy program with school-aged secondary children with special needs.

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INTRODUCTION
Australian universities have undergone major changes in funding over the last 10 years that have impacted upon the capacity for academic staff to support university students in the same manner that may have occurred in the past. The capacity to be able to put into practice the theory of specific subjects is limited by a number of factors, not the least being funding. Developing university links with schools in a practical manner is not a new phenomenon. There is evidence from the United States to support these links and the positive benefits of linkages between schools and universities, particularly in regard to literacy programs (Blanton, Griffin, Winn, & Pugach, 1997). Establishing these linkages requires a change in attitude from within the university, as well as from schools. Griffin and Pugach (1997) argued that this change requires resources in addition to supportive leadership. More importantly, collaborative programs require a core group committed to developing and implementing such an approach. The core group would involve all key players and require flexibility in approaches and developing linkages (Griffin & Pugach, 1997). For the Charles Sturt University (CSU) project, the core group consisted of the authors and key personnel in a local school. The key personnel included the principal, deputy principal, special education coordinator and specific classroom teachers.

As in the United States, Australian state education departments and/or teacher registration boards have major input into deciding course requirements for certification or registration of teachers. Part of the Ramsey Report (2000) highlighted the limited number of in-school days that teacher education students receive in comparison with other professions. Any program that provides education students with a greater opportunity to work with children under supervision, particularly those with special needs, should enhance the quality of graduates.

To set up a literacy program where university students studying special education can work with children who have literacy problems, outside of a practicum setting, requires a great deal of collaboration and consultation with key personnel in schools. The importance of such collaboration cannot be overstated, and has been highlighted by other researchers who have undertaken large-scale projects (Blanton et al., 1997).

Unlike the partnerships between schools and university detailed by Mariage and Garmon (2003), the CSU project was not set up to significantly improve the school children’s literacy levels in comparison with their peers. It was designed to improve their attitude to reading and writing and, as a by-product, improve literacy levels. It also allowed special education university students to develop their skills and abilities in teaching reading, writing and listening to a child with specific challenges.

With any intervention program, such as the CSU project, there are a number of factors that are critical to success. Gersten and Dimino
Refereed paper: University and school connections

(2001), cited in Mariage and Garmon (2003, p. 215), identified six critical factors including intervention to meet a reality principle, which basically means it must be able to be “translated into manageable and comprehensible teaching strategies and procedures. Strategies and procedures must provide a natural fit and be feasible within the details of day-to-day classroom instruction” (p. 215). Other factors include the interventions used and how they differ from previous strategies and, importantly, teachers being part of the collegial network. Explicit linkage of changes in teaching to student learning, teacher tasks being realistic to stimulate motivation and enthusiasm, and providing appropriate feedback to teachers were also important considerations. The CSU program attempted to incorporate all these features whilst recognising there would be limitations due to resource considerations.

INTERVENTION

Initiating the process

The driving force behind establishing an on-campus university school literacy program was the need to have university students studying special education work with children outside of a formal practicum setting. The importance of the practicum in education is acknowledged, and its role has been highlighted in the review of education in New South Wales (Ramsey, 2000). Unfortunately, the teaching practicum typically precludes special education students working one-to-one with a specific child. To overcome this limitation, the CSU project linked into the subjects ESS406 Consultation and Collaboration in Special Education and ESS407 Understanding Literacy Problems. The literacy program provides a hands-on experience for special education students, outside of a practicum, and allows students to work with children to trial, and put into practice, a range of strategies and methods that would not be possible in a practicum setting. The actual location of the program was on-campus, as well as in a school setting. The value of this program to the final year special education students is reflected in their own reflections and comments, discussed a little later. Typical of the comments was the ability to undertake practices that could not occur whilst engaged in a practicum. These reflections and comments are not unique, and have been highlighted by other researchers in the field (Crump, 1992; Northfield & Gunstone, 1997; Watson, 1995).

The collaborative process

Initiating the process of collaboration required a great deal of time on behalf of the authors and key personnel in the schools. It required a development of trust and respect. The time and effort required to set up such a project are considered to be major obstacles to collaboration, and researchers have highlighted these factors for many years (Johnson, Pugach, & Hammittee, 1988; Speece & Mandell, 1980). As it was a university-initiated project, initial meetings were conducted on the school site at a time that was convenient to the school staff. Two of the major issues to be resolved were the assurance that if children were involved in the program it would have minimal impact on
the workload of classroom teachers, and that it would not have a negative impact on the child’s school activities.

Discussions at the school between the authors and school management worked towards a positive outcome for the children enrolled at the school who required special education support by recognising that there could be limitations of a university based program. These limitations included the level of effective communication between the university students and the teachers, as well as linking activities at school with what occurred in the university program and vice versa. Furthermore, there was the acknowledgement that there needed to be a development of respect and trust, as well as confidence in the authors to undertake and support the children in such a program. These issues are considered as fundamental to any collaborative process (Cramer, 1998).

After several meetings between one of the authors and the school principal, the school supported the involvement of its children in the program. Further negotiations centred on the frequency and duration of the contact. The success of dealing with these issues in the main was a result of what several researchers claim is the intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics of the key participants (Elliot & Sheridan, 1992; Polsgrove & McNeil, 1989).

In this instance, the school principal and key staff of the school and the university lecturer all acknowledged that it would be a trial. As such, there would be some logistical limitations, but these were outweighed by the benefits to the children and the university students, who could potentially be working in the same school as qualified special education teachers within 12 months.

The initial literacy program timetable was set at two, two-hour sessions a week. Although the school initially requested three sessions a week, this was not possible. Children would be transported to and from the school by a university bus, with the cost covered by the local District Education office. The time of day for the program was negotiated as 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., which initially had many teachers concerned about the children’s ability to stay on-task. It meant that children would be out of class at 2:30 p.m., in effect missing the final 20 minutes of the school day, and would require their parents to pick them up from school after 5:00 p.m.

What was determined in the collaborative process prior to the project commencing was the administrative support from the school, the credibility of the university lecturers, the realisation of the time constraints, and the awareness by all participants that it would be a project and, as such, it would have limitations and strengths. Parents were involved, and their commitment to supporting their children was a condition for their child’s involvement in the program. Each child was asked to make a commitment to the program, and they were aware that they could be excluded from the program for inappropriate behaviour, non-compliant behaviour or repeated absenteeism.
All parties involved evaluated the program at the end of the term.

In developing a collaborative project the school specifically asked what type of child was required for the program and then selected the children with an equal mix between boys and girls from Year 4 to Year 6. These children were considered to be “challenging”, with very low literacy levels commensurate with their peers. They also had a range of other issues including high absenteeism, behaviour problems, off-task and non-compliant behaviour in class.

**Goals of the program**
The goals of the program were negotiated between the school and the university lecturers. For the children involved in the program, these goals were to motivate them to believe in themselves, develop a positive attitude towards reading and writing, improve on-task time and be consistent with the expectations of the program.

For the university students involved in the program, it was about allowing the students to safely put into practice their reading and writing program, knowing that there would not be a right approach, and that “failure” was considered part of the program. “Failure” in this sense was when a session did not go according to plan and the child was off-task or non-compliant. During these times a university student may have needed the intervention of the university lecturers to deal with a situation. At all times it was considered to be a supportive environment for the students. The university lecturers were present for all sessions, which were held on campus in a variety of locations. The university lecturers would move from student to student observing and participating where appropriate.

The literacy program, unlike a teaching practicum, was held on-campus and university lecturers supported them at all times. The capacity for university lecturers to regularly visit teacher education students whilst on a practicum is problematic due in part to limited resources. Although the CSU project was not a practicum, there were expectations that the teacher education students would link the theory to practice, collaborate with a peer and effectively communicate what they had undertaken back to the school and home.

Initially started in 2000, this program is ongoing, although the mode of delivery has been revised due to structural and financial limitations. The program has been considered to be of such positive significance for education students that even with such constraints it is still operationalised as part of core special education courses.

**The program**
There were 40 CSU special education students who took part in the initial literacy program as tutors. These students were paired by choice and were required to work two alternate afternoons in the week with a child from a local school. In 2000 and 2001, there were 20 children who came from the same school and worked with
a paired university tutor. The literacy program operated twice weekly. This was increased to thrice weekly in 2002, based on the reflected comments and assessment of the university special education students and school staff from previous years.

Children, upon arriving at the university, went to the common room where afternoon tea was provided. This was in the form of either a cup of soup, instant noodles, tea, coffee, cordial, Milo and milk. Snacks were provided on an irregular basis. The children made their own drinks and then took their drink and or snack with them and their university tutor and commenced work. Eating and drinking was not discouraged whilst the children engaged in working with their university tutor. A variety of locations were set up that had formal structure, such as tables and chairs and workstations with a computer, as well as informal structure, such as beanbags and lounges.

Each child had two university students as tutors. Only one university student would be present for a session. As part of the academic program, the university students had to collaborate with each other about what could occur, as well as what had occurred with their child, and provide this information as feedback to the school and the parents via a communication book.

As the university calendar is not linked directly with school dates, it was necessary in 2000 to start the literacy program one week after the university students began classes. In 2001, the correspondence of dates became even more problematic, and students continued the program a week into their exam period.

The twice-weekly involvement by children from the local primary school in 2002 was a compromise between what the school wanted and what the university could offer. The time of day the program was offered was also a compromise between school-based activities children were undertaking and the availability of university students within a range of other subject commitments. The major text used in this subject was, and continues to be, *Assessing and Correcting Reading and Writing Difficulties* by Thomas Gunning (2002).

The university structure had, and continues to have, an impact on the literacy program. As Crump states (1992, p. 313) most educators are “conscious of the gap between educational theory and practice.” Ideally, teacher education programs should model the teaching and learning approaches being advocated (Northfield & Gunstone, 1997, p. 49). This ideal situation does not take into account the many constraints placed on how material may be presented to students at the tertiary level and how many hours can be realistically allocated to an individual university subject. There are limited hours in a day, and it is not possible to present the many approaches to curriculum and teaching to university students given the constraints of a 13 week semester that may be further shortened by a four week practicum. However, it was considered important by the
authors that pre-service teachers be given the opportunity to practice the learning and teaching approaches they were presented within subjects that assess students’ skills and learning.

A number of researchers have noted that cooperative learning is an approach introduced in teacher education programs, but rarely modelled in university classrooms (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Van Voorhis, 1991 cited in Watson, 1995, p. 209). Another consideration is that teacher education programs could be more useful and intellectually demanding if they closely integrated methods, courses and actual classroom teaching (Goodlad, 1990, 1991; Holmes Group, 1990; Meade, 1991, cited in McDermott, Gormley, Rothenberg, & Hammer 1995, p. 84). One way to model these objectives in a university situation is to experience collaboration in order to feel comfortable in using this approach. This collaboration with a peer is part of the initial stages of developing skills and competencies as an undergraduate to take into the work environment. As Loughran (1997, p. 6) states, “If student-teachers are to understand a particular teaching strategy, they need to experience it as learners and as teachers, not just hear about it.” In the literacy program undertaken at CSU, the idea of “learning by doing” is strongly emphasised. “At pre-service level it is important to introduce teaching as a collaborative activity.” (Northfield & Gunstone, 1997, p. 51). CSU undergraduate special education students have Consultation and Collaboration as a core subject, which actively promotes the need for consultation and collaboration in the student’s professional life. Consistent with Loughran (1997), university students enrolled in special education programs at Charles Sturt University and Griffith University complete an integrated method and practice of a subject that specifically develops the university student’s collaborative and consultative skills.

Throughout the years of this literacy program, the authors have tried to maintain many of the initial features. The key element of the CSU special education degree is the requirement for all university students to work with a child with special needs in a practical program that has a language and literacy focus. At CSU and Griffith University, this practical component is not attached to the formal teaching practicum, which has its own set of competencies and is assessed, in part, by the teacher mentor at a school site. Assessment of the university students involved in the literacy program is conducted by the lecturers who coordinate the special education subject.

The authors had to consider the presentation of lectures and tutorials for these subjects, believing that there should be modelling of what was being presented. Although not an easy task, as highlighted by Konzal (2000), it is a challenge embraced by both authors and constantly reviewed and evaluated. University students initially found the task of taking notes difficult as issues were discussed and presented as a summary of points.

The size of the university student cohort added to the challenge. Smaller groups of students would
make the program more manageable, although identifying the children who could benefit the most from being involved in such a program might compromise the capacity of schools to be involved. This is especially pertinent when there are children who need specific help, but aren’t able to be accepted due to a small number of places.

**Evaluation**

Staff from the school and District Office observed several on-campus sessions when the university students were working with the school children. Perhaps the most significant comment related to the quiet nature of the work, and the fact that the children were on-task at 4:20 p.m. in the afternoon.

Specifically, there were minimal absentee days by the school children, and no instances of inappropriate behaviour that would lead to the children being removed from the program. The protocols for pick-up and drop-off were consistently observed by the children and reinforced by the university lecturers or their university students when driving the bus. The university lecturer undertook modelling of these protocols with a university student present. As the program progressed, a university student would pick-up and drop off the children without the lecturer being present. These protocols included lining up outside the bus or the school office, reasonable behaviour on the bus and no abusive language to each other or to their university tutors. The children were reminded every week about the fact that their continuing presence in the program was based on their willingness to follow instructions and be cooperative.

The following quotes represent the evaluation undertaken by the school staff, school principal and children, as well as by the university students involved in the program.

**Staff member A (Principal)**

_The attitudinal change in the children re interest in reading is a significant benefit._

**Staff member B**

_All four boys have gained confidence from the program. The children tell the other children about the work they were doing at the university and how it was helping their reading. If the project were offered again I would not hesitate in sending students who meet the criteria._

**Staff member C**

_Two students from 5C attended and both had very positive experiences._

_Boy A: I have noticed an improvement in his attitude to work. He will now attempt difficult work and ask for assistance._

_Boy B: He finds reading very difficult. He has had a lot of support and worked on individual programs with little success. He had a positive attitude towards the program._

**Staff member D**

_CSU program picked up the same
philosophy with added benefit of 1:1. Wayne demonstrated a greater enjoyment of school during CSU program. His enthusiasm flowed into the classroom. He often volunteered to read to the class and if he did not know a word he would shriek, “Don’t tell me! Don’t tell me!” and attempt to sound the word.

Child’s comments: Felt confident right from when I first heard about it.

I had two support teachers – they were really nice.

Back at school I felt better that I could read longer words. I hadn’t sounded out words for a while and they reminded me of how to do it. Weeks later I could still sound out words.

A sample of 14 university student comments was chosen from a total of 40, representing 35% of the total cohort. These comments are reflective of the general nature of comments made by the cohort.

Student A

This week learning how to do a running record and the shortcuts we can take was fantastic. This subject all seems to keep its end goal in mind. I’m going to keep practicing doing this so I can get better and faster, so that when we have our prac that I will be proficient. It was great to have to use these conventions we were given as someone read. It was a lot of fun as well.

Student B

I found this week’s tutorial was really valuable. Learning to do running records was not only fun but something which I will be able to take away with me when I become a teacher as well as during my practical experiences. Due to the fact that I am a kinaesthetic learner I find being involved and actually putting what you learn into practice really helps to further my understanding of what I am learning. If we were just told of the correct procedures to take, I would not have taken away what I did from the lesson as much as I did by actually doing a number of running records.

Student C

We looked at phonological processing this week...It was interesting looking at the theory behind things that we do in the classroom every week and things that our teachers did with us like blending where to show the sounds in a word such as 'mat' we do something like this mmmmmmmmm aaaaaaaatrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrttttttttt. It really makes no sense, but it works somehow!

Student D

Working collaboratively comes easy to me because I try to be supportive of others ideas, as well as the fact I am a person who would much rather work as a team than individually. I guess someone who feels the opposite to this would find it hard to use collaborative practices when working in a team.
Student E

Another factor contributing to the effectiveness of collaboration is talking at the level of the person you are talking to. When talking to a student or parent it is very important to remember that using educational jargon may intimidate them. I know from many experiences at university I find that I feel very comfortable and am able to respond to a teacher who talks to you on your level.

Student F

By having a class discussion on the reading assigned to this week, by speaking aloud, I was able to organise my thoughts. By listening I was able to compare my opinions with those of my peers. It was good to hear other people’s interpretation of the information, I found myself making more inferences from the text after the class discussion.

Student G

X (lecturer) provided us with a valuable practical experience in the tutorial for this week by making us sit the ‘South Australian Spelling Test.’ We were reminded of the ‘atmosphere’ of a classroom in a test situation, and all the factors that come into play, for example, nerves and the feeling that you can’t spell any of the words even though you have done so thousands of times in the past. This is an important consideration when designing assessment tasks in the classroom, as it highlights the reason behind teachers not only relying on one assessment device.

Student H

The collaborative activity that we carried out in tutorial, for which we were to create a structure made of straws and rubber bands to hold a glass of water, was an excellent example to convey the benefits of collaboration. By focusing purely on the collaborative aspect of this project, we were able to see how having more than one input into the process, can lead to greater success.

Student I

In relation to the bridge building activity we collaborated our ideas to come up with a way that was the most effective to hold the cup of water up off the table. In our particular group we all came up with ways that were possibilities and then brought the main ideas together to come up with one way that should be able to hold the cup. We all helped to actually construct the bridge and at times suggested better ways of somehow connecting the straws together and how to use the elastic bands to our best advantage. Our ideas combined were successful in holding the cup of water up off the table.

Student J

My group was particularly fortunate to have three people to work on this activity, as most groups were formed in
pairs. Our end result was a sure success because the most important element of our collaboration was carried out with adequate thought and cooperation – the process. Without due process, the desired end result or goal of the activity is pointless.

Student K

I like working collaboratively with my peers because I am very much a sharing learner – other people’s views/comments help me to consolidate my own views and also in a collaborative environment I feel more comfortable expressing my ideas/views because I know that others will appreciate – not necessarily agree with – my contribution. I also liked the hands on component of this activity because this is another way I find I can learn best through.

Student L

It was promptly made evident to me, how this process of collaboration could be transferred to a professional school setting. Similarly, to help a child reach goals in terms of their reading and writing difficulties, a collaborative course is imperative. Each child is an individual and so are their reading and writing difficulties. These difficulties cannot be resolved or lessened if sufficient time and effort are not poured into this process.

Student M

Implementing and evaluating this program would have been incredibly hard, if we had not been given the opportunity to work with a partner. I found it increasingly comforting to know that I had support and assistance from M, she was there to run ideas by discuss my concerns with. Not only did M play an important part in my development, but so did the other members of the class. Collaborating with peers gave me ideas I could use and it felt like we were all part of a team working together, even though we were working with different children. It sort of simulated a school environment where all members had to work together.

Student N

Overall, I have found working collaboratively for the literacy tutoring program to be effective. It has allowed me to discuss lesson sequencing and to have things brought to my attention that I had not been aware of or thought about. It was also good to have someone else to discuss the child’s program with and to be able to share the workload with. I also feel that the collaboration process has benefited the student as they have been subject to different approaches to learning and teaching.

The following comments from university students reflect their overall views on the practical component of the subject:

• The content of subject was very relevant and will use all of the work during (sic) my teaching. The content was taught very well. Clear and concise. Literacy program
excellent and work leading up was used therefore most useful.

- The practical part – collaborating with a partner to put our theory into practice with a student. Working with a student for our assignment was a great experience. (x 16)

- I liked the ability to work with the children.

- Practical experiences – teaching the children. Sample works in tuts.

- Partner work in collaboration report was helpful.

- Thought the second quiz was great. Applied to practical work, wasn’t just remembering theory.

- The literacy program should have gone on for longer. (x 18)

CONCLUSION
The value of university students putting into practice what they are learning in a specific subject cannot be understated. There have been several studies highlighting the value of putting into practice theory undertaken in teacher education programs (Blanton et al., 1997; Mayers & Schnorr, 2003; Tobergte & Curtis, 2002). Understanding the complexity of literacy and language development is a challenge for many tertiary education students. For special education graduates, it will become their daily modus operandi. Having the opportunity for tertiary education students to undertake an applied course where theory and practice are directly linked is, in many ways, dependent on the subject convenors/coordinators and the availability and access to resources and children. In Australia in the 1970s and into the 1980s, specific peak educational bodies, namely State Education Departments, employed or provided paid study leave for experienced teachers to undertake studies in special education. With a focus on inclusion and the apparent shortage of trained special education teachers, special education graduates Australia-wide are being targeted for positions before the completion of their studies. For example, at Griffith University in 2002 and 2003, special education graduate in specialist areas had offers of permanent positions by November 30 of the same calendar year of study. As this trend appears likely to continue for at least the foreseeable future, the importance of applied special education courses is underlined.

Specific applied literacy programs, such as the one outlined previously, are reliant on the commitment of those coordinating or convening the subject. However, as demonstrated by the above report, it is possible to incorporate a practical component that transcends the individual coordinator/convenor and has a life of its own. Such an initiative can facilitate linkages with the education community in a positive, proactive manner that ensures the continuation of a program beyond individual convenors/coordinators.
Linkages to educational bodies established prior to the commencement of such a program are essential. This program required university academics to actively recruit schools as willing participants in a project that was viewed as enhancing what occurs within the school curriculum, rather than being seen as critical of what may not be occurring within the particular school.

There are many elements of the literacy program that need to be considered, not the least being communication pathways between the university students and the child’s teacher(s) and parents. Communication books are one method, although these can be problematic. For example, in the initial trial of this program, communication books were lost or misplaced and the comments university students wrote were either too detailed or lacked specific detail. Teachers’ reported that involvement in writing in the communication book was another task that added to an already hectic workload in a challenging environment.

The use of facsimiles assisted the communication flow and allowed for at least a one-way flow of information back to classroom teachers. The use of other media, such as emails to the class teacher, and active encouragement of parents to attend at the completion of sessions assisted in the transmission of information.

The authors believe that there is a definite role for theory and practice to be linked in what essentially becomes a problem-based learning situation. There is potential value for the undergraduate education students, and this is reflected in the comments presented in this paper. The capacity for such programs to continue in Education faculties is, in many ways, dependent not on the academics who coordinate and convene such programs nor the schools or children involved. It is the university administration that needs to positively embrace such programs as value adding to the quality of graduates involved in the area of special education. This is a challenge yet to be fully addressed in Australian universities.

REFERENCES


*Food…Fun, Healthy and Safe* is another book in a series that gives practical, clear and accessible advice to reader, client and professional. This book focuses on food, particularly choosing, cooking and eating food. Other books in the Books Beyond Words series are *Going to the Doctor, Looking After My Breasts, Going to Court, Making Friends* and *Michelle Finds a Voice*, to name a few.

*Food…Fun, Healthy and Safe* tells the story of Matt and Lynne who want to learn how to prepare food for their friends. By following Matt and Lynne’s story, the reader learns about how to plan what kind of food to buy for a variety of situations, the importance of buying and cooking fresh food, eating five portions of fruit and vegetables every day, washing hands before preparing food, having clean preparation spaces and what foods are healthy.

Like other books in the series, *Food…Fun, Healthy and Safe* doesn’t rely just on text to get its message across. It allows the reader to take his/her own meaning from each illustration. The reader, whether aided or unaided, is able to tell the story as they see it. The book is structured so that it is able to be used in one or a few sittings. This allows for the reader to follow the illustrations at his or her own pace. Another strength of this format is that each illustration is able to be used for specific purposes, such as revising healthy eating habits, food preparation, shopping for food, preparing for a party and so on. For those who may require word prompts, there is a section that gives suggested word descriptions for each illustration.

The illustrations are colourful, realistic and provide enough detail to establish a storyline. The characters depicted are from a range of ethnic groups and the roles avoid obvious stereotypes. The reference section gives practical advice and whilst references are made to practices in Great Britain, the information is easily transferable to an Australian setting.

The book also provides sound background advice for carers, residential, day and leisure staff when discussing food and eating habits. Of particular interest may be the outlines/guidelines on how to support people to make healthy eating choices. This section also includes some excellent line drawings on Do’s and Don’ts that relate to particular situations, such as when preparing food not to mix together cooked and non cooked foods, not have animals near food preparation areas and to drink and eat food sitting or standing upright. There is also a section on special diets, and a brief explanation of current terms such as protein and fat.
The authors, Professor Shelia Hollins and Senior Lecturer Margaret Flynn, of *Food...Fun, Healthy and Safe* are leaders in the area of Psychiatry and Learning Disability. Catherine Brighton is a well known illustrator of children’s picture books. Together they provide the reader with a wealth of information that is able to be comprehended at a variety of levels without ever compromising the message that *Food is Fun, should be Healthy, and practices should be Safe.*

The contents of this book take the form of a written conversation between a mother and her young daughter with a disability. The text details the responses given by the author Martha Downey to the question posed by her young daughter Kate Downey, who is striving to understand the social relationships of adolescents and early adulthood.

The book contains six chapters, which address the various relationships a young person encounters as they mature and gain independence. These relationships include interactions with "Moms and Dads, brothers and sisters", "Other relatives", "Family and beyond", "Friends, boyfriends, life-long friends, husbands", "People in public places", "You, being your best self". As this book features actual questions asked by a young woman with Autism, it provides insight into some of the uncertainty which may arise in the mind of the young person with a disability regarding their social world.

Whilst not comprehensive in its coverage of social skills training, it does attempt to explore some aspects of relationships from the perspective of the person with a disability. Each chapter begins with a basic question about a social relationship, such as "Mom please teach me to make friends". The remainder of the chapter then explores several facets of this relationship which a young person with a disability may find to be of concern. The book articulates questions about feelings, which many less able young people with disabilities may lack the communication skills to express.

Although a useful resource for parents and teachers, the material in the book would need to be modified before it was used directly with some people who have an intellectual disability. The responses given to the questions are relevant and contain information, which a young person with a disability needs to be given, but the language used is often quite complex and abstract. Some aspects of the language used in the book would need to be simplified in order to facilitate understanding of some concepts.

This book is concise and quick to read, and would be an interesting additional resource for anyone about to embark on a personal development course with a young person with a disability.

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