Editorial

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Around the world, renewed emphasis is being placed by governments and employers on improving literacy skills for all people to enhance their employability, job satisfaction, level of remuneration and community participation. The past two decades have seen significant changes in literacy policy in schools both nationally and internationally. The new policy environments in which teachers currently work are based on setting standards from the curriculum to the profession and on the assumption that applying standards will result in equitable learning outcomes for all students. A backdrop to this current policy environment is the persistent and unproductive claims by the media over the past decade about what teachers do or don't do in their classrooms such as not attending to the teaching of phonics, denying young people access to good literature, not paying attention to grammar, giving too much attention to popular culture and allowing literacy standards to decline. Similarly, education authorities draw on the Teaching Reading report (DEST 2005) to comment negatively on the teaching of reading in Australian classrooms. This special issue goes some way toward challenging these claims by showcasing the innovative theoretical and practical work taking place in the field of reading education.

In 2008 the Commonwealth Government began monitoring the literacy performance of Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students in Australia with the introduction of mandatory literacy tests in reading, writing, and language conventions. Further, the recently developed Australian English Curriculum takes a developmental approach to learning to read by highlighting particular knowledge and skills to be developed in each year level. Students begin learning to read in years K-2 where they experience a range of text types including literature and where they learn decoding and comprehension skills as they engage in a variety of reading practices. In Years 3–6 students will develop a more sophisticated understanding of how language

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works. Students will consolidate both “learning to read” and “reading to learn” through further engagement with a range of different texts and their discussions around literature will include more aesthetic and ethical issues. In Years 7–10 the teaching of reading is not mentioned explicitly but implied in the ways they will analyse texts including the ability to discuss them in terms of “themes, ideas and historical and cultural contexts” (ACARA 2010). In this period the emphasis on reading is on developing students’ comprehension skills with “making inference, locating information, evaluating, making conclusions and compare and contrast” detailed in the Year 8 content and “retrieving synonymous information across a whole text, intertextuality, interpreting, critical analysis and evaluating text” detailed in the content descriptions of Year 9 (ACARA 2010, pp. 33–37). Effective reading instruction is clearly on the agenda in our schools.

In this special issue we present some of the current national and international research on reading from policy to the classroom to tertiary education to teacher professional development. In the opening article Phil Cormack presents ongoing work from an ARC funded project “An Historical Investigation of Early Reading Pedagogy, the Figure of the Teacher and Literacy Education” (Cormack, Green and Patterson). In his paper “Reading Pedagogy, ‘Evidence’ and Education Policy: Learning from History?” Cormack considers the claims of the Teaching Reading Report (DEST 2005) genealogically in light of historical cases from the early nineteenth century, in particular, approaches developed by Lancaster and by Stow. These cases demonstrate the danger of policy reform that fails to pay attention to the complex relationships among teacher, student and text in the reading lesson.

In the second article “Comprehension and Content: Planning Literacy Curriculum in Low Socioeconomic and Culturally Diverse Schools”, Allan Luke, Karen Dooley and Annette Woods discuss work from an ARC funded project where they have been researching literacy teaching and learning at a large low SES school. In this paper they highlight a need to reframe comprehension instruction as a social and intellectual practice and call for the integration of strategy and skills based approaches to teaching comprehension with curriculum focused on student and community and social and cultural knowledge. The third article by Barbara Comber and Helen Nixon reports on a 1-year study that investigated the ways strong-performing primary schools develop serious and in-depth reading for learning in Years 4–9. In this paper they continue the conversation started by Luke, Dooley and Woods and argue the need for critical reading comprehension in an era of accountability where students’ ability is measured through answering multiple choice questions of unseen texts.

The fourth article by Evelyn Chan and Len Unsworth “Image-language interaction in online reading environments: Challenges for students’ reading comprehension” presents the qualitative data from a study investigating students on line reading of multimodal texts. The paper illustrates some of the complexities students encounter when reading online.

Our international contributors Donna Alvermann, Elizabeth Friese, Sybilla Beckmann and Achariya Rezak present an article “Content Area Reading Pedagogy and Domain Knowledge: A Bourdieusian Analysis”. It is widely accepted that a reader’s domain knowledge interacts with the content of text in the process of

reading and that this has an influence on what and how the reader comprehends. This paper reports on a study that investigated mathematics teachers' understandings of content area reading instruction in relation to domain knowledge in mathematics. The research is of particular importance for middle and secondary schools where there is an expectation that teachers of all disciplines should also be teachers of literacy.

The final article "Learning to Read: A Professional Learning Journey" reports on a study which investigated a regional initiative in Australia to improve the capacity of teachers to teach reading comprehension. The paper reports on one case study from this project and found that the coaching model used produced significant positive changes in the ways in which this teacher understood and approached the teaching of reading comprehension.

References

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Author Biography

Jennifer Rennie is a senior lecturer at Monash University where she teaches in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in teacher education. Her significant research contributions are in the fields of Reading Instruction, Primary English Education and Indigenous literacies. She has been active member of a number of Professional Associations including holding the position of State Director, Australian Literacy Educator's Association for 5 years. She is currently managing editor of the Australian Journal of Language and Literacy. Prior to working in higher education she worked in both primary and high schools in the North of Australia for a period of 12 years.