Developing literacy understandings: Examining the effects of engaging *teacher aides in professional development.

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(*Teacher aide is term used within this paper for those who support teaching and learning in schools.)

Introduction
Falling standards of literacy achievement in schools, in both Australia and elsewhere has been the subject of media releases over the last decade. Debate over the so-called ‘literacy crisis’ facing education systems seems at times fuelled as much by political incentives or public hysteria than by concern over schools’ and students’ performances. However, educators who support a focus on beginning literacy (up to 5 years of age) argue very strongly that early opportunities for focused literacy-related experiences will enhance children’s literacy achievements in the long term (Juel 2006; Paris 2005). Several studies indicate children from low-income families and those whose first language is not English benefit greatly from cognitively challenging and linguistically enhanced conversations and experiences with children’s literature in order to prepare them for learning to be literate (McKeown & Beck 2006; Schickedanz & Dickinson 2005). To underline the importance of early implementation of these interactions, a number of studies highlight how the development of beginning literacy skills prepare children for successful transition to early literacy acquisition in primary school (Dickinson, McCabe and Essex 2006). In Australia, there is an increased awareness of literacy achievement for Indigenous children as National testing (MCEETYA, 2008) show they are performing below the benchmark with the gap widening as the children progress towards the final years of primary schooling.

Theoretical Underpinnings
Applying a social constructivist theory is one way that young learners can develop early literacy understandings within meaningful social contexts in the early years of childhood (Fleer and Robbins 2006). Educators and parents can enhance spoken language capacity, early literacy understandings, new vocabulary, understandings about the alphabetic code and concepts about print when children engage in meaningful conversations in a range of everyday contexts and children’s literature is shared (McKeown & Beck...
2006). For educators there is a continuing challenge relating to keeping abreast with the latest research-based information that can inform practice.

**Professional Development**

Educators of today need focused professional development. With rapid worldwide changes, shrinking global, and information communication networks and ever-changing social and knowledge contexts, literacy practices of the past are changing rapidly. Thus, it is even more important today that teachers and their assistants have the opportunity to enhance their professional knowledge and are able to focus on continually improving literacy-learning outcomes for students.

In 2005, Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis proposed four factors that ensure effective professional development. First, sessions need to have a specific content focus, so existing knowledge is acknowledged and new knowledge shared and explored. Second, sessions need to involve active learning where teachers experience planning and/or trialling new strategies or resources. Third, providing follow-up for participants in their own classrooms is essential and finally, being part of a professional learning community provides beneficial effects that contribute to higher levels of professional growth.

**Role of Teacher Aides**

While teachers have a pivotal role in the education of young children in schools, teacher aides also have an important role to play. Teacher aides can increase the number of focused adult/child interactions if they have access to appropriate professional development and know how to conduct effective interactions with young children. Roles and duties for teacher aides are similar across school sectors, but enacting the role may differ depending on the expectations of the school and the supervising teacher. Most frequently, teacher aides are responsible for the general duties in early years’ classes and these include setting up, creating resources, packing and storing resources and cleaning after children’s activities. Duties also include interacting with the children and communicating with them as they engage with planned activities in early childhood contexts, but for these to be most effective teacher aides need to know how to conduct focussed interactions and understand how young children learn to be literate. While contemplating ways of enhancing the role of teacher aides in early childhood settings and enhancing learning outcomes for young Indigenous students, a project was designed to improve early understandings of literacy and numeracy for young children.

**The Project**

A research and professional development project, Indigenous Students’ Oral Language: Building a Foundation for Literacy and Numeracy in Metropolitan Settings, received funding from the Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and was conducted in 2008. Aims of the project were twofold: 1) to enhance early understandings of literacy and numeracy for Indigenous children in the Preparatory year (the year prior to commencing Year 1); and 2) to examine the effects of engaging teacher aides in professional learning with their teachers. The purpose of this paper is to examine how participating in professional learning for literacy education affected teachers aides and their work. Perceptual data were gathered from teacher aides using pre and post interviews.

Participants
School personnel, including preparatory teachers and teacher aides from 5 metropolitan schools (8 class teachers and 8 teacher aides) in Brisbane, a capital city in the State of Queensland, Australia, were involved in the project. Schools from all sectors (State, Catholic and Independent) were included. One fully Indigenous class and seven classes where a percentage of the children had an Indigenous background were involved. The focus of literacy professional learning sessions was to enhance existing understandings of current research, theories and practices relating to beginning literacy with an emphasis on oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness and early writing.

Model for Professional Development
The model of professional development was adapted from Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) and included the following five stages. 1) utilising a specific content focus; 2) sharing resources and learning about practical hands-on literacy activities within professional learning sessions; 3) trialling resources and practical literacy activities in class by teachers and teacher aides 4) support from facilitators in the implementation phase and 5) learning with and from others in a professional learning community. The project took place over a 14-week period and the five-step cycle was completed twice.

At each professional learning session all classes received new resources for literacy consisting of hand-made games, children’s literature and commercially produced kits. Resources consisted of a number of generic items that could be adapted for a range of literacy-learning games and activities and included; fishing rods with small magnets attached; plastic fly swatters; various picture and letter cards; children’s literature; a pocket chart and a spinner game. These resources were designed to increase children’s spoken language interactions, phonological awareness, print awareness, knowledge of the alphabet and engagement with early writing.

Data Sources and Analysis
A research assistant or the project facilitator conducted pre and post semi-structured telephone interviews with all participating teacher aides. All interviews were transcribed, verified and analysed. During the initial interview,
participants spoke about their own education, the number of years spent working as a teacher aide; the schools they had worked in; professional development sessions they had attended and any particular literacy programs they had used. They also described the ways they worked in the classroom with young children. This information highlighted the typical tasks carried out by individuals and those that occurred less frequently. Teacher aides related their personal perceptions of how they believed young children learnt to be literate and this included personal perceptions of ways for best assisting Indigenous young learners. Finally, interviewees described their understanding of the project and their expectations of it.

During the post project interviews teacher aides described their own learning in relation to beginning literacy and told of ways they had participated in class with the children as new strategies and resources were trialled. Informal discussions also took place regarding; their perceptions of the children’s literacy learning during the period of the project; creative ways of using the new literacy resources; perceived self-confidence relating to literacy interactions in class and personal perceptions regarding how Indigenous children learn best. Each participating teacher aide shared their opinion regarding the educational value of the project from a personal perspective. Transcripts were analysed using categorical analysis that ‘involve the systematic organisation of data into groupings that are alike, similar or homogeneous’ (Rose & Sullivan 1996, p.232). Themes that emerged from the pre-project data interviews related to ways of working in the classroom; confidence with literacy-related activities; working with Indigenous students and knowledge of the project. Quotes from participants have been coded TA1 – TA8 to maintain anonymity.

Findings – Pre Interviews with Teacher Aides
Teacher aides in this study were all female and ranged in age from 25 to 61 years with an average age cross the cohort 40 years. Education levels and qualifications varied quite considerably with four having completed secondary school with the eldest in the cohort reaching Year 9 and all others finishing Year 12. Four participants achieved qualifications for becoming a teacher aide by completing a Certificate at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college. One participant, working in a school where the majority of students have an Indigenous cultural background, completed a one year course within the TAFE college situated within her school. Experience working as a teacher aide ranged from 10 months to 20 years and participants revealed they had attended very little professional development during their careers. Four indicated they had some training relating to published literacy materials (including some commercial phonics packages).

Working in the Class before the Project
Most commonly, the teacher aides were involved with general duties in the classroom. e.g. ‘I’m basically helping the teacher with general duties’ (TA 6); ‘I
set up paints and help with the painting’ (TA 3). Some participants related how they worked and interacted with the children to assist the class teacher e.g. ‘I’m working in small groups with the children and assisting the teacher. It’s very much hands-on’ (TA 4).

Working with Literacy-related Activities in Class
When asked how they assisted children with early literacy, some said they did the same things they did with their own children e.g. ‘I think it’s just going over things like I did with my own children. It’s reading lots of books – reading to them’ (TA 1). Another mentioned doing art activities to re-inforce literacy learning e.g. ‘We like to do a big T and glue stuff in it. We sing songs, we have a booklet for each letter and we find a letter and paste it in’ (TA 3). Another talked of activity books e.g. ‘Reading with the alphabet, they just colour the sound for /a/ in the activity book and they colour whatever starts with /a/ ‘(TA 1).

All participants said they felt confident carrying out the literacy tasks with the children prior to the commencement of project. Further in-depth analysis of the interviews revealed all participants provided broad information about the literacy tasks in class and no specific descriptions were given of different ways the children were engaged with literacy prior to the project. Most relied on personal experiences of working with their own children at home. Main ways of assisting with literacy included, reading to children and assisting them as they completed a worksheet or workbook tasks. ‘I think it just comes down to spending a lot of time with them talking through things and reading’ (TA 4); ‘Reading and with the alphabet they just colour the sound of letter in the activity books’ (TA1).

When asked how Indigenous children learn best, some had limited experience and expressed this, while others were able to articulate their perceptions. e.g. ‘they learn a lot better hands-on’ (TA 7). ‘You’ve got to establish a personal relationship. I think that is important’ (TA 6). Using art was another perception e.g. ‘Through songs, and our kids really do love painting. We’ll do a big S and they paint over it’ (TA 3). As far as the project was concerned, most participants knew very little about it at the time of the first interview, as it had only been mentioned briefly by their teacher. Some comments included: ‘Not a great deal really’ (TA 3); ‘Pretty much nothing’ (TA 5).

Findings – Post Interviews with Teacher Aides
Transcripts were analysed using categorical analysis once again themes that emerged from the responses were examined for similarities and differences. When interviewed at the end of the project, respondents were able to articulate different ways they had engaged with the children for literacy activities. Most, but not all, were able to provide a more informed response by speaking specifically about the activities and their interactions with the
children. For example ‘I have found explaining to them helped a lot’ (TA 4); ‘...just the importance of literacy and syllables in words and initial and final sounds’ (TA 4); and ‘I’ve learnt about mixing cards and making sentences for a story sequence’ (TA 7). Others spoke in general terms and could not explain how they had gained new knowledge to share. e.g. ‘Yeah, it’s been great and just for me and the children doing things a little differently’ (TA 5).

Teacher aides spoke positively about the resources for literacy that were provided and they were able to tell of different ways of using them in class. For example, ‘we do that game with the fishing line and get them matching letters or pictures. It’s been great having all the extra resources actually’ (TA 3). ‘That lovely literacy wheel ... and we’ve started sounding out and clapping syllables’ (TA 4). ‘Group session games with that rolling dice - and the children have to visually see and name from it’ (TA 8). Participants could readily describe developing literacy understandings they were witnessing in class e.g. ‘They think they’re so clever. They can read everyone’s name from having them all over the place, so the name thing was really great’ (TA 3). ‘Certainly I’ve seen the changes over the past few months, especially with their writing skills and being able to rhyme. They are able to give us a few rhymes now, not just one’ (TA 8).

Perceptions of the Project
When asked for their perceptions of the project and recommendations for changes to improve the outcomes the following were some comments received. ‘I think it has been wonderful. Something I wouldn’t have imagined these kiddies doing and something I thought they would be doing in Year 1, but it has been incredible’ (TA 4). ‘I think the way you’re going about it is the best way’ (TA 7). ‘I really feel that being at the course and not being told what to do or how to do it, I think visually and hands on before being with the children helps a lot. I’ve really got a lot out of it’ (TA 8).

Discussion
In addressing the focus for the paper regarding teacher aide perceptions and the effects of including them in professional development sessions with class teachers, some very positive effects were shown. They spoke more explicitly about the ways they engaged with the children in class and professional learning about beginning literacy was enhanced. Teacher aides engaged fully in professional learning sessions, and these were positively received. They participated in trialling new strategies and using teaching resources in class and engaged with others to share experiences of literacy interactions in their classes. These responses indicated the model of professional development was successful (Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis 2005).

Personal Learning Journey
Over the short period of 14 weeks teacher aides gained much with regards to enhancing professional interactions in class relating to literacy education. At
the beginning of the project, the majority of participants spoke strongly about their role as one involving mainly general duties associated with management of materials and equipment in the preparatory classroom. From the final interviews, this emphasis had changed and the teacher aides were far more involved in interacting with the children to assist them with their literacy learning. Despite each participant stating they were confident with literacy interactions before the project commenced, their understandings were largely based on personal experience and not on professional knowledge. It also was evident from responses in the post interviews that there had been a considerable gain in pedagogical content knowledge about literacy education and teacher aides demonstrated a more focused interest in children’s learning and spoke more about oral language interactions with the children after participating in the project.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The model of professional development proved to be an effective means for teacher aide learning not only in the specific area of beginning literacy education, but it appears to have influenced workplace actions and priorities. By the end of the project, the majority of teacher aides were taking a more interactive role in the classroom and participating more frequently in dialoguing with children about literacy. During the professional development sessions, the facilitator acknowledged existing knowledge and skills of participants and encouraged each person to take some risks and experiment with new ideas, strategies and resources in class. Many took up the challenge and worked in partnership with the class teacher. When both teachers and teacher aides attended the professional development sessions together, this appears to enhance ways teachers and teacher aides work together. There was a noticeable difference in knowledge and attitude when teacher aides were not able to attend each of the professional development sessions, and yet this may have related somewhat to the experience of the teacher and the personality of the teacher aide.

Features labelled as effective in professional development models by (Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis 2005) were included in the model utilised in this project. Features that contributed to its success included: 1. a focus on specific knowledge about early literacy; 2. sessions involving active learning for educators where new strategies and resources were shared; 3. follow-up visits in schools; 4. participants being part of a professional learning group with opportunities for sharing new knowledge. It was evident that teacher aides moved from being a little tentative and lacking in confidence for some time in the first session, to feeling comfortable and sharing teaching ideas in the final session.

In conclusion, the model of professional development where teacher aides were included with their class teachers proved to have a very positive effect on teacher aides in the project. Its main strengths lay in the professional
interactions – teacher aide, teacher and expert within their own school and in the professional development sessions. Second, teacher aides gained confidence enough to shift the balance from spending most time preparing materials to ones involving greater interactions with the children in class. The focus on specific research-based literacy-related content knowledge supported by a range of suggested teaching strategies using new resources were defining features of this project. The social constructivist theoretical perspective was appropriate in that teacher aides assisted the children as they learnt to be literate where the co-construction of ideas allowed them the scope to take risks and learn from the literacy-related activities in class.

References

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