



Regular Article

Exploring Initial Teacher Education students' learning journeys while implementing a reading intervention program

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates Initial Teacher Education students' learning journeys as they implement individualized reading tutoring with a primary aged student. An innovative approach was used in the university course under investigation. Data was collected through document analysis, focus groups and interviews. The findings show that providing a genuine learning experience was beneficial for these students in preparing them to teach reading. Other essential elements critical to the learning journey for the university education students was establishing a reading goal, experiencing the role of the teacher, engaging a primary-aged student, having a weekly peer support group for reflecting and planning, discussing assessment and being coached through the process by their lecturer.

1. Introduction

The skill of reading can change a person's life by allowing them to explore known and unknown worlds, taking the reader through time and space. Reading grants the reader opportunity to pursue his/her own education and develop as a human being. As a critically important skill, reading underpins all areas of the curriculum; however, Australian students' performance in reading has shown a steady decline over the last two decades (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2021). Primary (elementary) school teachers have the main responsibility for teaching reading skills and there has been much debate as to the best method of training future teachers to do this, given the importance and value of being able to read. Students training to be future teachers are referred to as pre-service teachers or initial teacher education students (ITEs), and in this paper the choice has been made to refer to these training teachers as ITEs.

Researchers acknowledge the complexity of reading itself: "Reading is a complex cognitive skill that requires the coordination of multiple brain regions" (Beaulieu et al., 2005, p. 1266), as well as enhancing brain connectivity and function (Horowitz-Kraus & Hutton, 2018). Stories impact the brain both psychologically and neurologically (Zak, 2013); while reading also underpins most aspects of education and thus learning to read is critically important. Although research has demonstrated that the quality of a teacher's instruction has the greatest influence on students' literacy outcomes, it has also revealed that many

teachers lack expertise in the teaching of reading. Research has also established that many ITEs struggle to effectively teach reading and feel ill-equipped to do so (Englert et al., 2020; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Morphis, 2018). This raised the question as to how a university course could be improved or further developed to better equip and build ITEs to effectively teach reading.

This study investigates an innovative approach to developing the knowledge and skills of ITEs in teaching reading that involves individual tutoring for reading in primary school, during one university course. This course is a third-year undergraduate subject in the primary education program. The ITEs enrolled in this course have usually completed two full years of their undergraduate program and embarked on at least one school professional experience placement of three weeks. This subject is the last in a suite of three Curriculum Studies Teaching English courses. These courses cover teaching: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening across the primary curriculum. The course featured in this research focuses on teaching English across Years Three to Six (8–12-year-olds). An important part of this course includes detailed assessing, planning, teaching and reporting, as well as regular collaborative group tutorials to debrief, discuss, plan and provide feedback to the ITEs as they each tutor a primary aged student individually for reading. Understanding how this innovative approach to a course better prepares ITEs will assist other institutions in training future teachers especially in teaching reading.

While a few research studies describe programs involving tutoring

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for struggling readers (Englert et al., 2019; Hikida et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2019) these studies lack the explicit detail that this study implements. The exact process of assessment, goal setting, planning, tutoring, debriefing, weekly collaborative peer reporting, external review and experienced feedback in this study provides that detail and also aligns with the Australian Professional Graduate Teacher Standards 5.5, 5.1 and 6.3. This study explores the ITE students' learning journeys while they implement an individualized reading intervention program with a primary aged student. Therefore, the research question is: What elements are essential for ITE students during their learning journey while they implement a reading intervention program? Answering this question will add value to the education of ITEs in their learning journey as they prepare for the role of teaching.

2. Literature review

Literacy is a precious skill and, as Kofi Annan, a former Secretary-General of the United Nations has noted, it is a significant factor in achieving an individual's potential. Literacy is one of the seven General Capabilities within the Australian primary curriculum, however, being able to read effectively underpins all other disciplines; and for children who struggle with reading, the path to progress is much harder. According to the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) conducted annually across Australia, approximately 25,000 Year 7 students fell below the national minimum standard in literacy for 2021. In comparison with other countries Australia has not achieved well. Since the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) began testing in 2000, Australia has consistently dropped in its rating, including in literacy. In 2018 Australia was ranked 16th amongst the 79 countries participating. Further, the proportion of Australian students among the low performers has increased (Baker, 2019). Clearly there is a need for improvement. Literature highlights four factors that lead to a greater achievement in students' scores. These four factors presented below include: the role of teachers, initial teacher education programs, the relationship between the ITE student and the school student and the role of knowledge, skill and self-efficacy.

1 Role of teachers

Researchers such as Ciampa and Gallagher (2018, p. 457) note: "Teachers are a critical factor in K-12 students' literacy performance. The quality of a teacher's instruction has the greatest effect on students' literacy achievement outcomes and is critical to their development of essential literacy skills". While Young (2017, p. 30) concurs, "effective classroom teachers have a greater impact on struggling readers than anything else, including having the right program". This then shows that the role of the teacher is crucial in the instruction of reading and ensuring that their students develop these essential skills for life.

Upon appointment to a teaching position, the newly graduated teacher must 'hit the ground running', knowing how to start and what to do, as there is no time for pause and ponder in the classroom while precious educational time escapes. That is, time cannot be wasted in a primary school classroom, as achieving a successful educational outcome for all students is vital. This is especially so in the case of students that struggle or who are starting to fall behind. Therefore, beginning teachers must understand their students, know the content knowledge to be taught and know how to teach it as they enter the classroom (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022).

In their research of teacher preparedness for teaching literacy, Englert et al. (2020) comment that many teachers lack sufficient understanding of the structure of words needed to teach phonological awareness or phonics. Morphis (2018) noted that many ITE students lacked an understanding of the detailed steps to ensure success for readers who are struggling. Further to this, many ITEs have a higher estimation of their knowledge than actual tests indicate. Meeks and

Kemp (2017, p. 11) state:

As a group, preservice teachers demonstrated a substantial discrepancy between their general confidence to teach early reading and spelling, and their content knowledge of this area, leading to the conclusion that few preservice teachers had sufficient expertise to be effective teachers of early reading and spelling.

This therefore creates a crucial target for teacher education institutions: to ensure that ITEs have a deep knowledge of the structure of words and evidence-based knowledge and skills to teach these effectively.

2 Initial Teacher Education programs

The *Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022) notes one of the key points of initial teacher education program content as *under preparing* ITE graduates in a number of key areas including the teaching of reading. This review highlights that many ITE graduates feel confused about how to approach teaching reading and are more likely to reproduce practices they have been exposed to during their courses and while on professional school placements. Meeks and Kemp (2017, p. 6) found that "more than 76 % of preservice teachers were ranked as having skills [regarding phonological awareness and phonics] that were minimal to very poor". Again, supporting the view of ITEs being under prepared for teaching reading.

Further concern for this is found in a study by Raymond-West and Rangel (2020) who analysed data from 72 teacher education institutions, finding that only 8 % taught the core components of reading. Also, that the teaching offered was not based on sound researched instructional practices, but rather students used personal preferences to choose an approach. In addition, identification and assessment of reading difficulties in students was not included in the programs.

A longitudinal study by Clark et al. (2013), which explored the perspectives of novice teachers, concluded that theory, from university coursework, was insufficient to effectively prepare for teaching reading. They proposed that more practical interaction, feedback and consultation was needed to develop knowledge and skills for the task of teaching reading effectively. This supports the notion of ITEs engaging in meaningful experiences that build their content knowledge and skills in teaching reading.

Teacher education courses were transitioning to a practice-based model was a point noted by Wetzel et al. (2018). Recommendations for improvements across university programs have included this comment from Gaines (2017, p. 11) that the "opportunity to engage with other educators in the elementary classroom would encourage greater learning and growth." While most universities routinely incorporate a field practicum for ITEs, Hoffman et al., (2019) reviewed 62 studies investigating ITEs working in small groups or one-on-one teaching literacy. The authors concluded that "Few studies address, in innovative ways, the forms of coaching support that can be offered for preservice teachers in their tutoring experiences" (Hoffman et al., 2019, p. 245). Which supports the underlying innovation of the study reported in this paper.

Typical professional school practicum experiences involve the ITEs teaching under the supervision and guidance of the regular classroom teacher. The University lecturer may then make a visit during that time. However, this approach lacks a coaching experience with collaboration between other players who could contribute to the knowledge and skill development of the ITEs. Potential missing elements could include discussion and reflection sessions between the ITEs in the cohort, the lecturer and the learning support teacher. Relationships are so important in teaching and learning and contribute to the success of a program. This includes the relationship between the ITEs, their peers, the lecturer as well as the school student with whom they are working.

3 Relationship between ITE student and school student

The relationship between teacher and student is critical. Stilwell (2018, p. 24) comments: “Immediacy behaviors are based on the idea that teacher behaviors will promote feelings of incentive, liking, pleasure, and influence. These immediacy behaviors have been shown to increase cognitive learning and student perceptions of teacher effectiveness”. The relationship between the ITE students and the school students they are tutoring will be positively impacted, resulting in increased engagement and student motivation if the ITE student enjoys the teaching process (Stilwell, 2018). Further, “Students who believe their teacher is caring also believe they learn more; and positive social, cognitive, and language development are increased” (Stilwell, 2018, p. 27). In addition, Hein (2018, p. 16) mentioned a study by Koch (2008), in which the effects of classroom environment, students’ behaviour, and the implementation of instructional practices were examined to see the correlation between these practices and the achievement gap. Koch, like Bandura (1977), found that social learning theory is also a major factor in the learning environment; meaning that students learn from observing each other thus developing self-efficacy.

4 Role of knowledge and self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the individual’s belief that they are able to accomplish a particular task. In the context of teaching reading, the teacher’s self-efficacy is critical, due to its close link to student improvement (Horony, 2020). “Therefore, teachers with higher self-efficacy may be more effective in teaching the struggling learner while increasing motivation and engagement” (Horony, 2020, p. 22). Feng et al. (2019, p. 81) describe the benefits of self-efficacy in teachers:

Teachers who exhibit high self-efficacy are less likely to encounter burnout and are more prepared to overcome challenges in their day-to-day activities Are more thoughtful in their instruction, often developing student-centered classrooms and are more likely to utilize diverse strategies and instructional practice than their counterparts with lower self-efficacy.

Based on a study of 1364 first year teachers, Feng et al. (2019) found two emerging themes that contributed to higher self-efficacy. First, the ITEs that completed their reading course work prior to appointment had increased pedagogical knowledge and higher self-efficacy. Second, support from a mentor, particularly if that person was discipline specific, increased self-efficacy.

Reading is a critically important skill, and for many students, learning to read is a constant struggle. For teachers, the ability to be able to teach reading effectively is also vitally important, and research has demonstrated that many beginning teachers are under-prepared and lack the necessary knowledge and skills. ITEs who learn to tutor individual students, under supervision, and then to collaboratively explore the process and practice in depth with peers and supervisors, gain an effective method of professional development.

This study was implemented to explore the innovative process involved in a university course engaging ITE students in real-world hands-on experience (Mabade & Ngobeni, 2024). The investigation focuses on the ITE students’ learning journeys as they engage in a reading intervention program with a primary school student. Of particular interest are the elements that are essential in designing, managing and supporting ITE students while they execute an individualized reading intervention program.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted as a qualitative case study of one university course in the primary/elementary teacher education program undertaken in semester one of 2023. Ethics approval was granted for this study through the Avondale Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants for the investigation included 3rd year primary ITE students, previous students who completed this course and who are now teaching, and the lecturer/researcher. All students in the course were invited to

participate in the study. Nineteen (three male and sixteen female) of the twenty-one students agreed to participate. Four previous ITE graduates (one male and three female) who had completed this course recently agreed to participate in this investigation.

This investigation focused on the ITEs learning journey of conducting an individual reading intervention program. This involved the ITEs attending the local school to tutor one primary-aged student for reading. After each session the ITEs attended a small group tutorial with a maximum of six ITEs, facilitated by the lecturer. During these guided tutorials the ITEs would debrief about their tutoring session and plan for their next session. The lecturer as facilitator would listen, question and challenge the ITEs on their pedagogy, assessment and evidence in planning what they would do next with their school student.

Data was collected through document analysis, a researcher diary, lecturer notes, researcher observations, ITEs’ focus groups with the lecturer/researcher, and individual interviews with previous ITE students who have graduated and are currently teaching. Table 1 shows the timing and details of the data collection.

The focus group questions included.

- What have you learnt through this reading tutoring experience?
- What was the highlight? What aspects would you never repeat?
- Think about the other members of your tutorial group and after they answer the above questions, provide them with feedback about what you have observed about their learning journey so that you are helping each other grow in this teaching experience.

The individual interview questions included.

- Do you feel the course helped to prepare you for teaching reading in your classroom? How? Can you give examples?

Table 1
Research project data collection details.

Method	Participants	Data	Timing
Document analysis	Nineteen ITE students	ITE students submitted their course assessment written report	due at end of semester 1, week 13, 2023
Researchers’ diary	Two researchers	Monthly meeting discussion and written entries	March to July 2023
Lecturer notes	One lecturer/ researcher	Weekly notes taken during the weekly tutorials	Semester 1, 2023 – weeks: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 11
Researcher observation notes	One researcher	Notes taken during the weekly tutorials	Semester 1, 2023 – weeks: 2, 3 and 6
ITE student Focus groups	Nineteen ITE students	Five focus groups: group 1–4 participants (40 min) group 2–5 participants (50 min) group 3–4 participants (40 min) group 4–3 participants (30 min) group 5–3 participants (30 min) transcripts	Semester 1, 2023 – week 12
Individual interviews – random sample	Four practicing teachers who had completed this unit previously recently	Written responses to emailed questions	March 2023

- Were there aspects that you wish you had learned, that should be included in the unit in the future?
- Do you have anything else you would like to say regarding this reading intervention program?

The data generated for this study was analysed using NVivo software to organise themes. The researchers used the induction process to identify and code themes (Hurst, 2023). This process was iterative involving constantly analysing forwards and backwards across the data defining and redefining the themes.

3.1. Findings/results

This university course under investigation is specifically structured so that each ITE student can work tutoring a Year 3–6 primary aged student (8–12 years old) for reading each week (between eight to ten sessions across the semester) as part of their experiential learning. These tutoring sessions begin in week one of the semester and end in week 11; however, there are usually some weeks missed due to student illness and school holidays. Within the first few weeks of the semester it was expected that the ITE student would have established a reading goal for their tutoring session with guidance from the lecturer. All ITE students were also placed in a tutorial group of not more than six members that met each week to debrief regarding the tutoring session and to help plan the next reading tutoring session for the ITE students in that group.

During this project throughout the tutorial sessions, the lecturer intentionally omitted explicit instruction in telling the ITEs how to teach reading but rather asked questions and guided as a coach. This was done in order for the ITEs to use their funds of knowledge, previous Curriculum Studies Teaching English course theory, previous experience and understanding (Harrison-Palmer, 2022), while learning by experience to recognise the gaps in a child's understanding and skill for reading and then address these specifically in this context. Frequently the ITEs shared similar discoveries in their learning, even repeating them more than once in their group discussions.

All of the transcripts or texts from the documents, researchers' diary, lecturer notes, researcher observations, collaborative discussions in the tutorials, the focus groups and the interviews were critically analysed using thematic analysis to determine similarities and differences. From this analysis five main themes emerged. These included engaging the school student in the learning experience, being able to identify the reading goal, the aspect of experiential learning while engaged in reading tutoring, planning for the reading tutoring sessions, and teacher networking and collaborating. These five themes are described below.

1 How to engage the school student

The ITEs quickly learned the vital importance of really getting to know their primary student, building a strong teacher/student relationship and developing rapport. Explaining the purpose of the activity to the student and having this matched to the student's interests was an important foundation. The ITEs also realised that their own enthusiasm and energy were critical to successful interactions with their students. As an ITE student stated, *I think going in I had high hopes in the first week. I think it was a lot of me as a person going "oh, I'm not sure whether this is going to work" and my attitude towards it until a few weeks ago where I tried something different, brought more energy.*

Making learning fun, interesting and active through physical games engaged the students and kept their attention. One ITE student stated, *So I guess for me, one of my biggest learnings was not just making it interesting for the students. When we talk about the Graduate Teacher Standards, the first thing we're encouraged to do is to get to know the students, get to know their interests, get to know how they learn in the first few weeks. It was a little tricky because that's when you're still starting to get to know them. And even though it was my nephew who I know so well, it was almost like I didn't know him at all. You have to get to know them on a different level, which would be*

interesting for people who teach their own children. So as soon as I started incorporating soccer into the tutoring, it just got easier for me. It got easier for him. It was more interesting for both of us, and you can actually see progress. Whereas when it wasn't specific to an interest of his, I could see that he was very easily distracted. He wasn't too interested. It wasn't like we were moving forward at a great pace to begin with, but once I started making it about soccer and incorporating games, even if it wasn't a game, but calling it a game, I just found really helped. I reckon the second half of this just felt like a breeze.

Many ITEs realised that they needed to get their primary aged student to do things physically to engage them. For example, *Once I realised that he had a big interest in basketball and was more than willing to play basketball each week, he found it a lot more fun and was instantly participating. I also realised that he enjoyed doing Science experiments and was asking each week if we were going to do one. By the end of the tutoring sessions, he was saying that he loved reading and was sad that I wasn't coming back to tutor him anymore.* The ITEs also realised the importance of making simple theme-based adjustments made a difference in engaging their student. One ITE student mentioned that using red and yellow cards brought in a soccer theme which tuned their Year Six student into the flashcards and reading the vocabulary words better.

2 Identifying the reading goal

The need to plan assessments from the beginning and to keep these specific and measurable became very obvious to some of the ITEs as they realised the need for alignment. One ITE student shared what they learnt at the end of the tutoring experience, *I think the biggest thing I learned, and I kind of learnt it today, was the importance of doing and knowing the assessment before you do all the tutoring. This was because I had put things into the assessment that he didn't know, because I hadn't planned for it.*

ITEs stated that when they were specific about the reading goal it made the planning easier and much more targeted. One ITE student stated that, *I think the biggest thing that I have learnt is to have the goal and then plan week to week. I really didn't have a plan and it was just what am I going to do this week ... instead of having an action plan.* Another ITE student shared, *Just having those small learning goals. That's what I learnt. Just keeping them small and simple, congratulating the student when they meet that goal.* They realised that their tutoring time was precious and they needed to be focused in order to reach the goal in the short time period given. For example, *She got sidetracked and I went on with her as well. I got sidetracked so easily ... But then I started to set expectations. Like, we have 40 min today and I broke down the activities with her and I started to notice that if she knew what our time goals were and she knew what activities we had to get done, we stayed on topic more. I've written about setting expectations and setting high expectations, and I've done it all in theory, but that was kind of a big moment for me.* This notion of doing the theory but not putting it into practice leads into the next theme of experiential learning.

3 Experiential learning while tutoring

Experiential learning covered several aspects of the tutoring process as one ITE student stated, *it was really good to actually have a child to assess and see their progress.* Another ITE student stated, *In Uni for example, I am content with getting by in subjects that I am not so confident in. When I am in a teaching position however, 'just getting by' means my students have a cap on their understanding too. I noticed the more confident I got in my learning journey, the more [the child] got out of the lesson too. I have always known this fact coming into teaching, but this program highlighted the reality of it.*

The ITEs found that mornings were the times when the students were most receptive and that the sessions should be organised to avoid clashes with another subject the student particularly enjoyed. The ITEs soon realised that resources needed to be tailored to the student's interests, but that they could be prepared quickly and did not need to be expensive

or overly time consuming. As one ITEs commented: *that in your first few weeks you're trying to plan and make all these massive resources. And then I noticed at the end of the week, I can make the same resource easily and really quickly. I don't have to put all this effort into it, so even though it sounds stupid just realising that you don't need to have all these strategic resources for a little activity, you could just change it up really quickly and it's a whole new resource. And the kids aren't gonna know.* A lesson that several noted was to persevere and not become discouraged; further, comparing oneself with others was not helpful.

4 Planning the tutoring session

Many of the ITEs learned from difficult sessions that it was vital to be thoroughly prepared for both lessons and assessments, as well as critically thinking about the purpose behind each activity. Again, understanding and planning for the student's learning style and interests contributed to more enjoyable sessions. As one ITEs commented, *being prepared is very important and even if you think you have enough resources, you don't. So, rather be over-prepared, because especially once I started getting the hang of it, I flew through it. So, I think that was my biggest thing – resources.* Further, it became obvious that there was a necessity for more physical activities. For example: *it wasn't until week 8 that I started to realise that I needed to change activities and use a lot more games. I think it was that week where I started bringing in the experiments with the instructions and gave it to him and said "do it yourself", that something switched and he engaged in the reading activity.*

No time can be wasted on activities unrelated to the targeted goal, and planning needs to be extensive and thorough. For example, *I also learned much about goal-specific activities. It is all well and good to play games or read texts, but if my activities didn't have a purpose, they would have been a waste of time. So, I learned only to bring in intentionally relevant and goal-specific activities.* Wasted time cannot be regained. ITE students who were over-prepared found things easier and were able to achieve better results with their school student.

5 Teacher networking and collaboration

For some of the ITEs, having to share their plans and experiences, including the negative ones with their peers, was quite daunting, however, as trust developed they began to see the benefits. For example, *Further, don't compare yourself to your peers. I found that the rest of my tutoring debrief group were focused on other reading goals than mine. This meant their activities were/seemed more fun and engaging to their students and myself. This left me feeling a bit confused on how I could make my activities more fun and engaging like theirs were. Through this I was motivated to find some interesting activities rather than rely on basic ones. Once I put more effort in, my tutoring sessions began to flow better and as a result meant [name's child] was more engaged in my sessions. Overall, next time I would be less selfish and focus on my student more and rely on my peers more to help me find and create new ideas. This experience has helped me to realise that teaching is a team effort, and you need to rely on your support network to help you brainstorm ideas and boost your confidence on days when lessons don't go as expected.*

Consequently, accepting others' questions and challenges was a learning experience, but many reported on the value of the group debrief. For example, *So, my tutorial group had good ideas, it's just, I don't know, maybe it was the fact that I didn't really take them on board. I should have listened more to what other people were saying, because I feel like some things that people brought up, I've done in the last couple of weeks and it's been amazing.* While another ITE student commented, *I found that so many times when I was talking about my session I would realise, as I was speaking, why it didn't go right. And yet before, in my head, I couldn't figure it out at all. I found in this group, while talking about it helpful, otherwise I would have been so lost. It helped with knowing where to go next and what to do next, it actually helped so much. Every single week I found that having everyone suggest things and just talking about it made it clearer.*

They noted that 'collaborating and sharing ideas with colleagues' was very useful. For example, *I learned about the importance of collaborating with a group, being able to share that your lesson didn't go well, and then getting feedback and some ideas, how you can change, it has really been beneficial.* While another ITE student stated, *I have gained an appreciation for professional relationships and the value of seeking assistance from colleagues when stuck or needing ideas for teaching or help with a specific student. This experience has helped me gain practical skills and built my confidence in planning and conducting a literacy reading intervention program.*

A wide variety of learnings occurred for the ITEs during the tutoring sessions and during the group debriefings, as they shared, suggested, questioned and engaged in serious thinking about the tasks and ways to achieve success.

4. Discussion/recommendations

The program described in this paper, together with the comments from the participants, reveal that this type of approach during an ITE program produces effective learning and valuable skills as part of preparing future primary teachers. As many beginning teachers struggle (Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Morphis, 2018) with how to teach their students to read successfully, it is crucial that this situation is addressed urgently which this innovative approach is targeting. Providing a genuine, hands-on, learning experience for ITEs is critically important in order to transmit that learning into an effective educational experience for their student and future students. This project illustrates the use of Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, which describes learning and development through the experience of practice, observation, reflection and trial.

The five key themes identified in the results all link together to present the essential elements needed for ITEs to develop their skills in teaching reading successfully. This real-world experience of tutoring a current primary aged student provided opportunity for the ITEs to work with peers collaboratively, realise the significance and need to plan for engagement and motivation, and build their understanding of how reading occurs and how they need to go about teaching the various elements of reading by identifying a specific reading goal. In addition to this the ITEs experienced the need to focus on the set reading goal for the school student to achieve and meet it in order to progress with their reading skill development.

It does not matter how much a lecturer tells ITEs to get to know their students and to make learning fun and engaging – until they do this and experience it – the learning will be only theoretical and will lack the genuine understanding and application necessary. For most students having to actually learn the hard way – physically doing it and being in the real-world situation, working with an actual student raises their responsibility and understanding of the process and the teacher's role. This concurs with Young (2017) who noted that the role of the teacher in teaching reading was pivotal in developing students' essential skills for life. Many ITEs find this more realistic approach enjoyable, together with the delight of success in seeing their school student progress with their reading goal.

An essential component which formed part of this experiential learning was that the ITEs needed to understand exactly what they needed to teach in order for the school student to achieve a set reading goal. There were two aspects forming part of this process namely, firstly identifying the reading goal for the student by assessing the student and then being able to unpack all the necessary steps needed to be able to teach the student so that they could achieve the set reading goal. This meant that the ITEs had to plan for assessment, understand the skill that they needed to teach and to remain focused on that skill throughout the sessions while assessing the skill development.

The absolute imperative for planning was not really appreciated by some ITEs until the lesson began to fall apart together with the student's interest and behaviour and the need became obvious. Similarly, some

ITEs really struggled to engage their student; it was not until they took a genuine interest in their student, and paid attention to the child's interests that they started to realise the importance of connection and relationship with the student. This was genuine experiential learning in action. Clark et al. (2013) proposed for more practical interaction and development of knowledge and skills for ITEs which this innovative approach has embedded into the ITE program at this university.

Learning from each other, not only new ideas but examples of failure as well, proved to be both useful and encouraging for the ITEs. Perhaps the most significant part of this program was the weekly group collaborative debrief and feedback with the lecturer and peers. For some, having to share plans, outcomes and difficulties was quite challenging and confronting initially. Nevertheless, it was a collaborative experience which included the lecturer, and the sharing and questioning helped clarify and guide the ITEs as they reflected on their plans and related activities. Hoffman et al. (2019) identified that students needed opportunity for coaching support during their learning experiences. Maydew (2025) found that the role of the lecturer in providing a safe and supportive environment for learning was critical to the development of the ITEs professional success. The weekly tutorial sessions in this class therefore provided this ideal coaching support time where the ITEs and lecturer could discuss, debrief, plan and reflect on the tutoring sessions.

Reflecting, thinking and being challenged is critically important in helping ITE students understand and develop their approach to teaching, learning through their failures and successes, which then carries through to their activities. It is essential that the ITEs actually implement their ideas in a trial mode during the tutoring sessions to both understand the school student's needs and how they do or do not learn. Also, being able to recognise what will engage the school student and motivate them to develop and grow their reading skills. This means that the ITEs have to attempt and try something in order to assist the school student. The ITEs realised through this experience that they cannot fumble along through the tutoring sessions but need to be focused on a specific reading goal, coupled with engaging reading activities relevant to the school student. Some ITE students focused on their student's interests such as football. However, some were looking and watching other ITEs trying to figure out what they needed to do.

During the collaborative group sessions opportunities arose where there was a need for ITE students to be innovative and creative in order to address a challenge. Sometimes this occurred when one student suggested something which triggered creative solutions from the group. Often activities were adapted or enhanced to attempt to assist a peer in addressing their challenge. The collaborative group became the solutions-focused group assisting each other and effectively working as a solutions team. The group made each individual think about what they had done or were planning in greater depth and to specifically target the reading goal.

The fact that all ITEs were engaged in tutoring a Year Three to Six student for reading meant that across the collaborative group ITEs were teaching potentially a different year level student with a different reading goal, for example – decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency. This meant that each of the ITEs in the collaborative tutorial group had different goals and school students, however, all could learn from each other. In addition to this, each ITEs was able to contribute to the weekly discussion and knowledge learning about teaching reading by identifying and unpacking the various steps needed to achieve the targeted reading skills. This process ensures that the ITEs have increased knowledge and higher self-efficacy in teaching reading. Again, helping to ensure that ITEs are classroom ready and able to effectively teach reading.

There were some limitations to this study. The selection of participants excluded the primary aged student, the classroom teacher as well as the parents. In the future, these participants could be added to investigate the effectiveness of the tutoring program implemented for the school student. Another limitation was that the tutoring was only implemented for one semester focusing on tutoring reading with

students across Years Three to Six (eight-to thirteen-year-olds). Potentially broadening the program or repeating the activity in another course to allow ITEs to tutor students for reading across Years Foundation to Two (five-to seven-year-olds) would add to the knowledge, skill development and self-efficacy of ITEs in teaching reading. A further area of study could be the tracking of individual ITEs in this program across their learning journey identifying their pivotal moments of understanding and self-efficacy development. This could contribute to a deeper understanding of skill development in knowing how to teach reading. Additional areas of investigation could include how ITEs assess the reading goals and what data they use to support the primary-aged students' learning gains.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on exploring the ITE students' learning journeys while they implemented an individualized reading intervention program with a primary aged student. The elements that are essential for ITE students during this program are that they have a primary aged student to tutor, a peer group with the lecturer that meets weekly after each tutoring session as well as time to plan and reflect on the program and their learning through the process. The ITEs found this learning experience so helpful and specific to their needs for teaching reading by engaging the primary student, setting a reading goal, experiencing the role of the teacher, planning the tutoring session, and networking and collaborating with their peers under the guidance and assistance of the lecturer.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sherene Hattingh: Writing – original draft, Investigation. **Marion Shields:** Writing – original draft, Investigation.

Ethics statement

This research project (ETH. 2022.015) was granted ethical approval by the Avondale Human Research Ethics Committee. All aspects of this research adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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