Introduction and background

TO PROPERLY CONTEXTUALISE this study, it is essential that the reader has a clear understanding of the sheer size of the Australian continent. Distance education is a necessary feature of our education system because of the vast distances between homes and towns in rural and remote parts of the nation.

Australia is the world’s largest island of 7,659,861 square kilometres and, despite its size, it is regarded to have a relatively small population of 19.47 million. There are vast expanses of remote land utilised for farming cattle and sheep on properties known as stations. It is not uncommon for the land area of individual stations to be one million acres. Many Aboriginal communities also inhabit the remotest parts of Australia with minimal access to services the larger towns and cities enjoy. Proximity to schools is clearly an issue for families living and working in these regions, and thousands of Australian children living in these contexts have their education delivered remotely via Schools of Isolated and Distance Education. These schools, in some of the larger states, operate several Schools of the Air in major rural centres. The latter schools were originally set up to facilitate learning programs and to provide relative proximity between home and school via HF radio and occasional visits from itinerant or school-based teachers. Home-based tutors organise the daily delivery of lessons that have been provided by the Schools of Distance Education. While some home tutors facilitate the learning of just one child, the majority of tutors are parents who have two or more children working at their respective lessons at one time. The focus of this report is on the pedagogical practices of these home tutors.

In 1991, the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991) called for greater proficiency in English and ‘effective’ literacy for all Australians. When funding was allocated to implement this policy, the amount of funding allocated to literacy development in the early years was relatively small. In 1998 the publication of Literacy for all: The challenge for Australian schools (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998) resulted in a plan for literacy policies in Australian schools starting in the first years of school:

The government believes that schools should equip all children who enter education with basic literacy and numeracy skills. It is in the first years of school that all children can be helped to acquire the foundation skills, which will set them on the path of success in reading and writing... (p. 8).

This national policy resulted in the allocation and targeting of resources to areas of educational disadvantage, they
also placed greater emphasis on the importance of learning in the early years of schooling.

Children receiving their schooling through distance education were one group who were found, on national standardised tests, to have poorer literacy results than children the same age who were attending a mainstream school. As a result of these findings, distance education in the early years of schooling was a sector targeted to receive research funding from the Australian Department of Education Science and Training.

This funding resulted in a research group working on a project to investigate the practices of teaching and learning in distance education settings. The project title was Project to investigate improving literacy outcomes of distance education students in the early years of school (Dole et al., 2005). This multidisciplinary, cross-institutional group developed a large-scale study that comprised home visits to remote families using distance education services. Questionnaires were administered to home tutors and interviews were conducted with distance education school authorities, distance education teachers, home tutors and the children themselves. Our brief was to research the role of home tutors in supporting literacy and numeracy development and the use of technology in distance education with children in the first three years of schooling. We were to document the best practice examples of home tutoring, in the form of case studies.

To this end, the principal of each school providing distance education in Australia was invited to nominate two home tutors they believed were exemplary in their tutoring practices in literacy and numeracy; each school was visited by a member of the research team and, following interviews with school-based personnel, the nominated tutors were visited on site. The aim of the research was to describe best practice so the features of sound pedagogy could be used as the basis for future planning. In total we conducted 45 case studies across seven states and territories. The full report and complete set of case studies are available in the Department of Education Science and Training report titled Project to investigate improving literacy and numeracy outcomes of distance education students in the early years of schooling: Project Report (Dole et al., 2006).

An 'observation schedule' was developed based on literature related to sound pedagogical practices. Six categories of practice were identified and these have been explained later in this paper. The observation schedule was used as part of the home visiting phase of our study and was applied during a standard lesson selected by the home tutor. The visits to the remote families, conducted by the researchers, were intended to examine and document the teaching/learning practices of the home tutors regarded by the school as exemplary practitioners. The observation schedule, field notes, anecdotal notes, conversation transcripts, and a semi-structured interview with tutors and children were the instruments used to collect data during the home visits.

This paper reports the findings based predominantly on data gathered with the observation schedule, although the analysis took place in the context of complementary interviews and surveys.

The importance of context and vital role of families

Distance education teachers based in Schools of the Air and Schools of Isolated and Distance Education rely predominately on parents, and occasionally a hired 'governess', to fulfil the role of home tutor. The home tutors' task is to support children on a daily basis for their formal schooling in the early years. Some families using the service are itinerant workers on fishing charters, mines and rural properties, while others might be travelling families or those located temporarily overseas. The materials supplied by the distance education provider are almost always in the form of prescribed content in prepared paper-and-pencil-based materials, although there is increasing access to online material. The materials are organised so that home tutors and students can work through the learning program in a linear and chronological fashion.

For the purpose of our study, we adopted a socio-cultural perspective that recognises young children's understandings about literacy develop within their socio-cultural and linguistic communities ... in the social contexts of their everyday lives (Diaz & Makin, 2002, p. 3). Of course, not only literacy but all learning is situated in these broader contexts of influence. In light of this, it was decided to observe, as naturalistically as possible, the home tutors and children within their unique setting. This view was crucial to the design and credibility of our research in conducting home-based lesson observations. Data collected in the national survey of home tutors conducted as part of our project indicated that:

Home tutors/supervisors spend approximately four to five hours per day in face-to-face teaching with their children, and spend on average one hour per day in preparation for home tutoring/supervising. Compared to the amount of one-to-one contact students in a non-distance education classroom get with their teachers, this is an extraordinary length of time (Dole et al., 2005, p. 135).

In light of this 'extraordinary' amount of face-to-face teaching, the observation and documentation of actual practices and use of learning materials by home tutors in distance education contexts became a critical feature of our study.

Volume 32 Number 2 June 2007
The role of the school-based teacher

School-based teachers were responsible for implementing lessons with their students usually twice a week. In some schools, these lessons were conducted via two-way radio, but in most settings there is increasing use of technologies such as teleconferencing and online lessons via the Internet. Depending on individual circumstances, school-based teachers usually provided brief private telephone lessons. These often involved assessment tasks such as miscue analysis via reading aloud or working through specific activities that the child was finding difficult. Teachers also made themselves available for assisting parents/home tutors by phone as required. The teachers visit each site for one or two days, at least once a year, and this is usually an opportunity to conduct modelled lessons, undertake assessments, implement art, health and physical education activities, and generally build rapport with the student and their family.

The home-based school setting

The researchers visited a wide variety of teaching and learning environments. Some homes had purpose-built or demountable classrooms adjoining the main homestead, complete with whiteboard, desks, well charts and a library. Other homes had simply converted a spare room into a classroom, while others used the family dining table as a dual-purpose space. Wherever the lessons took place, there was usually always evidence of some 'traditional' classroom features, including posters displaying timetables, classroom rules and reward/achievement charts.

The instrument

Because of the scale of the project and the number of researchers gathering field data, the research team decided to develop a format for documenting the in-home practices of home tutors. Hence the observation schedule was developed to ensure consistency in the gathering of data and the recording of interactions and relationships within this teaching and learning situation. The focus was on observing the use and extent of some practices identified by the researchers and with reference to the literature in early childhood education, literacy and numeracy education, and information and communication technology (ICT) in education.

The project brief, determined by the funding body, was to document the practices of home tutors, and therefore the focus of our observation was primarily on the actions and interactions of the home tutor in the distance education setting. Hoogsteder, Maier and Elbers (1998) have noted that the focus on the adult-child interaction is problematic since 'the focus is on how adults direct and control the interaction, while there is a conspicuous lack of interest in the children's contribution' (p. 179). We are in full agreement with this view, hence our instrument was just one of a group of instruments including field notes, anecdotal and conversation transcripts, and interviews with children and tutors.

We also note the assumption embedded in observation of the home tutor's practice, that the learning taking place is dependent on the tutor's practice and knowledge of accepted methods of teaching and learning. In reality, our approach to the fieldwork was more holistic, since we believe that the child's learning dispositions (Carr, 2001) also have a major role in what learning actually takes place in a given context (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001). The collection of data other than the observation schedule is reported in full in the project report (Dole et al., 2005).

The researchers needed to anticipate, prior to the fieldwork, a range of practices that might be seen, since no previous research of this type had been conducted. Hence provision was made to document examples of optimal and less than optimal practices of home tutors. These practices were organised into six categories on the observation schedule, which we briefly justify and describe as follows:

1. Active learning

The observation schedule was designed to identify the extent to which learning was active or passive. It has been well-documented that children are active participants in their own learning (Nolan, Kilderry & O'Grady, 2006). This view is well-established in the field, with reference to the importance of direct 'hands-on' experiences being articulated early in the twentieth century by Isaacs (1938) who noted: 'It is not what we do to the child or for the child that educates him, but what we enable him to do for himself, to see and learn and feel and understand for himself, and this is equally true of the young infant, the school child and the adolescent' (p. 83).

With regard to literacy and numeracy learning and teaching with ICT, we were interested to document the role of play and hands-on activities in developing concepts and language associated with early learning in these areas. In particular, we wondered how much encouragement home tutors were given, in the printed set materials and by their school-based teachers, to engage young children in active playful learning experiences. We regard the child as a protagonist in the learning environment and hence opportunity for the child to actively engage in learning through play...
forms part of what we regard as optimal pedagogy for learning in early childhood (Perry, 1998; Wassermann, 2000).

2. Enquiry/problem solving

The observation schedule was designed to focus on the amount of emphasis placed on problem-solving and the process of learning compared with that placed on arriving at a particular correct response. As Borich and Tombari (1997) have noted:

A constructivist approach to teaching and learning does not deny the importance of factual knowledge, but it does emphasise that the best way for learners to apply this knowledge is to put it in the larger, more lifelike context that stimulates learners to reflect, organise, analyse and problem solve (p. 80).

It is widely argued that children must have opportunities to connect new learning with prior knowledge and experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). Adult support for making connections between the known and the unknown is regarded as crucial to scaffolding learning in the early years (Jordan, 2004). Adults can facilitate this by providing examples and by talking about strategies to solve problems (Raban, Ure & Weniganayake, 2003).

3. Play

By observing teaching and learning in the home, the researchers wanted to identify the extent to which playful experiences were utilised in learning and whether there were opportunities for child-initiated and spontaneous experiences to influence the daily program. An important dimension of this category was to decide whether experiences observed were open-ended or closed tasks, since it is clear that in a rapidly changing world teaching children not what, but how to think and learn is paramount (Briggs & Potter, 1999; Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001; Hargreaves, 2004). Play in its various forms is widely held as the single most important pedagogical tool of the early childhood educator (Moyses, 1994; Perry, 1998; Wasserman, 2000). Hence the degree to which play was part of the distance education programs in early childhood was crucial in our observations.

4. Language and literacy

The schedule was designed to document the teaching/learning situations where the home tutor engaged the child in conversations to do with meaning and context of the task. We wanted to compare this with time spent giving information and procedural instructions.

The importance of integrated learning has been highlighted by Freebody and Luke (1990), who argue for a balanced approach to teaching/learning to read, involving breaking codes (sounds), understanding the meaning of the text, using texts functionally and analysing texts critically. They argue for the integration with critical thinking of reading, writing, talking, listening and viewing. In observing language and literacy, we were also interested in exploring the practical dimensions of Dyson's (2000) work, and examining the variety of strategies utilised and the ways children and tutors appropriated local cultural and contextual understandings in the course of the 'lesson'.

5. Numeracy

The observation schedule was designed to examine whether learning experiences related to real-world contexts of the child and if the emphasis was on understanding rather than getting the right answer. Connections with everyday experiences are seen as crucial to the development of numeracy skills and attitudes (Kamii, 2000). In addition, Pound (1999) and Schoenfeld (1992) have argued the development of mathematical thinking and a positive disposition towards numeracy experiences are forged through the exploitation of authentic numeracy experiences in the early years.

6. Technology

The observation schedule targeted specific use of ICT and whether these were used spontaneously and as an integrated part of the inquiry process or used only as directed in the set materials. 'One of the ways that we can make science and design and technology relevant to children is by giving them the time and free access to the tools, instruments and materials that they require to investigate, design and make for themselves' (Siraj-Blatchford & MacLeod-Brudenell, 1999, p. 87). We were interested in whether the technology was used in ways that simply replicated old pedagogies using new technologies (Pyungho, 2001; Yelland, 2002) or whether technologies were being used to innovate and create in ways that were not possible using other materials and equipment (Resnick, 2000). A recent report from the Australian Curriculum Corporation (2005) noted 'making technologies available does not of itself result in changed learning methods ... effective use of ICT in education requires appropriate pedagogies' (p. 3). This supported our notion that, while various technologies might be available to distance education students, the pedagogies adopted to utilise them would determine the degree to which the transformative capacity of technologies would be realised.
Table 1. Observation schedule of a literacy or numeracy lesson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific pedagogy</th>
<th>Not evident/evident/very evident Examples/notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Active learning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Concrete activity with objects</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Experience has a real-world purpose or application</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assists child to connect prior and new knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Passive learning: e.g. rote or child lacks interest/bored</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Enquiry/problem-solving</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Posing alternative views/ideas</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Seeking further information: internet, reference books, video, other</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assists child to formulate questions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Focus is more on process than product</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Product-oriented: one solution/correct response only</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Play</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Child-initiated</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teacher-directed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Includes culturally appropriate resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A variety of open-ended materials provided</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Play used as a reward for completion of 'work'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No play experiences observed, e.g. work book or set tasks only</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Language and literacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses open-ended questions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Uses motivating statements</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provides encouragement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Models appropriate vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Gives information</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Engages in conversation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provides opportunities for self-assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Active listening</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Language observed is mainly procedural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Numeracy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Situations related to real-world contexts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child encouraged to verbalise thinking and solution strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher seeks justification solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Materials used embody mathematical concepts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Materials are used to promote thinking and understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasis on right answers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Technology</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ICT spontaneously used to utilise a 'teachable moment'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ICT integrated seamlessly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ICT used to expand thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ICT used as alternative to handwriting</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• No use of ICT obvious</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In practice, the schedule was used to record naturalistic observations. The instrument was designed as a tool for qualitative analysis, with ratings being assigned to particular practices according to whether they were 'not evident' or 'very evident'. The schedule was also used to describe the extent of particular practices. The observation schedule and its six headings proved useful in providing examples of pedagogical practices we regarded as optimal and those that were less than optimal. Data from the observation schedule was analysed in conjunction with a more detailed set of field notes, which were completed as soon as possible after the lesson.

**Case study examples**

In the following section, we will examine several examples of the data collected through the observation schedule and the ways in which the practices of home tutors may be interpreted using our instrument as a starting point.

**Case One**

On the morning of the observation, the home tutor (mother) explained to the researcher that the child (5 years old) participating in the lesson had difficulty remembering the days of the week. The child had a fixed interest on tigers in her writing. The tutor had come up with the idea of writing a book with each new page commencing with a day of the week. There was also the added encouragement to write about other animals, with the child selecting the country she would like to travel to, then deciding on the animal she would find there. The tutor had replaced the set literacy work with this new work the child was about to commence.

At the start of the lesson the tutor opened the atlas and asked, ‘Where has Charlie been so far?’ The child responded, ‘In Africa and India.’ The tutor then asked, ‘Where would you like to send him next?’ The child replied, ‘I would like to send him to Australia, then I can send him off again.’ The child and the tutor then looked at the days of the week and the child was able to say the two days that Charlie had already travelled; these were Monday and Tuesday. The child then said the story today would commence ‘On Wednesday…’ The child quickly participated in writing her sentence about a kangaroo. The tutor asked her what colour the kangaroo was and they discussed the different colours of male and female kangaroos. The tutor asked whether the child was going to draw a male or female kangaroo. When the child replied ‘female’, the tutor then asked what it would also need if it was a female. When the child had completed part of her sentence she asked for help with the words ‘saw’ and ‘kangaroo.’ The tutor gave positive feedback and encouragement for the concentration and effort being made by the child.

Analysis of this small segment indicated there were many examples of optimal pedagogy being evident:

1. The tutor followed the child’s interests.
2. She showed flexibility in changing the literacy task to suit the child.
3. She continually helped the child to make connections with prior knowledge (What days of the week had been written already?).
4. She made links with the child’s own experience and talked about her pet kangaroo.
5. A warm relationship and conversations of interest were evident.
6. The tutor asked open questions such as ‘What animal will you find in Australia?’
7. The child was involved in choice and decision-making regarding drawing materials and colours etc.
8. Positive, descriptive feedback was continually given.

**Case Two**

In the second case study, the home tutor taught a lesson based on the set materials sent from the school. The lesson, conducted with a kindergarten girl, was ‘making a weather chart’. During the lesson the tutor read a non-fiction text to the child and engaged her in a conversation about the pictures of different types of weather. The tutor seized incidental opportunities to maximise the connections the child made between the text and her own experiences. The tutor engaged the child in a conversation about the weather they had experienced on the station recently, and at one point took the child outside and sat down with her to look up at the sky. She then talked with the child and asked her to predict tomorrow’s weather and to draw inferences from what she observed in the sky. The tutor gave the child considerable encouragement to check her ideas and self-evaluate by asking follow-up questions such as ‘is that right?’

This scenario was interpreted as having many instances where practices were deemed to provide evidence of optimal pedagogy in this context:

1. Engaging the child in a conversation rather than taking a didactic approach.
2. Linking the learning activity with the child’s own experience and prior knowledge.
3. Using active participation in the environment as a tool for learning.
4. Using open-ended questions to reinforce concepts and strengthen the child’s understandings.
5. Encouraging the child to self-evaluate.

These excerpts, documenting what we regarded as examples of what we have termed optimal pedagogy, contrasted with several other case studies where the tutor we observed utilized less than optimal pedagogical practices. These are exemplified in the following case study.

**Case Three**

A governess was the home tutor in this setting, and she used a commercial mathematics workbook for the entire lesson. The five-year-old completed a worksheet drawing, grouping pictures of cars, counting them, recording numerals and then colouring them in. No concrete materials were used during the lesson, and the child was compliant and passive throughout. The focus of the lesson was completing the worksheet and getting the right answer. The task was introduced by reading instructions aloud from the book. There was no conversation during the lesson other than procedural information being repeated in the form of a question such as ‘you’ve drawn three, you need to do six, how many more do you need?’ When the tasks were too difficult for the child, the tutor decided to abandon the lesson.

We interpreted this lesson as giving little evidence of optimal pedagogy, for the following reasons:

1. The tutor had her focus only on the child completing the set work correctly.
2. The tutor and child did not engage in any dialogue other than that related to the task at hand.
3. No connections with the child’s prior experiences, interests or prior learning were made explicit.
4. The tutor did not use concrete materials to support the child’s active participation in developing the concepts.
5. The child was engaged in a product-driven task with little opportunity for higher order thinking.

As a footnote to this case study example, and in fairness to the tutor involved, we acknowledge that the home tutor was not trained and was following guidelines and materials set by a remote, school-based teacher who was responsible for the type of program engaged with by the child.

**What did the instrument allow us to do?**

The above examples from the case studies highlight that the Observation Schedule assisted us in identifying the extent to which practices in each of the six areas were utilised by home tutors. We recognise, that, while the schedule did provide a means of mapping our observations against some different styles and approaches to teaching, it did not reflect the attitudes, values and socio-cultural understandings underpinning these practices. Hence the observations proved helpful in providing a list of observable practices that indicated particular pedagogical styles. However, the actions and interactions we observed are situated in a context of relationships as well as in attitudes and values. These broader contexts often supply the ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘why’ of the actions (Hoogsteder, Maier & Elbers, 1998).

The instrument also allowed us to capture some of the diversity and complexity of the work of home tutors in distance education. Since we had different researchers conducting field visits in a variety of geographically isolated sites, the instrument allowed us to share a common lens through which to view the practices of home tutors. Comparable field notes across the research team nationally enabled us to come together to analyse data from a range of settings with comparable information. This strategy was enormously helpful in the context of our study where the scale and distances we were working with were vast.

By determining a shared understanding of optimal and less than optimal practices, and the extent to which they were evident or not evident, the research team was enabled to conduct qualitative fieldwork in a time-efficient manner without significantly compromising comparability of data.

**Analysis of national case studies**

In this section we will analyse the overall picture of the case study data at a national level. A majority of the field study cases documented did exemplify some aspects of sound pedagogy, as outlined within the Observation Schedule; however, there were a few cases in which practices were not deemed pedagogically sound. This following analysis attempts to explain the existence of these practices, leading to some recommendations for future program development.

Cases where there was evidence of the less than exemplary practice, other than the one described above in Case Three, were usually the result of a home tutor/supervisor focusing only on the child completing the set work correctly, and where there was little or no engagement in conversation or elaboration beyond the set materials. Hence few opportunities existed for tutors to make connections with the child’s prior experiences, interests or learning. Tutors in these cases reported feeling pressure to complete work in time and to avoid digressing into areas that might be of interest or relevance to the child.
This points to limitations in the program that are embedded in the materials provided and, more importantly, the relationship with the school-based teacher. A lack of formal training, experience or confidence may lead to home tutors having a heavy reliance on materials the school provides. Many tutors felt that, if all the work was not complete, they had not done their best to teach their child. The tutors who engaged in these practices often lacked the pedagogical knowledge to make judgements about the set work or the connections between activities and materials that might support or extend a child’s learning.

Our analysis of the practices of home tutors documented through the Observation Schedule was complemented by interviews following the observations. These interviews often helped the researchers to understand the thinking behind the practices we observed.

One important theme arising from these discussions was that most home tutors/supervisors indicated that the school-based teacher’s role was to adjust and modify set programs to cater for the specific needs of individual children. Home tutors did not, in general, feel equipped to make such decisions. It seemed, however, that most of these changes took place only when requested by the tutor. In other words, school-based teachers were not usually reported as taking the initiative to individualise programs for their students. Where this did take place, home tutors were happy to implement modified or replacement activities such as developing personal dictionaries, using games to reinforce concepts, writing letters and emails, or counting the internet to research a topic.

Additional pressure on the home tutor comes from the dual role of being a parent and a teacher. For beginning home tutors, isolation and feeling overwhelmed by their task as a tutor often combined to fuel a lack of confidence in approaching the school for support. There was a sense that tutors felt they ‘should’ be competent and that they were not performing the tasks as well as they should. Hence, the informal network formed among home tutors is a vital and unseen ingredient in successful distance education in Australia. More experienced tutors often informally mentor the beginning tutors on the phone, at school camps and via email. The most successful relationships seemed to be those where teachers acknowledged parents as their partner in the education program and where experienced tutors were willing to share their “tips” with others.

With regard to the observation of exemplary practice in literacy and numeracy the early years, it appeared that many of the successful tutors used intuitive strategies for developing children’s ideas and concepts.

**Recommendations and conclusion**

Two major recommendations arise from the observations conducted with home tutors. First, the case for providing professional development and adequate training to home tutors is strong. The tutor’s role is complex and requires flexibility and a holistic ‘picture’ of the curriculum and early childhood pedagogy in order to confidently modify set materials and make spontaneous decisions to exploit the learning in everyday situations. The development of explicit models and instruction in relation to good home tutor practice is clearly worthwhile and necessary.

Second, the partnerships between school-based teachers and home tutors need to be fostered in ways that enhance the learning and teaching program. This means that teachers and tutors can respond to the needs of the child together. Regular collaborative planning would facilitate this and would situate each particular child at the centre of the program. In this way, the program can be negotiated, responsive and flexible. This approach would emphasise the development of partnerships that foster learning through understanding and connection, rather than simply completing a series of activities in a linear and pre-determined fashion.

This paper has described some aspects of a national study investigating literacy and numeracy practices of home tutors in distance education settings. In particular we have focused on the use of the Observation Schedule as an instrument for collecting field observations in a systematic and naturalistic way. The instrument was very helpful in documenting the presence or lack of sound pedagogical practices used during a 30-minute literacy or numeracy lesson. In the broader study, it was useful to combine the data from this instrument with in-depth interviews to gain a clearer picture of the ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘why’ of the home tutors’ actions. In subsequent papers we will explore these dimensions of the study.

**References**


SCHOLARSHIP

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THE JEAN DENTON MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

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This scholarship fund was established by the Kindergarten Union of South Australia in 1977 and is now administered by the Jean Denton & Lillian de Lissa Scholarships Committee and the Public Trustee.

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The purpose of the scholarship is to advance knowledge in early childhood education. The scholarship is available to any person or persons working in Australia.

The scholarship is for postgraduate studies or advanced research either within or outside Australia, the purpose or the benefit of which will be applied in the early childhood area within Australia. The scholarship is granted for a one year period.

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