

Literacy improvement in a primary school : A case study

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The importance of early literacy learning success for all students has almost universal recognition. Indeed, many school systems use measures of literacy achievement to evaluate and describe the effectiveness of classrooms and schools. Not all school populations, however, acquire literacy knowledge with the same level of facility.

This paper describes a literacy intervention innovation in a primary school that was implemented on a whole school basis. The school had experienced comparatively low levels of literacy success for several years. Improvement required all staff to evaluate and, where necessary, modify literacy pedagogy. Whole school change that takes account of variation in staff knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and levels of commitment is frequently problematic.

The innovation was in the context of a learning community. All staff, as active members of the community, targeted literacy learning and teaching explicitly and systematically, within a model of professional learning and enhancement.

The context for the innovation

The project was implemented in a primary school in metropolitan Melbourne. Statewide assessment indicated that in 1996 the school had comparatively low levels of literacy. In 1996, 80 % of its students performed below state literacy benchmarks and 84 % of the Preps were judged to be at risk of severe literacy underachievement. It was in the most potentially educationally disadvantaged category of school, with families highly likely to receive educational assistance.

The school had a strong orientation of ‘whole language’ approaches to literacy education. The observation that these procedures had not successfully enhanced students’ literacy knowledge was attributed to factors such as the students’ general environments, lack of motivation to read and lack of reading models. The teachers believed that it was unreasonable to ‘expect the students to change’.

Background to the innovation

A principal appointed in 1996 identified the need for literacy enhancement. He did not accept the prognosis that students in the district were unable to learn literacy. He put in place procedures for monitoring students’ literacy learning progress and noted that two literacy innovations in the school at the time, an early years literacy program used in the first three years and an intervention program for those who had literacy learning difficulties, Reading Recovery, were insufficient to improve the literacy knowledge for many of the students. He evaluated these programs as requiring an entry level of knowledge not available to several of his students. As well, the parents had low level of expectation of their children’s ability to learn successfully at school. A consultant in literacy education was invited to work with the school to implement an enhancement program.

The innovation.

The innovation was a school-wide professional development activity intended to broaden teachers’ understanding of the factors that influence early literacy learning and to map these into

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teaching procedures to target students' literacy learning needs. Many schools have identified the need for literacy improvement. The aspects of the present activity that make it innovative are its integration and operationalisation of several features including (1) the underpinning beliefs and expectations that all students in the school to learn to be literate and that all staff in the school could teach them to achieve this, (2) that both learning and teaching need to be explicit, systematic and consistent, (3) that relevant existing knowledge, both students' and teachers', provide the starting point for any change, (4) that professional learning requires leadership, collaboration, the opportunity to contextualise, trial and evaluate novel practice and needs to be data-based at any time, with the opportunity to see that this practice is leading to improved learning outcomes.

The school used an explicit model of literacy processing, the 'multiple levels of text processing' model (Munro, 1999) to identify mismatches between the school's literacy education curriculum and the literacy knowledge of its students. This model examines learning at the word, sentence, conceptual, topic and dispositional levels of text and the associated metacognitive and oral language.

The school used the model to examine students' literacy learning profiles. This indicated that the students lacked the competence necessary to support literacy learning in the areas of sound knowledge (phonological and phonemic), vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, effective listening strategies and task engagement strategies for learning.

The school also used the model to plan an intervention program at all grade levels that targeted initially word and sentence level knowledge, with associated phonological and phonemic knowledge. When students had made gains here, the focus moved to conceptual and topic level literacy knowledge, with teaching in the areas of strategic listening and higher order thinking strategies. The model allowed the school and teachers to see at any time the literacy knowledge that was in place and what might be targeted next.

The school developed a learning community focus that involved following key steps :

- The leadership team was challenged to improve the literacy knowledge of the school and a vision of what literacy learning could be like was framed and explicated. To do this the leadership team described explicitly and in operational ways what they 'saw' the students and teachers doing and what the school community was fostering in three years time when the goal had been achieved. This led the leadership team to consider the gradual development of a 'code of literacy teaching practice' that would encapsulate the approach to literacy learning and teaching in the school.
- The leadership team unpacked the vision with staff, negotiated and allocated parts of it with individual members of staff and groups. These staff were responsible for operationalising each component of the vision. Some aspects of the goal were not negotiable, for example, the belief that all of the students could be able readers.
- The roles of different professionals in the learning community were identified. The school leadership team needed to learn how to lead the school's literacy learning focus, for example, how to use effective instructional leadership, how to develop and implement a leadership team's literacy plan and how to put in place conditions for optimising effective literacy pedagogy. Classroom teachers needed to improve their knowledge how to implement effective literacy teaching procedures in their classes. A key aspect of this involved teachers learning collaboratively to trial and evaluate these. Leaders of literacy learning and teaching needed to be trained to foster, lead and support individual teacher growth.
- The school identified and collated existing staff knowledge about literacy learning and relevant teaching procedures . It was seen as important that existing staff knowledge be identified, acknowledged and valued. Whole school change can be more problematic than individual change. Teachers differ in their attitudes to literacy innovations, what they know or believe about literacy and how it can be most effectively taught and their

commitment to such as innovation. The innovation, to be successful, needed to take account of these.

- The school developed a broad action plan for professional learning about literacy. The plan synthesised: (1) the vision or goal; (2) the means by which the goal would be attained ; and (3) the collation of what staff knew of effective literacy learning and teaching and the resources available for the literacy initiative.
- The content to be learnt by staff was organised into 'digestible' units. A criterion here was the rate at which teachers could be expected to modify their teaching in authentic ways and to observe the outcomes of these changes while needing to do regular classroom teaching.
- The format for professional learning was the 'professional learning team'. Within each department the staff worked in small collaborative learning teams to pursue action research projects. Each team would be led by a 'leader of literacy learning'.
- An operational plan was developed. This included (1) the systematic mapping of the action plan into a set of professional learning activities and (2) indicators for monitoring progress in student achievement, outcomes for teaching staff, leaders of literacy learning, the school leadership team and other school community members.
- The outcomes of the learning were identified and shared with the community of learners.
- The community reviewed, evaluated the outcomes of the learning and used relevant outcomes to enhance literacy pedagogy knowledge.

Implementing the innovation

Aspects of the implementation described here include : (1) the 'un-packing' of the content to be learnt, (2) the teaching plan by which staff explored and implemented novel literacy teaching procedures and (3) how each department consolidated its new knowledge about 'best literacy pedagogy'.

The content to be learnt was organised into 'digestible' units The content learnt by the staff in each year is outlined below. Each area of content was introduced as providing possible options for dealing with literacy problems displayed by students and teaching strategies for enhancing literacy learning identified. Teachers working in professional learning teams researched teaching procedures from each area in their teaching and reported the outcomes to their colleagues. The content areas were as follows:

- In 1997, word reading knowledge, phonemic and phonological development were presented as options for dealing with current literacy problems
- In 1998 a plan for school wide phonological and phonemic knowledge enhancement was developed with examples of weekly teaching activities at each year level.
- In 1999 areas of oral language and strategic listening linked with literacy, including vocabulary development, listening comprehension, story schemas.
- In 2000-1 sentence, conceptual and topic level knowledge associated with literal, inferential and evaluative literacy comprehension.

Each area included a set of explicit instructional procedures and explicit student learning outcomes at all year levels. A focus was on teaching students how to use what they know when they read.

How the professional community learnt The procedures used to facilitate staff learning assisted teachers to modify their instruction, through collaborative teamwork, demonstration lessons and individual teacher coaching. They are shown in the following sequence. Teaching staff

- identified current problems in literacy learning as a need for change
- collated what they knew about how students learn literacy, reflected on their beliefs about literacy learning and identified what they didn't know but would like to know about literacy learning
- were introduced to aspects of the content as options or possibilities for improving learning and saw how each could unpack literacy difficulties,
- contextualised the new ideas by mapping them into teaching procedures and evaluated their teaching to see options for fine-tuning how they teach.
- saw the novel teaching procedures demonstrated and modelled in their classes and were coached to implement the procedures.
- worked in small professional learning teams to trial and evaluate the new teaching procedures in action research projects in their teaching and add them to their repertoire of literacy pedagogy, improve / fine-tune their teaching.
- reported the outcomes of their action research to a staff meeting, up-dated their teaching to benefit from the new literacy teaching knowledge, examined how it can become part of regular teaching practice.

Skilling the leaders of literacy learning Staff learning was led and supported by a literacy leadership team that had a sufficiently high level of literacy learning and of instructional leadership to foster and guide the staff learning process. Areas in which the leaders of literacy learning were trained and activities that they led in their teams included

- leading the dialogue about literacy learning, for example, assist staff to unpack students' literacy difficulties from a developmental learning perspective, lead staff to see options in their literacy teaching.
- developing procedures for identifying students' entry level literacy knowledge
- leading professional learning teams, assisting colleagues to plan, implement and evaluate action research activities
- developing action plans for enhancing teaching at the team level and the individual teacher level,
- coaching individual staff to implement more effective teaching, using effective instructional leadership procedures

How the learning community identified what it had learnt The knowledge gained by each teacher was shared with other members of the department and with the school community so that individual knowledge gains became group knowledge. Staff meetings twice a term were allocated to this sharing during the trialing of novel teaching procedures. At the end of each trial, each teacher reported the effect of the novel teaching procedure they trialed on observed student outcomes. Each outcome was described in terms of student achievement, level of student engagement, students' knowledge of how to be literate and their attitude to themselves as literacy learners.

The staff reviewed and evaluated what they had learnt. They reflected (1) evaluatively on what has been learnt about effective literacy pedagogy and identified valuable outcomes of the learning

and (2) 'into the future, identifying how they could incorporate the novel effective procedures into their teaching and develop them further. At the school level, ways of improving the school's code of teaching were identified. The professional body identified and planned the next part of the literacy enhancement path.

How the innovation has worked out in practice

As well as changing teacher behaviours, the innovation has changed student outcomes. In terms of educational achievement, in 1996, 80 % of the students in the school performed below state literacy benchmarks. In 2001, 90 % of their students are at or above them and in 2002 this has rose to 94 %. In 1996 84 % of Preps were judged to be at risk of severe literacy underachievement. This fell to 44 % in 1998 to 0 in 2001 and 2002. Trends in some of the indicators of student literacy learning progress are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : Trends in some of the indicators of student literacy learning progress for the school.

	1998	1999	2000	2001
Preps reading level 1 text with > 90 % accuracy	56 %	76 %	85 %	100 %
Grade 1 reading level 15 text with > 90 % accuracy	66 %	82 %	84 %	94 %
Whole school reading scores on Reading Progress Test : Standard score (mean = 100)	94	95	107	113

Not surprisingly, the level of progress in literacy learning over the last decade has attracted the attention of educators throughout Australia.

Conclusion

This literacy innovation is continuing. As with any innovative practice, its evolution moves in unexpected directions that usually yield additional insights into effective literacy pedagogy. The regular collection of this knowledge by the school ensures that few new discoveries are evaluated in terms of their potential contribution to its code of teaching practice. The school sees itself as a dynamic learning community in terms of literacy pedagogy.

Follow-up information ? All aspects of this innovation have been described in much greater detail in earlier papers. These include the following.

Munro J. (2003). Fostering literacy learning across the curriculum. *International Journal of Learning*, 10, 327-336.

Munro J. (2003). *Literacy improvement : Operationalising and contextualising a conceptual model*. Paper presented at the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement, January, 2003.

Munro, J. (2002): *Leading learning communities*. IARTV Seminar Series 119. IARTV: Jolimont, Vic.

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Munro J. (2000). Phoneme awareness span: a neglected dimension of phonemic awareness *Australian Developmental and Educational Psychologist*, 17, 1, 76- 89

Munro, J. (2000): *Coaching in Educational Contexts* IARTV: Jolimont, Vic.

Munro, J. (1999). *Assessing and teaching phonological knowledge*. Melbourne: ACER.

Munro, J. (1999). Plumbing the levels of reading: An information processing model of literacy learning difficulties. pp. 57 - 78. In D. Barwood, D. Greaves and P. Jeffrey (Eds.) *Teaching Numeracy and Literacy: Interventions and strategies for 'at risk' students*. Melbourne, Vic: AREA

Munro, J. (1998). The Phonemic-Orthographic nexus: The Phonemic-Orthographic Literacy Program. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 3, 2, 15-21.

Munro, J. (1998). Phonological and phonemic awareness: Their impact on learning to read prose and to spell. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 3, 2, 15-21.

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