Effective Practice in Education
Professional development case studies in Auckland and Northland schools

A rural primary school targets literacy achievement with a focus on reading
Debbie Lynch has been principal at Maromaku School for eight years and it is her first principal’s position. “My goal as principal is always to have children achieving at or above their literacy and numeracy levels and to produce good quality citizens,” says Debbie. As a teaching principal, her biggest challenge this year has been finding time for her and her teachers to inquire into their teaching practice and to keep the focus on student achievement. Being in the classroom has helped. “I am at the grass roots of literacy teaching and understand what’s working,” she says.

“As a teaching principal I am at the grass roots of literacy teaching and learning and understand what’s working”

Debbie Lynch
Principal, Maromaku School

A local cluster focus on literacy

As the literacy leader in her school, Debbie has been meeting regularly over the last four years in a regional cluster of local schools. Team Solutions literacy facilitator Kathy Hancock has worked with the cluster schools to help them raise student achievement in literacy, beginning with writing and, in 2009, sharpening the focus on reading.

“Working with the cluster has definitely helped us,” says Debbie. “We are all literacy leaders but most of us are teaching principals. Being in a little school, the cluster is a bit like an extension of our staff.”

Kathy Hancock worked with the literacy leaders’ cluster for two days each term in 2008-2009. Ministry of Education funding was available to assist with teacher release for these sessions. Kathy has worked hard with the literacy leaders to develop sustainability so that, from 2010, when the Ministry funding is reduced, there is capacity within the cluster to carry on the work. To this end, Kathy has helped mentor one of the literacy leaders, Kylie Cook from Kawakawa Primary School, who now acts as a lead facilitator. “The aim is to grow the people involved,” says Kathy. “We tried to plan for sustainability from day one.”

As a cluster facilitator, Kathy has helped the literacy leaders work to improve student literacy using a teaching as inquiry focus, establishing action plans for professional development. Initial discussions explored the need for literacy work to be embedded in authentic contexts aligning with students’ experiences and cultural connections. Kathy was able to work with individual schools to support them with their identified need. “One school wanted to focus on upskilling their team of literacy leaders to observe and give feedback,” says Kathy. “Another wanted in-class modeling from the facilitator and further work on data analysis.”

Observing Guided Reading practice

“This year, we started with the theory base of Guided Reading,” says Kathy. An initial step was to work with the literacy leaders using a range of resource materials focused on literacy, including Guided Reading DVDs, the Literacy Learning Progressions and the Ministry texts Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4 and Effective Literacy Practice in Years 4-8.

The next step was for the literacy leaders to work with the teachers in their own schools, asking questions such as, ‘If this is the theory, what would we expect to see in our classrooms?’ This information was brought
back to the cluster and collated so that everyone could reflect on it. From this, a tool to look at teacher practice in Guided Reading was developed. “It’s really an observation tool,” says Kathy, “that lead teachers can work with as they lead inquiry into their Guided Reading practice.” The tool is essentially a series of focused headings under which the teachers record evidence of their practice.

Kathy notes how valuable this tool has been. “Firstly, it was constructed with all the teachers. Secondly, the tool was a way for teachers to set goals for themselves in an informed way, based on evidence. Because we are working in a cluster, we needed to be able to design the professional development specifically to meet the needs of all our teachers across the schools. We collated the information from the observations to get an overall picture of Guided Reading across the cluster. Clear trends emerged. One of these was around discussion patterns in reading lessons where it became clear we needed to move towards more student-led discussion.”

Using the Guided Reading tool, teachers were able to select a goal for improving students’ reading skills. Some of the goals selected by teachers in the cluster have been:

• greater recognition of students’ prior learning in order to scaffold a learning programme
• becoming more evidenced based in lesson planning to inform teaching decisions
• developing strategies for generating more student-to-student and student-to-teacher discussion in classrooms so that there is a less dominant pattern of teacher-directed discussion.

Kathy used the STAR (Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading) data from the cluster schools. “We discussed the trends, strengths and areas to focus on,” says Kathy, who supported literacy leaders with observations to inquire into links between theory and practice.

The STAR data showed that reading comprehension was an area where student achievement was lowest. Literacy leaders co-constructed a goal to develop more explicit teaching and learning strategies to improve students’ reading comprehension. Modeling and feedback became important practices for achieving this goal.

“Teaching practice can be described as truly effective only when it has a positive impact on student achievement”
Ministry of Education, Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8, p.8.

Maromaku School’s focus areas
Supporting Maromaku School with student-led conferencing was a main focus for Kathy’s work in 2008. She worked with principal Debbie Lynch, as the literacy leader, and with the other teachers at the school, observing their practice during reading lessons twice per term over three terms. In 2009, Kathy worked with Debbie through the cluster sessions to develop her skills in observing teachers and giving feedback on their teaching of reading.

Student achievement data
Kathy also worked with teachers at Maromaku School to develop skills in three-way conferencing with parents and students. She helped teachers to communicate learning behaviours and expectations with students.

“Kathy helped to form valid baseline data and targets that focus on what we found from the data and what we know about our learners. She worked with us to design valid professional development to move teachers and students on,” says Debbie. Kathy states that this approach is an example of weaving the key competencies into learning and places the student at the heart of learning. This helped keep the momentum and consistency to retain a focus on literacy achievement.

Teachers are now more skilled at using student achievement data to inform their practice and make decisions about tailoring their programmes to meet student needs. Kathy worked with the teachers on using spreadsheets, managing the eTAP web-hosted SMS system and managing assessment tools such e-asTTle, which the cluster schools have been working with this year, through their association with Team Solutions. “Kathy provided us with step by step guides on how to extract and process data accurately,” says Debbie. “She has helped us better understand what the data is telling us about teaching and learning, and how to act on it.”

Students sit their e-asTTle reading test at Maromaku School
“The key thing,” says Kathy, “is whether students understand where they are at, where they are going next with their learning and, in partnership with their teacher, understand how to achieve this.”

**Shifts in teacher practice**

The teachers at Maromaku School have been focusing on observing each other’s practice and giving feedback to help improve literacy. “Kathy has helped us learn to model, observe and discuss our practice,” says Debbie.

How have teachers changed as a result of this professional development? Debbie sums it up: “The biggest change for us has been the focus on evidence. We set up the video and engaged in dialogue around our practice. This year we have focused our observation and modeling work on Guided Reading.” Significantly, there has been a greater sharing of evidence of student achievement with parents and with students.

**Shifts in student achievement**

Based on asTTle assessment, teachers identified a group of students requiring a more focused programme to meet their needs and provide support. The school identified 13 students in reading and 14 students in writing as their specific target group for raising achievement. “In our target students there have been some major shifts,” reports Debbie. “Over the course of the year, there has been improvement in asTTle results. Consistently and directly looking at data allows us to identify and focus on student achievement.”

When the Education Review Office (ERO) visited Maromaku School in term 3, 2009, the specific focus for the review was the quality of teaching and learning, especially in reading. ERO recognised that the recent professional development in literacy was producing results. Among areas of good performance identified by ERO were the analysis of achievement information, provisions to meet individual learning needs, children’s awareness of their reading abilities and the range of reading materials available.

**Community connections**

Greater connections have been made with the school’s community to discuss student learning and report student achievement. “We now have three-way parent-student-teacher interviews in term 1 where students talk about their learning,” says Debbie. “Students know where they are at and the data is shared with parents and together we plan what students will work on in the following term. The reading wedge graphs we use for juniors make it easy for parents to identify how their child is progressing.”

The focus on supporting teachers to develop their skills in three-way conferencing has paid off. The ERO report noted that parents and whānau take an active role in supporting the school’s reading programme, with children reading at home and whānau providing regular feedback on this activity to teachers.

Getting parents in to the school, especially fathers, to talk about the importance of reading has been effective this year. “We have had a father and an ex-student come in this year to be role models and help motivate students with their reading,” says Debbie. The school is also involved in the Duffy Books in Homes scheme with its theme ‘It’s cool to read’.

“**Consistently and directly looking at student data allows us to identify and focus on student achievement**”

**Debbie Lynch, principal**

**Leaders of learning**

“One of the great things has been to see the principals developing in their roles as leaders of learning in their schools,” says Kathy. As a teaching principal, Debbie Lynch is pleased to be closely connected to literacy learning in her school. She is passionate about providing books that students like to read. “It’s about developing that reading mileage and that love of reading.”

The cluster was able to access the expertise of Wayne Mills, senior lecturer at The University of Auckland’s Faculty of Education. “Wayne was great for helping the literacy leaders in the cluster explore the types of texts we should be purchasing to develop our children’s reading and ensure that teachers and students enjoy it,” says Debbie. “At our school we now give out lots of books as rewards. We have a winner of the week and, through the Duffy programme, we have our ‘Caught being good’ reward system.”

“*Every day our teachers read aloud to students and I love it when I see kids sitting around the school reading. I talk with students about my reading and so do the teachers and the teacher aides. We’re trying to grow a love of books and reading at this school.*”
Effective literacy practice

The Ministry of Education’s two resources Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4 and Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8 identify and describe features of literacy teaching practice that are clearly linked by national and international research to improved outcomes for students. This focus is significant given the increasing diversity of New Zealand students and the impact of technology on the ways in which they engage with texts.

The effective practice described in these books can be applied to the range of student needs including those of boys and girls, talented or gifted students, students from all types of backgrounds, students learning English as an additional language, and students experiencing difficulties in their literacy learning.

The six dimensions of effective practice

1. **Knowledge of literacy learning** encompasses knowledge about literacy as well as knowledge about literacy development.

2. **Knowledge of the learner** encompasses knowing about the pathway of progress for each student and about the patterns of progress for literacy learners in general at different points in their development.

3. **Instructional strategies** are the tools of effective practice including reading to students, guided and/or shared reading and writing and independent reading and writing.

4. **Engaging learners with texts** means placing the use and creation of texts at the heart of literacy learning. This involves using and creating rich texts. These relate to students’ interests, draw on and affirm their social and cultural identities, use authentic language, and motivate and challenge them as learners.

5. **Expectations** are the ideas that teachers, students, parents and communities have about students as learners - about their knowledge and expertise, their progress, and their achievement.

6. **Partnerships** are collaborative relationships (active, planned and dynamic) which contribute to and support students’ learning.


Acknowledgements

Effective Practice in Education: Professional development case studies in Auckland and Northland schools is a series of case studies that has been developed to demonstrate effective ways that schools work in partnership with Team Solutions. Each case study looks at innovative professional learning partnerships that bring about sustainable change in teaching practice to improve student achievement and engagement.

It is important we continue to share case studies of effective practice in literacy education. The New Zealand Curriculum (p6) clearly outlines the importance of literacy learning: “As language is central to learning and English is the medium for most learning in The New Zealand Curriculum, the importance of literacy in English cannot be overstated.”

School leaders interested in further reading on literacy learning can visit www.literacyonline.tki.org.nz

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Camilla Highfield, Director

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