

Principal's Sabbatical - Term 2 2008
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Executive Summary

Literacy teaching and learning is at the core of every school. The focus in recent years has been on raising the performance of students not achieving in literacy and while this is not a bad thing, New Zealand teachers and schools now have some catching up to do in providing ambitious literacy programmes for all students, particularly in the senior primary school.

Purpose of Sabbatical Project

To seek out and video exemplary literacy teaching in senior primary classrooms and create a short documentary film for teachers/schools

Background

I have had a career-long interest in literacy teaching and learning, mostly at the junior level. Early in my career I taught in multi-cultural schools in South Auckland and I became disillusioned with the books used to teach reading in junior classes and so I wrote my own with the kids - about everyday activities and class visits. I had studied photography at teachers' college so we illustrated many of our stories with photos. While in South Auckland I wrote and illustrated two books for Oxford University Press (*The Zoo* and *The Supermarket*). Later I contributed scripts to the Ready to Read revision and my story *My Bike* was published as part of the revised series and is still being read in schools 25 years later. I am firmly from the whole language camp and have been a strong advocate of writing personal narrative, and of reading real books, throughout my teaching career.

Activities undertaken

During my sabbatical I set out to find schools and teachers running effective literacy programmes in senior primary classes. I asked those in a position to know where these teachers and schools might be. I asked literacy advisors with the Ministry of Education, universities and colleges of education. I asked friends and colleagues who gave me people to contact. I even asked ERO and searched school reviews.

Many I contacted were reluctant to name names. Some provided other sources to ask, but not specific schools. Many e-mails went unanswered. So my thanks go to those people who did respond and provide leads. And thanks, too, to the schools I did visit, who all welcomed me and spent time giving me information and tours. I appreciate it and I've learnt lots from the experience.

I visited schools in Christchurch, Nelson, Wellington, Tauranga, and Auckland. I talked or corresponded with, literacy advisors in Christchurch, Nelson, Wellington, Waikato and Auckland. I talked literacy learning, the new New Zealand Curriculum, inquiry learning, school property and the weather - with principals, teachers and advisors.

I also followed leads on the Internet and some of the best contacts came serendipitously by making connections through Internet research. My sabbatical also enabled me to read and re-read books and articles that have long been nagging at me. I maintained a blog for much of the time, which ensured I got my thinking down while it was fresh.

A video about literacy teaching and learning classes in other schools become impossible due to the time constraints when touring and in developing the relationships required to film teachers in action. This remains a project for another day.

Findings - Inquiry Questions:

- What does highly effective literacy teaching in the senior primary school look like?

Definitions of 'effective' vary. At its baldest students in effective teachers' classes "make more progress than expected". While this is true, I think it is more than this; that the ends don't justify the means. In highly effective teachers' classes the means are as important as the ends and careful choices are made by these teachers about both 'what' and 'how' they teach literacy.

Effective literacy teaching looks integrated, looks dynamic, looks child centred; it builds on previous steps, is closely monitored, is taught within real contexts and is interesting and motivating.

- What do highly effective literacy teachers do differently?

Effective literacy teachers foster strong relationships with and between students. They create a climate of support and sharing in their classes. They know that learning to read and write is a social activity and, just like learning to walk or talk, it requires the input of caring and encouraging adults.

Effective teachers know their stuff. They know about books and read themselves. They know about writing and perhaps write themselves. They seek out quality writers and writing to use in their programmes. They encourage students to read and respond to quality texts. They have knowledge of words, grammar and spelling and can use this knowledge to develop student's understanding of how language works. They know that reading and writing are about sharing meaning. The focus of programmes is to develop understanding.

Effective literacy teachers integrate their own knowledge with data collected about learners to provide specific and timely feedback and next steps for each student. This is a continual process and leads to rich conversations with students about what they are reading or writing. All these processes are integrated, holistic, and dynamic. And frequent.

Effective literacy teachers think about their teaching. They read professionally as well as personally. They learn new stuff; synthesise, integrate and use new information, collegially and independently.

- What do students in their classes do differently?

Students in effective classes read and write for sustained periods. They write lots of personal narrative and value their own experiences, and their own 'voice', in their writing. They have the concepts and vocabulary needed to talk about what they read and what they write. They share their own thinking, reading and writing, and support the efforts of others. They build on what they already know, and can see and make connections between the different and varied aspects of what they are learning.

- What do school's with highly effective literacy programmes do differently?

They provide ongoing, in-depth, and focused professional development for staff. They encourage rich dialogue among staff about teaching and learning. They provide quality resource material and direction for programmes but also encourage individual approaches and creativity. They encourage personal learning and acknowledge successes. They use data well to provide direction to programmes and to evaluate effectiveness.

- What can Auckland Point School (and others) learn from highly effective literacy teachers?

As with most things in schools, the quality of the teacher makes the most impact. Our schools need to develop, encourage and reward quality teachers. This is an ongoing process involving PD, mentoring, dialogue, good appointments, etc, etc. This is the stuff of leadership.

Implications

Our schools need to continue the dialogue about literacy teaching. Reading and writing well is a thinking process. We will serve our children best if we teach these areas holistically and dynamically. Schools should avoid being captured by the trendy stuff and see that the best thinking in school can

(and should) take place within literacy programmes - questioning, inferring, imaging, summarising, evaluating, synthesising - all these are literacy skills. To be truly literate is to question, to evaluate ideas, in short, to think.

Because schools are unable to focus on improving all areas of the curriculum at the same time, their current focus often leads to relative neglect of other areas and I suspect that literacy learning in the senior primary school has been an area of relative neglect while schools have been focused on numeracy, ICT, inquiry learning and the new curriculum.

Another thing I've noticed is that most of our literacy advisors are also ESOL advisors and to me the two areas seem to have got muddled. The focus for literacy development in schools has tended to be on struggling readers and writers, ESOL students, and in junior classes. I believe this is a shame. We need to reinvigorate the teaching of reading and writing for all kids. We need to be expert at literacy teaching, be clear about 'what' we teach and 'how' we teach it, for every child, not just the ESOL student or the struggling reader.

Literacy and ATOL contracts have given most of the direction to reading and writing programmes in New Zealand schools in recent years. The mantra 'follow the data' has reinforced the focus on raising the performance of the 'tail'. This, while not to be frowned at, has also distracted us from thinking about bigger issues in literacy teaching.

Fairly clear direction is provided in the English Curriculum about 'what' should be taught in literacy programmes but the Ministry of Education has been less specific about 'how' it should be taught. The manual *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8* (MOE 2006) gives some general pointers to 'how', but is rather dry. It also makes the mistake of relying too heavily on New Zealand sources and research and as a consequence is narrow and, dare I say, passionless.

The Ministry has avoided giving literacy teaching a clear philosophical steer and in doing so has added to the confusion for teachers. The recently released *Literacy Learning Progressions*, (Learning Media, 2007) are also muddled. I'd suggest that, more than anything, they show we have lost our way, that we don't know what it is that we should be doing and how we should be doing it, especially in the middle school years. The push given by ERIC and LARIC in the late 1970s moved literacy practice on in leaps and bounds and we need this kind of push again. As long as the push isn't Synthetic Phonics or some other misguided political foolishness...

In my travels I saw some quality activities developed from work that teachers had undertaken with literacy advisors but these tended to be one-off activities and didn't seem to be well integrated as part of a programme developed by teachers. Teachers need to be exposed to the big ideas behind these activities to ensure that they become a part of teachers thinking about literacy learning, part of a philosophy of literacy teaching.

There are sources we should be paying attention to other than New Zealand research. Teachers need to know about Nancie Atwell, Debbie Miller, Lucy Calkins, Shelley Harwayne, Donald Murray even. The ideas of these educators and authors will develop our thinking and enrich or teaching of literacy. They will also inject some passion into an area often lacking in passion in our schools.

Conclusions

So what should we be looking for - listening for - in our schools? I suggest we will hear more about specifics. In writing: strong verbs, specific nouns, seed ideas, show-don't-tell, memoir, sharing circles, peer response groups, author's chair, mini-lessons. In reading: reading real books, read-alouds, conferring, schema (prior knowledge), comprehension strategies, (questioning, inferring, imaging, summarising, evaluating, synthesising). Effective teachers will be using this vocabulary in their conversations in the staff room and with their students.

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* Recommended

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