

Sabbatical Report 2010

Gordon Caddie-Waltham Primary School

The purpose of my sabbatical leave was to *carry out an inquiry into accelerating literacy acquisition during the first year at Primary School*. My study was focused particularly on low decile learning communities and the schools that serve these areas.

Why Literacy?

Research and practical experience shows that children who are slow to develop literacy skills are often those that fail in many areas of our education system. A look at my own school's data showed that 95% of students who were stood down or suspended from school were low achievers in literacy areas. It also showed that 98% of students 'at risk in Literacy' were also low achievers in Numeracy and other key learning areas.

Why Focus on the First Year at School?

Once again, research and experience shows that almost all students who are 'at risk' in their Literacy Levels at aged 6 continue to achieve at 'below expectation' through out their primary school years. Reading Recovery Programmes are often effective in shifting 'at risk' 6 year olds to the 'average of their peers', but this is available to very few children and even many of those lucky enough to get Reading Recovery make immediate progress and then fall back into 'at risk' categories as they grow older.

If we can have a greater number of our children further along the road to literacy by the time they have been at school one year indications are that we are well on the road to raising literacy levels (and engagement in learning and achievement in other areas!) across our whole community.

This our school is participating in the Ministry of Education Literacy contract and in the recent past we have fully participated in the Numeracy Project implementation and Home and School Partnership Contracts. We have also developed a positive learning culture and our own professional development is top priority at staff and team meetings. From these

initiatives we already have some great things going on and teachers are focused on best practices in their classrooms. Despite these positives our school still struggles with the demands of new entrants arriving with increasingly low standards of early literacy development. Too many of our children turn six and are well below the expected standards of achievement in literacy. From here much effort continues to go in through interventions and special programmes but it often seems that only a few of these ‘at risk’ children can be pulled back towards national norms.

Most of all I want to take our school forward, raise achievement and see us raising the bar across the board in terms of student outcomes.

My sabbatical study came directly from the **needs at my school**. The Waltham **School Charter and Strategic Plan** clearly sets Literacy as one of our top priorities. Student targets set directly on Literacy achievement are a feature of our plan every year. Our recent developed Waltham School ‘Stars’ vision reinforces our commitment to Literacy. “Success in Literacy and Numeracy” is the first ‘point of our star’.

Section B: Programme Outline

To follow is the summary of my sabbatical programme.

I used the internet, published work and colleagues to gain background knowledge in this field and to identify key people and places to visit.

What did I find in these initial interviews and visits?

Children in low decile areas were generally starting school with considerably lower levels of Literacy acquisition than their higher decile counterparts. This is still true for those students who were engaged in formal pre-school education. (Based on School Entry Assessment data across 5 schools contacted).

Schools that **set clear goals** relating specifically to Literacy reported they were making a difference with both teacher performance and student achievement. (Interviews with curriculum leaders and/ or Principals and references to their End of Year BOT reports.)

Schools that had **leadership directly involved in staff P.D.** discussed that this had been an important part of the change process.

Several schools talked about initiatives to **engage family in** the learning process and in school activities.

Key Findings

The key factors that were identified as making a difference to Literacy acquisition across all the readings I completed and school visits were clear. These were....

Teaching pedagogy and classroom practise, school culture and student engagement, and raising parent's confidence and awareness in literacy development.

Below I have summarised the examples of practice I observed and/or discussed on my sabbatical which reportedly made a positive difference to Literacy levels.

Teacher Pedagogy/Classroom Practice

- Whole school development, including the senior team (and Principal). A number of schools stated that an external facilitator was useful but they needed to focus on developing a leader within the school staff for change to be sustained in to the future.
- ‘Walking Staff Meetings’ where teachers visited each others rooms, talked about their ideas and saw resources in action.
- Staff culture of sharing ideas and visiting each others classrooms to observe practice.
- Use of ‘target/monitoring groups’ within classrooms to more closely plan for/ asses the learning of an ‘at risk’ sub group.
- School entry testing and the use of the results to inform teaching practice.
- Schools that limited interruptions to guided reading programmes and maintained the highest possible amount of quality instructional reading time in the classroom reported this had a very positive influence on literacy levels.
- A number of schools talked about the success of Sensory Motor Programmes and Oral Language Programmes in promoting early literacy skills.

School Culture and Student Engagement

- Schools identified that a significant number of students achieving lower stanines in ‘6 Year Net’ results were also more difficult to engage in learning compared to their peers. This was also evident social skills development and ‘behavioural issues’. Schools that took a holistic approach to meeting students social, academic and behavioural needs tended to be more positive about their ability to help children achieve early literacy success.
- Schools with a ‘strength based’ vision for achievement seemed to be more successful than those who dwelled on the negatives about their students and their families. (Strength based schools had action plans for literacy achievement that built up student and family capability).

Raising Parent's Confidence and Awareness of Literacy Development

Many schools discussed the issues of a child's family and 'out of school experiences' and their undoubted influence on a child's literacy levels. This is true for both a child's literacy levels at school entry and their progress during their first year at school.

Some examples of practice observed...

- Regular Home School Partnership Meetings. Several schools had been involved in a MOE contract which supported a model which provided ongoing parent education meetings. Supporting early literacy development at home was common theme.
- Clear school programmes to support home based reading. (eg. home reading log books, home learning challenges based on literacy)
- Schools providing opportunities for extra adults to read with students (eg. Grandparent Readers) and mentors that read with students at home (providing a role-model for parents).

Acknowledgements

The Waltham School BOT for supporting my application for sabbatical.

The Staff of Waltham School for supporting my sabbatical absence and for 'stepping up' together to run the school without me during Term 2. It was such great feeling to come back to such a happy, progressive and well-functioning school.

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