Professional development in literacy – a focus on the learner

By Bruce McLachlan, Principal of Swanson School, Term 3 2010

Executive summary

My vision for an effective literacy programme has the following five elements[1]:

1. A school-wide approach to the teaching of literacy which is carefully crafted, curriculum based and which reflects the research consensus
2. Quality resources to support teaching and learning programmes
3. Appropriate assessments to inform teaching and learning programmes
4. Appropriate, timely, intensive and systematic intervention for children struggling with literacy
5. High quality professional development in literacy instruction

This is the learning journey of our school to achieve that vision. The learning journey focuses on how teachers' practice changed as a result of professional development.

Purpose

I researched the models used to provide professional development and their practical application in schools. In my report, rather than critiquing the various models, I highlighted the professional development experience that worked well for us at Swanson School, including how that professional development was enhanced by the introduction of the *Teaching as Inquiry* model.

Rationale and Background information

In recent times my reading of Graham Nuthall's research[2] has suggested to me the need for a paradigm shift in the delivery of professional development. Unlike most research into effective teaching which tends to focus on teachers and the programmes they deliver, Nuthall's research focuses on the learner – what they learn and how they learn. Teachers frequently make assumptions about learners but, in fact, students learn less from teachers than teachers think. They learn more from their peers than their teachers, and much of their learning is fragmentary and confused. While teachers can learn much from this research about modifying their teaching practice, I believe there are lessons here for us as well, in terms of the focus of professional development.

For some time professional development in literacy has focused on teachers rather than learners. While improving teaching practice is important, I believe a shift in the focus onto learners is what is needed. Researchers have identified that one of the keys to improving student achievement, especially amongst the lowest achievers, is the targeted teaching of struggling readers. Good general literacy 'teaching' programmes are adequate for many students. Struggling readers, however, require something different. And we need to constantly monitor that what we are teaching them is what they need, and that we are in fact getting through to them at all – this requires us to constantly inquire into our practice as teachers.

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[1] 'Improved Early Reading Instruction and Intervention', American Federation of Teachers
[2] Graham Nuthall, The Hidden Lives of Learners NZCER Press, 2007

Introduction

For the last ten years I have been a Principal, firstly in a decile one state school and more recently in a decile five state school. In 2000 I trained as a Reading Recovery teacher. This experience ignited in me a passion for literacy teaching and learning.

Many years ago the Principal of my daughters' primary school made a statement that has stuck in my memory ever since. He said that primary school teachers teach students whereas high school teachers teach subjects. Having done both jobs I believe that I am well placed to comment. One of the main differences between the two services is that primary school teachers are generalists – they teach English, Maths and Science; whereas high school teachers are specialists: i.e. Science teachers teach Science, and English teachers teach English. This is no doubt where that Principal's axiom has its roots. The implication in what he said was, of course, that primary school teachers know their students better than high school teachers. So is this in fact true? Well, I believe that the answer is in the planning.

I once worked with a teacher who had a reputation for being well planned. She used to proudly state, to anybody prepared to listen, that she had completed not only her planning for the next term, but probably the next year! Now, of course, a certain amount of planning can be done in that way, and I suppose that it is all in the definition of 'planning'. Either way, I believe that the kind of planning expected of teachers now is quite different from the planning I got away with 20 years ago. A well planned teacher in 2010, whether she teaches in a high school or a primary school, is a teacher who doesn't just know her students – she also knows what they are learning as a result of what she is teaching them. This teacher initially asks, "What is important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where my students are at?" Then she considers, "What evidence based strategies are most likely to help my students learn?" Then she teaches the lesson or lessons. After the teaching and learning has occurred she then asks, "What happened as a result of the teaching and what are the implications for future teaching?"

Sound familiar? It should. It is a direct quote from the 'Teaching as Inquiry' model in The New Zealand Curriculum. In the 21st Century, therefore, I constantly find myself saying that teachers cannot 'plan in the absence of children'.

Up until the beginning of this century the major focus of teacher support texts, (i.e. curriculum documents and texts such as The Learner as a Reader and Dancing with the Pen), was on student outcomes – i.e. what we wanted the student to know and be able to do. In 2003 Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4 was published. This was one of the first teacher support texts that signalled a change in focus. The first chapter was entitled, A Focus on Effective Practice, and the first paragraph reads, "The focus of this book is on effective literacy practice – that is, on what the classroom teacher does that leads to improved outcomes for students.… Teachers matter, and what they do matters."[3]

When the new curriculum was published in 2007 it was the first time that a section on pedagogy had been prominently included. Very simply, effective pedagogy means, teacher actions promoting student learning. As a teacher for over 25 years, I found this change of focus both exciting and scary. Exciting in that my rightful place in society had finally been recognised – what teachers do is important! Scary in that if my students didn't learn, I had to take some responsibility for that. There is a mountain of research on effective pedagogy but one of the best and most succinct outlines is the chapter in The New Zealand Curriculum. As

[3] Page 8, Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4, Ministry of Education, 2003

teachers in 2010 we need to know about the kinds of teaching approaches that have been shown consistently to have a positive impact on student learning. We also need to have a shared understanding about that pedagogy.

So what has been our learning journey at Swanson? Well without meaning to sound arrogant – nothing happens in a school unless a Principal makes it happen or lets it happen. In relation to our learning journey I do not pretend to be a literacy expert, but I do have some expertise and lots of passion! When I did not have the expertise to lead the professional development myself I sought somebody else to do it. So to start…

Our Learning Journey

2005

I was aware that there had been considerable on-going professional development in literacy teaching at Swanson over the past 12 years. Through observations it soon became obvious that the majority of teachers ran good general literacy programmes. In my first year as Principal in 2005 the Deputy Principal and I met with all teachers to discuss their literacy planning. Most teachers were able to show adequate evidence of planning. My study of the available data at the time, however, indicated an unacceptable number of students struggling with reading.

I therefore introduced 5-weekly testing of those students who were either not achieving or who were at risk of not achieving. I had had success with this as a method of improving the achievement of struggling readers at my last (Decile 1) school. Teachers did a running record on each of these identified students every five weeks and I collated the results. This regular monitoring achieved some success among some students.

The 5-weekly testing programme ensured that the achievement of struggling readers was regularly monitored. Why five weeks? Because basically struggling readers cannot afford five weeks to go by without any progress happening. These students need to be hot-housed.

The major change in what had appeared to have been done in the past was to encourage teachers to focus more closely on actual struggling readers by monitoring their individual progress. The other subtle encouragement was to look more closely at data – especially the achievement data of these 'targeted' students. As a result of the 5-weekly testing programme and the PD in literacy some teachers modified their practice and began diagnosing specific reading behaviours in individuals. When teachers began to do this they realized that they wanted more data to help identify what these students needed.

"Assessment is extremely helpful for the reading teacher, as long as the data are used to guide tutoring decisions, and not just filed away in a folder. If it is not used as a teaching guide, then there is no point in doing assessment. In my experience, the value of assessment is that it can stop you from going around in circles and not making progress. When a pupil is making no progress on the assessments, it is a wake-up call to change the nature of the teaching. Otherwise, we can continue to follow false trails and waste precious time for the pupil. Tutoring pupils with reading difficulties is a race against time, to close the gap as soon as possible. Regular, effective assessment can help you do that."[4]

[4] Tom Nicholson – Unpublished Course Notes, Auckland, November 2003

2006

In 2006 we introduced the asTTle Reading assessment for Year 4-8 teachers to help inform their teaching. This professional development consisted of looking at identifying the reading behaviours of individuals and using the 'What Next' facility to suggest appropriate instructional strategies. Some teachers began using information about their students' reading behaviours to inform their planning, and in some cases this led to excellent results.

Alongside this PD for Year 4-8 teachers we also ran professional development for Year 1-2 teachers around the importance of phonemic awareness and oral language as pre-reading skills. Again the focus was on using data to inform planning. Another motivation in doing PD at this level was that if we improved the achievement of students as early as possible, we would not always be playing catch up – other than perhaps with transient students.

Some teachers began to recognise the importance of teaching phonemic awareness and oracy to those students who did not come to school with those skills.

More and more students are entering school without pre-literacy skills. Increasing numbers of children are coming from dysfunctional families and/or families experiencing poverty, and are having poor, minimal or no early childhood education. Many children come to school today knowing no nursery rhymes or never having been read to. Rates of transience are increasing. Reading levels achieved ten years ago by Year 1 students after a year of instruction are now not achieved until Year 2 or 3. This, I believe, necessitates a new approach to literacy instruction, rather than a simple acceptance of the 'new' status quo or 'deficit theorising'.

At this time I gave teachers permission, especially in the junior school, to spend most of their day teaching literacy. As the Project Director of the Global West ICT Professional Development Cluster, I value the importance of ICTs in teaching and learning. The model of inquiry learning we introduced through this PD is important to prepare 21st century learners. These things, however, are *not* as important as literacy teaching and learning, and this is the message I have been particularly careful to give to teachers and parents alike. I would also argue that while numeracy is important, it is not *as* important as literacy.

Maximizing the outcomes for students who require additional support had been uppermost in my mind for some time. In 2006 therefore, we also set up the *Learning Support Team*[5] whose job was specifically to focus on the learning needs of students.

Many schools now have a Special Education Needs Coordinator or SENCO. At Swanson School our SENCO is also what we call our Learning Support Coordinator. Once students who are either not achieving or who are at risk of not achieving have been identified and referred to Learning Support, it is the responsibility of the Learning Support Coordinator to ensure that a Learning Support Register is maintained and programmes are in place to meet their needs. These may occur either in classrooms or through withdrawal; and may consist of individual or small group instruction. Sometimes in a classroom, teacher aides will work with high performing students, thus enabling the class teacher to work with the learning support students.

2007

In 2007 I carried out a literacy 'audit' in order to determine the quality of teaching programmes. The Deputy Principal and I visited all classes and observed a reading lesson. All teachers plan and implement an instructional reading programme that includes a range of

[5] See article in *Education Today*, 'The Kowhai Team – A Learning Support Model' – Issue 4, 2007, Term 3

approaches to reading. On this occasion a 'guided reading' lesson was observed. Guided reading lessons involve the teaching of a small group of students while the remainder of the class are purposefully engaged in independent tasks. A number of good teaching practices were observed. In general the lessons were well planned – teachers had chosen texts that were appropriate for the level of the students, 'learning intentions' or the focal point of the lesson were often shared with the students, the students were engaged and interested in the lesson and the students were encouraged to take part in the lesson. Findings from the observations led to various questions for discussion being raised. These were fed back to team leaders and resulted in discussions about improving reading instruction. Some teachers modified their practice as a result of some of these suggestions.

As more data became available it was clear that despite on-going professional development, and the monitoring of classroom programmes, there was still a significant minority of students who struggled with reading. Some teachers accepted that this was as a result of a change in the 'readiness' of the Swanson cohort over time, to access literacy learning. While I think there is some truth to this – the cohort does seem to have changed – research and experience in low decile schools in the past decade indicates that student achievement *can* be improved, but that the key is to change teaching practice. "Once we have a baseline of information, then we can use this to verify whether or not our instruction is making a difference."[6]

While it can be difficult to get teachers to change their practice, it is clear that most teachers at Swanson did review their literacy teaching in the light of professional development.

2008

In 2008 our professional development took a new path. I felt that we had made good progress in developing teachers' professional knowledge, but we needed to decide where to next? I used the *Teaching as Inquiry* model from the new curriculum for this review – except that I was the 'teacher' and my 'students' were the teachers. I had asked and answered the initial question, "What is important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where the teachers are at?" I had considered, "What evidence based strategies were most likely to help my teachers learn?" I then delivered the PD, ('teaching the lesson'). Then I asked "What happened as a result of the PD and what are the implications for future PD?"[7]

So what did the results of this 'inquiry' look like?

When I came to Swanson as Principal it was clear that several years of professional development in literacy had been undertaken in the school. This PD appeared to have been well considered and of a high quality. The focus, however, was typically on teacher practice. What was happening for the students was assumed rather than studied.

To date we had ensured that all teachers were teaching good general literacy programmes. We had clearly identified our individual struggling readers. We were closely monitoring them. We had got better at using assessments to detect the specific literacy learning needs of these individuals, and we were exploring teaching strategies to meet these needs.

The 5-weekly testing programme which we had introduced in 2005 had achieved some good results. By 2008, however, I found that we needed to run a staff meeting on the delivery of running records after growing concern that the 5-weekly testing was resulting in teachers

[6] Tom Nicholson – Unpublished Course Notes, Auckland, November 2003
[7] From page 35 of The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007

using running records as summative assessments rather than as rich diagnostic sources of information about individual student reading behaviours.

I ran further staff meetings on identifying reading behaviours and appropriate instructional strategies. I used Alison Davis's, Teaching Reading Comprehension[8] as well as various books and articles from my research into early literacy acquisition.

Teachers were regularly provided with research articles as well as synthesised research in staff meetings. I introduced the staff to a model of literacy acquisition[9] in order to help teachers improve their knowledge of the learner and I ran staff meetings in using Effective Literacy Practice[10] and ensured that each teacher had a copy. This occurred alongside professional development in formative assessment, learning intentions and success criteria. Despite this, there were still considerable gaps in some teachers' knowledge of literacy learning. My reading of Nuthall's research which focuses on what is happening for students led me to consider how much teachers actually knew about individual students, especially those who struggle to read.

In 2008, together with the Literacy Leader, I met with every teacher and asked them each the same four questions:

1. Who are your struggling readers?
2. What are their reading behaviours?
3. What evidence based strategies are you using to help them learn?
4. What can we do to help?

Some were able to articulate specific reading behaviours that students needed to work on while most were not. Most teachers found the exercise very challenging.

It was clear that teachers needed guidance in planning for targeted individual instruction – modifying their traditional literacy plans for seeing all four groups once a week and doing a mixed guided/shared reading lesson with each group. While there was some variation in the amount of teaching time each group received, it appeared that both fluent and struggling readers received a similar level of instruction. The teaching, which often appeared to be very good, was also not always targeted at *individual* need. Struggling readers should be getting more input from teachers than fluent readers. Teacher's programmes need to be modified so that struggling readers receive daily literacy instruction targeted at need while fluent readers get to work with the teacher perhaps once a week. The next stage of the professional development we planned needed to get teachers to reflect on this new paradigm and explore alternative methods of planning and instruction.

With these observations and interviews completed I realised that I needed help to deliver the next stage of the professional development programme. Towards the end of 2008 we invited Kate Birch to work alongside our literacy leaders and classroom teachers in a coaching and mentoring role. Before beginning the in-depth professional development with teachers, and in order to determine needs, Kate set out to collect evidence of current teacher effectiveness and determine the nature of teacher beliefs about effective pedagogy for the struggling reader. In part this was going to be an expert review of the effectiveness of our PD programme to date.

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[8] Alison Davis, Teaching Reading Comprehension, Learning Media, 2007
[9] The Juel, Griffith and Gough model of literacy acquisition
[10] op cit

Kate found, "In almost every classroom, the teacher has created an environment where students are settled and ready to learn. Teachers have established strong relationships with their students, based on respect and trust. Routines and expectations for behaviour are clearly established and adhered to. These create optimal conditions for student learning. The Literacy Team teachers exhibited a real understanding of the reading processes and progressions, and of effective pedagogy. Their teaching practice was exemplary, and provides a strong platform for leading the literacy development across the school."[11]

Her recommendation was that future professional development focus on three shared goals:

1. Effective use of learning intentions and success criteria
2. Engagement of all students
3. Development of student metacognition around reading strategy use

Underpinning all of these would be the alignment of data, needs, goals, teaching, text and tasks.[12]

2009

Kate began in 2009 with a series of demonstration lessons, across the year levels. Teachers were released in small teams to observe her and to discuss with her the implications for their own practice afterwards.

Teachers were also supported to analyse their student data early in the year, and to use this to inform not only student learning goals, but to inform their own teaching goals. Teachers identified a target group, to monitor the impact of their teaching. This target group was tracked regularly, using data from the 5-weekly testing and anecdotal evidence. 'Wedge graphs' and other techniques for measuring student progress against expectations were introduced and teachers were encouraged to share these with students. The Literacy Leaders monitored teachers' progress in achieving these goals.

Individual teachers and small groups were coached by Kate and/or the Literacy Leader. The coaching cycle involved planning sessions, team-teaching, observations and practice analysis, based on personal and shared goals.

The focus was on targeted individuals first. When teachers were able to observe the progress of these students they were then able to apply the same techniques to other individuals and then groups.

We worked on reorganising the school day to ensure that a decent length of time was devoted to a 'literacy block'. We also had a focus on the independent activities students undertook while the teacher was working with a reading group. This was to ensure that valuable time was not wasted doing 'busy work'. Teachers were encouraged to teach students how to use 'buddy reading' techniques, again to ensure that no time was wasted. We also worked on developing 'student voice' and students' sense of 'agency'.

The PD was tailored to the identified needs of the teachers where possible. In the junior classrooms we focused on what we called 'The Five Pillars':

1. Opportunities to support and extend oral language
2. Opportunities to support and extend phonological/phonemic awareness

[11] Kate Birch, 'Swanson School Literacy Professional Development, Initial Evaluation' November 2008
[12] ibid

3. Opportunities to develop knowledge of the alphabet (phonics)
4. Independent reading – directed and/or self-selected, to increase mileage and for enjoyment
5. Opportunities for students to 'play' and explore within a reading context

Some teachers again found the PD challenging, but looking back to 2005, we felt that we had come a long way. We had introduced better assessment methods. We had changed the focus of our assessment from assessment of learning to assessment for learning. We had got teachers talking about diagnosing reading behaviours and possible strategies to assist. Our PD had helped to focus teachers' attention on their own practice and how that potentially impacted on student achievement. What students were achieving – the data – was the starting point for planning.

2010

Kate's PD continued into 2010. Once teachers became aware of how to help their targeted students and they began spending more time teaching them, the majority of the students began to improve.

In 2010 we did two things to help embed our changed pedagogy.

Firstly I introduced an effective teaching model I had received from Associate Professor Graeme Aitken, of the University of Auckland. We included this model in our performance agreements this year and used it to determine how we were reducing misalignment, lack of engagement and lack of achievement in our classrooms. This was an attempt to provide a framework for teachers to inquire into their practice.

The second thing was that we changed our school achievement targets in our Charter from cohorts to individual students. Each teacher targeted two or three struggling readers with the goal of raising their reading achievement by at least two curriculum sub levels. We were all, therefore, working for the same goals. The school goals were the teacher's goals and vice versa.

In late 2010, two meetings confirmed for me that we had succeeded in changing the pedagogy of the school. The first was when Kate Birch, the Literacy Leader and I met with every teacher and essentially asked the same questions I had asked two years before. This time, however, they all could answer in detail and proudly outline the successful achievement of their targeted students. The second meeting was when the Leadership Team, consisting of all the team leaders, met with the ERO team reviewing the school. As I sat in silence, (a most unusual occurrence, I might add!) each of the team leaders in turn talked about using data to inform programming and the learning conversations that went on constantly in team meetings.

Conclusion

We felt good about our professional development programme. By and large it had achieved what we set out to achieve: to support teachers to recognise the requirement to monitor the needs of all of their students carefully; to use good quality assessment data to set teaching and learning goals; to involve students as true partners in their own learning; and to change their teaching practice to match changing needs as a result of an inquiry process.

One of the challenges for educational leaders is how to ensure that there is a culture of continuous improvement in the school. I believe that the embedding of the *Teaching as Inquiry* model into the schools' performance management system has the potential to ensure continuous improvement happens. If teachers are constantly encouraged to inquire into their

practice themselves, assisted by their team leaders, rather than experience the old model of being 'checked up on' there is more chance of them acting as professionals.

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As Louisa C. Moats, writing for the American Federation of Teachers in 1999, stated: teaching reading ***is*** rocket science[13]. Struggling readers need expert teachers. Because struggling readers are to be found in most classrooms, all teachers must have the knowledge, resources and support they need to implement high-quality literacy instruction for their students.

A final note about acknowledging sources and references

This is not an academic essay. I have no intention of ascribing other's arguments as my own. I am just not very good at noting where certain passages in my notes have come from! It is quite possible therefore that I have forgotten to acknowledge a source. If anyone cares to let me know of any apparent plagiarism I would be quite happy to correct it!

[13] Louisa C Moats, 'Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science', June 1999 – A paper prepared for the American Federation of Teachers.