Early identification of 'at risk' learners in Literacy – New Entrant / Year 1.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Maori Hill school Board of Trustees, the teachers, support staff, students and school families who all supported me to take this Sabbatical time and in particular our Deputy Principal, Jo Selbie who took over as Acting Principal in my absence.

To the Principals, Senior Leadership members, teachers and students at the schools we visited many thanks for your time and enthusiasm in sharing your stories and expertise: Postgate School, Discovery School, Paremata School, Titahi Bay School and Ngati Toa School.

Many thanks to the teachers who completed my survey around New Entrant assessments. I appreciate the time you took as your feedback has provided valuable information and insights into how schools across New Zealand are assessing their students.

A special thank you to Joy Allcock for not only her time and enthusiasm in discussing and sharing her Literacy insights with me, but for also arranging our visits to Shine Literacy Project schools and for providing ongoing Professional Learning Development to our staff and colleagues.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Ministry of Education and TeachNZ for providing me with this opportunity and support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main purpose of school-based assessment is to improve students' learning and influence the quality of learning programmes provided. Early assessment of students' knowledge at enrolment or shortly thereafter is crucial as this gives a picture of what the child knows and can do before instruction, giving a clearer picture of skill/needs for targeted teaching.

Assessments that include a broad range of comprehension skills, letter identification, phonological awareness, naming vocabulary skills and word recognition, (all of which have been shown to be critical skills in the development of competent literacy learning) are recognised as being of great value to the early identification of 'at risk' Literacy learners.

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Assessments that enable children to demonstrate what they understand and can do in oral language and in other aspects of early literacy are crucial, however we need to remember assessments are only one part and that teachers need to provide effective early literacy instruction in order to ensure progress and achievement for our students.

PURPOSE OF THE SABBATICAL

The overall aim was to investigate what tools and methods schools across New Zealand use to identify 'at risk' Junior (New Entrant –Year 1) Literacy learners. I then sought to identify other tools or methods schools could employ and in particular Maori Hill School to identify and accelerate our learners before completion of 40 weeks at school.

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The early identification of needs and 'at risk' learners is an important element in accelerating New Entrant /Year 1 students. Historically some students at our school (and many others around Otago) struggle to achieve the expected levels in Literacy achievement (oral language, reading and writing) After 1 Year at School. While these students make good progress and 'catch up' in other years and have excellent New Entrant/Year 1 teachers, this trend occurring in many schools was cause for concern.

Throughout my teaching career (the majority of that time in Junior classes) and time as a Principal, the schools I have worked in have all used a variation of the 1997 Ministry of Education School Entry Assessment (SEA) kit along with additional assessments to gather a broad range of literacy information.

The SEA assessment kit contains a reading task based on Concepts about Print (developed by Dame Marie Clay), a story retelling task – Tell Me (developed by Professor Stuart McNaughton) and a numeracy assessment.

Of interest to note, is that two separate evaluations commissioned by the Ministry of Education in 2001 to determine the extent to which schools were using the SEA found that the range of literacy skills assessed by SEA was not comprehensive and also had issues around reliability and clarity in administration of in particular the Tell Me test. Results from the Ministry of Education (Dewar & Telford 2003) study found that 59% of primary schools during 2001 were using SEA and of this group 86% of teachers always used Concepts about Print when they assessed a student compared with 46% who always used Tell Me. 47% of this group indicated they used other assessment tools as well as SEA because they wanted to assess a broader range of new entrants knowledge and skills and 44% of those surveyed felt that SEA needed to be updated and to include additional literacy aspects (e.g. alphabet, letter and word identification).

Anecdotal feedback from cluster schools in both our RTlit cluster and in my Principal PLD group indicated that the tools available for assessing New Entrant/Year 1 students could

be time consuming and slightly 'ad hoc' with many schools designing/formatting their own assessment tools and using part of the SEA. Not confident that this 'ad hoc' approach necessarily meant we were gathering the most relevant data for early intervention and acceleration, I was interested in discovering what other schools were doing to identify students early and what schools involved in the Shine Literacy project did. The Shine Literacy project provides teachers with supplementary teaching strategies for enhancing the development of foundational skills necessary for successful literacy learning (Allcock 2016).

ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

As part of my sabbatical I, along with our senior management team visited 5 schools involved in the Shine Literacy project in Porirua. We met with Joy Allcock, Shine school Principals, Shine project lead teachers as well as having an opportunity to observe lessons in classrooms and chat with teachers.

I also met with Joy Allcock and our staff undertook 2 sessions working with Joy looking at identifying Literacy needs, assessment tools and strategies for teaching using Sounds Like Fun and Switched onto Spelling programmes.

I undertook professional readings and carried out a short survey which was sent to a range of Primary schools across New Zealand to establish the extent to which teachers were assessing New Entrant /Year 1 students and how. I also spoke with teachers of new Entrant/Year 1 classes.

Questions focused on:
- if schools used the SEA kit for assessing New Entrant/Year 1 students
- when the assessment took place (age or length of time at school)
- what other forms of literacy assessments schools used
- with whom the results are shared with (what happens to the information)
- how often assessments were repeated in the first year at school
- additional support programmes offered within the first year at school
- who was responsible for administering the assessment

I also provided an opportunity for teachers to feedback any information about their schools use of assessments and programmes for new Entrants/Year 1 students.

The survey was sent to a range of schools across the country from decile 1 to 10 and with New Entrant / Year 1 rolls of between 5 and 100 children. Just under a third of the schools I sent the survey to responded.

Results from the survey showed that 45% of all respondents use the SEA test, with 32% not using it at all. 23% of the schools use their own school version. In 86% of schools surveyed the class teacher undertakes all the assessments with the Assistant Principal (AP) in the remaining 14% of schools administering the initial assessments and the class teacher responsible for ongoing monitoring.

In response to the question at what age/time do you assess your New Entrant/ Year 1 students? *(select all or as many as you use)*

Timing	%	NO.
After 6 weeks at school	14%	3
After 1 Month at school	30%	6
After 6 months at school	0%	0
When we feel they need it	91%	20
Other	50%	11

The following remarks are representative of comments made in regards to other times:
- *I do SEA and Jam immediately upon entering school (3)*
- *At entry and after 6-8 weeks*
- *We do an initial assessment at entry, and then ongoing monthly assessment*
- *Within the first 4 weeks. It also depends on the child as it could be within a week or up to 6 weeks of starting school.*
- *As soon as possible usually 2 weeks after entry*
- *Entry into school and again after one year*

In response to the question about what happens to the information (shared with)? *(select all or as many as you use)*

Uses	%	NO.
Used for next teaching steps	23%	5
Inform Parents	32%	7

OTJ assessments and Reporting		32%	7
Planning and Teaching		32%	7
Identifying 'at risk' students		5%	1
Placement in support groups/programmes		14%	3
Set learning goals		14%	3
Group students		14%	3
Other			

The following remarks are representative of comments made in regards to Other uses of the information:

- *Teachers use to inform teaching and discuss concerns with SENCO*
- *Information discussed at staff meetings. Next steps recorded. Information shared with caregivers.*
- *Use to report to parents at 6 weeks after starting school.*
- *Classroom teaching and learning*
- *Use as entry data for BoT literacy reports to compare against 40 week results*

In response to the question at what age/time do you assess your New Entrant/ Year 1 students? *(select all or as many as you use)*

Timing	%	NO.
After 6 weeks at school	14%	3
After 1 Month at school	30%	6
After 6 months at school	0%	0
When we feel they need it	91%	20
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The following remarks are representative of comments made in regards to other times:

- *I do SEA and Jam immediately upon entering school*
- *At entry and then after 6-8 weeks*
- *We do an initial assessment at entry, and then ongoing monthly assessment*
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- *Entry into school and again after one year*

In response to the question how often are assessments repeated in the first year of school?

Timing	%	NO.(22)
Every Month	14%	3
After 6 Months at school	0%	0
As required	26%	6
Only on children at risk of not meeting expected levels	5%	1
Other	55%	12

The following remarks are representative of comments made in regards to other times:
- *Running records usually monthly; writing samples / letter - sound assessment / essential list 6 monthly but all depending on child / time of year etc*
- *Depends on assessment. Running records, letter id, sounds at least once a month.*
- *Each term for reading, writing and letters, SEA just once and then their 6 year net*
- *Letter checks x2 termly, supported by running records / word checks*
- *Target kids are identified and monitored at least once a month, NE assessed as required at least one a month, Reading is once a week*
- *Running Records; Alphabet; High frequency word recognition each term; Assessed against writing matrix 3 times a year. Ongoing teacher observations.*

All schools surveyed provide additional support programmes for their New Entrant / Year 1 students. A third of the schools provide Teacher Aide small group support utilising Quick 60, Rainbow Readers or high frequency word/ sound practice. The most commonly used programmes amongst the schools who responded to the survey are Talk to Learn and the Early Words programme. PMP and HPP were also used along with volunteer parents/grandparents for regular familiar reading practice. Interestingly a couple of schools mentioned referrals to the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB).

Further comments from respondents indicate a variety of strategies to monitor 'at risk' students. Regular monitoring of sight words using reading rocket word lists & sounds and alphabet knowledge, running records (weekly or monthly depending on needs) was mentioned by many schools. The use of target books that help monitor potential "at risk" children or class target documents which track achievement for literacy and termly goals are set with strategies and evaluations for students needing extra support to meet expectations are used in several schools along with regular discussions at Team and Syndicate meetings. Observations and formative data is collected each day and recorded in a couple of schools and feedback from parents is used to support assessments. At least one school has a colleague review assessments which are then shared with the team. The purpose for assessments were varied and this is something many schools acknowledged as requiring review.

In discussion with the 5 Shine schools we visited, who all use Sounds Like Fun, which uses research-based strategies that integrate the teaching of vocabulary, phonemic awareness and alphabetic code knowledge (Allcock 2016). The schools we spoke to assessed their students after being at school for 3-4 weeks, they were retested somewhere between 15-17 weeks at school (around the same time as mid-year assessments) and again at the end of their first year at school. Additional testing was carried out as part of the project at the 18 months (60 weeks) and After 2 years at school (80 weeks).

These schools utilise a set of comprehensive assessments that provide information about the skills students need/should have during initial literacy learning. A range of assessments were used across the schools we visited however, all used an initial assessment looking at Phonemic awareness (Sutherland Phonological Awareness test (SPAT), Letter and Sound knowledge (upper and lower case names and sounds), word identification (Clay Word Reading assessment), Oral language and invented spelling. No schools mentioned using the SEA test, however, several did use the Six Year nett assessment After 1 year at school. Schools involved in the Shine project also used pseudoword test (Allcock 2013). A couple of the schools used additional tests they had developed and tracked children across the school.

IMPLICATIONS

The biggest implication (from my readings, survey, observations, discussions and experience) is that all schools are employing a variety of tools to assess their students but no one school has the answer as to which tools provide exactly the right pivotal piece(s) of information. All schools agree that a combination of assessment tools that look at more than just letter knowledge, word reading or a retell is important and that monitoring and tracking students along with providing support programmes is crucial. This is very similar to the 2001 Ministry of Education study of the use of SEA in schools.

Timings for assessing new Entrant / Year 1 students varies, with 91% of surveyed schools administering assessments when they feel the students need them or as close to enrolment as possible. Schools acknowledged that regular assessing and monitoring for those initially assessed as 'at risk' is a priority along with shared discussions about students either at syndicate level, with the SENCO or senior management. Early assessment after starting school was of benefit to the class teacher, enabling them to better target teaching to specific needs and skills. Assessing as a tool for informing or reporting to parents was not seen as important, as schools spoken with felt parents received information as part of their usual cycle of reporting.

Programmes to support students identified varied across the schools I surveyed and this is something for further investigation. Many of the programmes schools were using had a word or reading focus which may or may not be the most crucial need but are employed as the programmes are readily available.

CONCLUSIONS

During the course of my sabbatical and in my discussions with our staff and teachers and Principals at other schools' I am confident in our schools current practices. Using assessment data to track student progress and to tailor instruction to meet individual learning needs is and will continue to be a priority for our school.

Assessments that enable children to demonstrate what they understand and can do in oral language and in other aspects of early literacy are crucial. The addition of phonological awareness and oral language assessments and further teacher professional development will I believe provide that additional layer of information to compliment what we already have. Timed and systematic monitoring of those identified as being 'at risk' will continue to form part of our Progress and Achievement Team meetings and link with our Literacy team review meetings, however, earlier assessment within the first 1-2 weeks at school of New Entrant / Year 1 students will provide early support for students and will link with our school monitoring cycle.

A review of our school Oral language programmes has started in conjunction with our work with Joy Allcock and I am sure this will lead to further review of our current practices and programmes, with a view to developing programmes that continue to support and strengthen early literacy acquisition.

Having visited schools involved in the Shine project and seeing the results and changes in regards to learning, our school will continue to look at implementing Sounds Like Fun across the junior classes and in support programmes for older children.

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