

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

TITLE To investigate successful oral language programmes in the Junior departments of low decile, multi-cultural schools with a predominance of Maori and Pasifika students.

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SCHOOL Glen Eden Primary School

West Auckland Contributing School

Decile 4 (3 in 2014)

Multi cultural: Maori (20%) , Pasifika (predominately Samoan) 30%. NZ European 30%, Other: including Other European, Middle Eastern, Asian, including Indian: 20%

SABBATICAL TIMEFRAME Term 2/3, 2014.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Staff: West Auckland schools, including Glen Eden Primary

THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH: This research will lead to focused professional development and then to the writing and implementation of a revised oral language programme in the new entrant and year one and two areas at Glen Eden Primary School. A suggested professional development programme is outlined at the end of this report.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE: Our one month check and 6 year nett data shows that children are coming in to school with very poor oral language skills. In particular, children (both English as first language and as second language) have limited vocabulary, have trouble with sentence structure, often not speaking in whole sentences, they muddle tenses and misuse prepositions. Five of our classroom teachers have recently undertaken study in TESSOL and their study and investigations support these findings and highlight the necessity to focus more specifically on oral language.

We need a coordinated approach to assessing and then accelerating oral language acquisition as a solid basis for the learning of reading and writing, whether the students be first or second English language students. Over 25% of the students at Glen Eden Primary are on the ESOL register. Although many of the references and understandings that form the basis of this report are related to second language learning, my focus is on language acquisition for all junior children.

METHODOLOGY

1. Researching oral language programmes and assessment tools.
2. Relevant readings (see references below)
3. Observations of oral language sessions in classrooms.
4. Interviews with the English Team leaders or the Principals of local schools, decile 1-4, to ascertain what works (or doesn't) in their schools.
5. Collating findings, further research of programmes.
6. Setting up the bones of an oral language professional development programme for 2015.

FINDINGS

Observations

National Standards require teachers to concentrate on the teaching and assessing of Mathematics, Reading and Written Language. Unfortunately this narrow emphasis takes the concentration away from the basis of all three of these academic areas: the ability to express oneself orally.

My classroom observations show that teachers dominate the talk in all curriculum areas, even oral language sessions. Even in the best of the oral language sessions observed, the teacher spoke more than any other person in the room. Often the teachers repeated everything said by the children.

There was a lack of wait time in all teaching sessions observed. It seemed to be more about moving the lesson on, getting to the point (as perceived by the teacher) rather than students thinking and talking.

Closed questions (expected yes/no answers) by teachers were the norm in my observations.

The best examples of oral language sessions were those using techniques such as pair/share or doughnut with the children given a specific topic to discuss. The practice of whole class 'morning talks' gave the majority of children very little time to talk, if any at all, especially when the children were allowed to 'pass.'

I observed limited use of verse, rhymes, jingles, oral language games.

Do all students have the same opportunities to talk? Flockton and Crooks (1997) (in *Raising the achievement of Maori students*) concluded that Maori students had fewer opportunities to speak than non Maori. At a school such as ours with approximately 30% NZ European, 20% Maori, 30% Pasifika and 20% other, many of the last two groups being ESOL learners, we can surmise who is doing most of the talking. My observations confirmed that the New Zealand Pakeha students spoke in class more than other students.

At Glen Eden Primary we currently don't plan extensively or specifically for oral language or assess it, as the acts of speaking and listening are integral to every curriculum area. However, this lack of planning and assessment can lead us to undervalue the importance of the teaching and learning of oral language, and further allow for little or no differentiation in the teaching.

Research

Learning Through Talk is a Ministry of Education document which all teachers should be familiar with. It “brings together what we believe to be sound understandings..., accepted theories of learning, and information from the wide range of disciplines associated with oral language. It’s also informed by the observations of experienced teachers and literacy experts.” (p 5) All teachers need the time and opportunity to explore this resource.

The *Literacy Learning Progressions* discuss the importance of oral language at home and at school as a basis of the reading and writing journey.

“The oral language foundation that supports children’s school reading and writing includes:

- Curiosity about oral language and a willingness to experiment with it, for example, by playing with rhyme and alliteration
- A wide oral vocabulary of nouns and verbs and also many adjectives and prepositions
- A willingness, and the confidence, to talk about things happening now, in the past, and in the future
- The ability to retell an experience, an event, or a known text
- An awareness of rhyme and of words that start with the same sound, along with the ability to hear and distinguish some other phonemes in spoken words” p 8

The Talk to Learn programme was devised in 2001 in the Bay of Plenty “to meet the needs of students beginning school with delayed oral language skills.” (p2) The authors recognised that the “most significant barrier to learning for pupils entering their schools was the low level of oral language.”

In the first year of school children need focused teaching, as well as many opportunities to talk, and opportunities to enjoy finding and using new words phrases and language patterns with lots of exposure to rhymes, stories, poems and jingles.

Gibbons emphasises “Productive talk does not just happen – it needs to be deliberately and systematically planned.....It is not an exaggeration to suggest that classroom talk determines whether or not children learn, and their ultimate feelings of self-worth as students. Talk is how education happens!” (Gibbons, p 38) Gibbons talks about the importance of scaffolding in the learning of language and of providing prior experiences about which children can base their talk. This prior work done with children enhances their ability to write and read. Gibbons discusses the importance of listening in the process of language acquisition and states, “if we want children to become good listeners, we must ourselves become active listeners of what they say to us.” (p 116)

Oral language underpins written language. “Through talking about events as they happen and discussing their ideas, children construct knowledge and awareness and acquire the language they need in order to make sense of their experiences.” (p 19 *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4*) Children benefit from a rich variety of opportunities to practise oral language with supportive adults both at home and at school.

Oral language has a significant role in thinking and learning (*The Literacy Learning Progressions*, p 5) both in every curriculum area and specifically for expertise in reading and writing. Oral language is important for both the acquisition of vocabulary, and forms and features of texts.

There is a need for a rich and diverse oral language programme with optimal occasions for the children to speak and the teacher to model. Clay (p 50, 2007) suggests that children “require energetic and intensive extra opportunities to enrich and extend their use of English language. This is not a need to *hear* more English: it is more *a need to use more English*. School does not allow for the quantity of talking (and linking) that children need to do.” In fact “entry into formal education settings such as schools reduces children’s opportunities for talking.....schooling can prevent children from using the language which they used so effectively before they came to school.”

First Steps Oral Language Developmental Continuum (1994) suggests that teachers should avoid interrupting unnecessarily so that the train of thought is not interfered with and that they also avoid predicting what students may want to say. They should avoid doing the talking for them. Teachers should provide many opportunities for children to talk. Children need many and varied experiences to talk about and to increase their vocabulary.

The AIMHI project (1996) emphasised the importance of the student/teacher relationship in effective teaching practice in low decile, multicultural schools. Although this study was specifically looking at the secondary setting, its findings are relevant to all educational settings. Teachers need to understand the world of their students, show respect and fairness, give of themselves, be caring and patient and show perseverance in order to get the best out of their students. The AIMHI study emphasises the importance of encouraging dialogue in the classroom setting and the importance of questioning, of paired and group discussions and of clear explanations from teachers.

The ERO report *Accelerating the Progress of Priority Learners* (May 2013) also emphasises that teaching must be responsive to students’ learning processes, links must be made to children’s daily lives and teachers must build on students’ prior knowledge.

Tataiako emphasises that teachers need to talk to children about their learning, listen, share and care, ask questions.

Raising the Achievement of Maori Students talks about the need for teachers to help students make connections and build strong relationships with whanau/fono. Teachers need to be available to students, eg being in the classroom in the mornings to chat with students.

Teachers need to recognise that there are three functions of speaking: (Richards) talk as interaction, eg a chat, talk as transaction, eg ordering food, and talk as performance, eg making a speech. Peer share, role plays, other drama activities, speech making, poetry, rhymes, and reading to are all excellent activities to promote the various functions of oral language.

Van Hees’ article describing a study in which changes in teacher practice are critical in making a difference to student outcomes, makes a good starting point for professional development. The New Zealand Curriculum emphasises teaching as inquiry, teachers looking closely at their practice, making changes and assessing results. Van Hees’ article could well be used to begin teachers thinking about their own practice as regards oral language.

IMPLICATIONS for Glen Eden Primary School

My research shows that there is a vast amount of literature available to teachers on the teaching of oral language, but that there is a huge discrepancy between the best practice described in the literature and actual teacher practice. This leads me to believe that teachers are not accessing the literature and that they are not given the time to put the ideas into practice. The responsibility of the school is to give them both the access and the time.

CONCLUSIONS

Glen Eden Primary School will focus on oral language as an integral part of their professional development focus for 2015.

The professional development programme for 2015 should result in the development of an oral language teaching and learning programme for 2016 and beyond.

The 2015 professional development programme will be based around the following:

- Teachers to read and unpack van Hees' article. Workshop to answer questions raised in the article, particularly Table 2 and 3, asking what one change will I make to my practice this term to give children a better chance to express themselves orally? Give teachers opportunities to be observed and receive feedback as they practise this change in their practice.
- Learning Through Talk: Oral language in Year 1 to 3 (and Years 4-8 if whole school professional development)
Give time for teachers to read through the text, encouraging them to ask questions of their practice in each chapter.
Concentrate specifically on Chapter 4: Instructional Strategies, and Chapter 5: Engaging Learners with Talk. In team meetings or PLG's work through the two chapters over time, using teacher as inquiry approach: read about and discuss strategies, plan, teach, reflect on effectiveness of teaching, discuss with colleagues, re-jig, plan, teach, reflect.
- Gibbons' book is very readable and provides practical examples and suggestions for working with children to further their oral language. The Glossary of teaching activities from page 141-152 would make an excellent basis for teacher professional development. Specific examples:
Barrier Games
Describe and draw
Find My Partner
Find the Difference
Hot Seat
I'm Thinking of Something that..
Interviews
Paired Problem Solving
Problem Solving Activities
Wall papering

- Staff who are keen to look further into teaching strategies and activities could also benefit from reading both the First Steps Oral Language Resource Book and the Talk to Learn resources for a wealth of ideas to support their teaching and learning.

A FINAL REFLECTION from a letter to the *That's Life* magazine (Nov 2014) “My five year old daughter, Katie, burst in after school and said ‘Mum, no more school for me. I can’t read, spell or write. They won’t let me talk and that’s the only thing I’m good at.’ ” Thanks Katie. That puts it all in perspective.

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