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Focused Improvement in Early Literacy Development

- > [Summary](#)
- > [Target student group](#)
- > [Method](#)
- > [Results](#)
- > [Lessons learned](#)
- > [Next steps](#)
- > [Research base](#)
- > [Further reading and links](#)
- > [Contacts](#)





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Summary

What happens if a child enters school with insufficient development in oral language, and limited concepts of print and literacy practices?

This strategy is a partnership between the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA), and the Fogarty Learning Centre at Edith Cowan University (ECU).

Studies in Australia and overseas have highlighted the significant relationship between the quality of oral language learned in the pre-school years and the development of early literacy in English ([Snow et al. 1998](#) ) .

A cluster of independent schools in Western Australia, with large numbers of students from Indigenous, low socio-economic and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, aimed to address this issue. The focus was to assess the oral language and emergent literacy development of their pre-primary students and to use that data to inform explicit teaching of English language and literacy skills.

Target student group

The strategy had two phases. Phase One focused on Pre-primary students in selected metropolitan schools in Perth, including an inner-city school specifically for Indigenous students, an Islamic school, several Christian schools and a Turkish school. Phase Two focused on 12 remote schools in Western Australia with significant populations of Pre-primary Indigenous students. Note: Pre-primary is the term for the first year of compulsory schooling in Western Australia.

Method

The FIELD strategy

The Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) worked with the findings from the studies [In Teachers' Hands](#)  and [Teaching for Growth](#) , with the aim of addressing the language- and literacy-knowledge learning needs of Pre-primary students in independent schools. The eight most disadvantaged metropolitan schools in the independent school sector were targeted for a project aimed at early intervention.

Fundamental to this intervention were the dual needs of:

- developing students' early literacy skills and knowledge
- building the capacity of Pre-primary teachers to explicitly and systematically teach literacy.



Thus, the FIELD project was established, based on a model of action, implementation and reflection. The process was:

- F** – Find out: gather data and acknowledge prior learning to inform baseline data.
- I** – Investigate and identify: analyse individual literacy learning using a literacy audit.
- E** – Explore strategies and engage specific skills, according to identified needs.
- L** – Lay out plans: continue liaising with families and link all strategies.
- D** – Debrief, discuss and develop next step to continue improvement.

The FIELD project consisted of two phases of implementation.

Table 1: FIELD implementation phases

Phase One	Phase Two
Focus: Build teacher capacity in early literacy instruction to improve Pre-primary students' development in English language and literacy.	Focus: Build teacher capacity in early literacy instruction through collaborative professional learning.
Eight Metropolitan schools in Perth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One inner-city school, specifically for Indigenous students • One Islamic school • Three Christian schools (small, and including Indigenous students) • Three Christian schools (large) • One Turkish school. 	12 remote schools, all with Indigenous student populations.
This phase included the testing of Pre-primary students' English language and literacy development, using the Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study (LLANS), in-class observations of teachers by mentors from ECU, and ongoing professional learning conducted by these mentors and staff from AISWA.	Teachers were provided with professional learning support from mentors from Edith Cowan University and staff from AISWA on the development of oral language and literacy; how to support early communication for children whose home language is not Australian Standard English; emergent literacy; and planning individual education programs (IEPs). This phase did not involve any testing of Pre-primary students' English language and literacy development.
Total number of students in Phase One: 186	Total number of teachers in Phase Two: 15



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The creation of an interactive resource package formed the culmination of the project.

In Phase One, the literacy capabilities of Pre-primary students were established using the tests devised for the Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study (LLANS) at the beginning and end of the school year. These results were used by teachers to determine students' understanding of phonemic awareness in English; concepts of print; and environmental or contextual emergent literacy.

Mentors from ECU helped teachers analyse and interpret the results of the LLANS tests and use the data to plan for explicit language and literacy instruction; develop individual education plans; and organise for small-group and whole-class instruction. Mentors also observed the teachers in their classrooms, and provided ongoing professional learning grounded in findings from evidence-based research (Louden et al 2005). They also helped teachers analyse those teaching practices associated with higher and lower levels of growth in literacy.

Results

'As a new teacher, and having so many challenges, I needed all the help I could get – and being involved with FIELD provided that essential support. FIELD helped in the following ways: keeping me informed through newsletters and professional learning; having a mentor to show me different ways to do things, such as teaching the alphabet using the 'Carnine Order rather than the usual alphabetic order; providing me with timely support and advice; helping me come to grips with testing and other assessment; providing much needed resources for me, the children and the school – from which we all benefitted. Because the FIELD project was there encouraging me to be a reflective, confident and resourceful teacher I know I am a better teacher. Having opportunities to network with other teachers and the mentors away from school, gave me new ideas and strategies to try in the classroom. Simply getting together regularly to talk with others has helped all of us gain a bigger picture of teaching.' (Classroom Teacher)

Analyses of the impacts of the FIELD program were applied to qualitative data (in the form of interviews with teachers, and mentor observations) and quantitative data (from the LLANS test administered at the beginning and end of the school year). Qualitative data attest to:

- improvement in teachers' capacity to explicitly teach aspects of language and literacy to Pre-primary students
- a strengthening of home–school partnerships in some schools
- increased awareness by some school leaders of the student-learning needs targeted and addressed by the intervention.



Table 2: LLANS achievement by school: means and standard deviations

School	Number of students	Mean LLANS Score 1	Mean LLANS Score 2	Mean Score Change	Standard Deviation LLANS Score 1	Standard Deviation LLANS Score 2
School A	21	51.55	59.37	+7.81	7.96	7.04
School B	1	11.20	46.20	+35.00	-	-
School C	15	46.91	60.14	+13.23	10.91	9.95
School D	22	47.91	57.63	+ 9.72	7.67	8.89
School E	26	49.67	52.27	+2.60	5.15	7.46
School F	16	47.29	51.53	+4.24	8.58	12.30
School G	43	52.67	57.90	+5.23	7.10	7.54
School H	42	51.29	60.63	+9.34	6.38	8.38

Quantitative data indicate improvement in students' literacy in the areas tested.

- Most children were able to recognise environmental print.
- Recognition of rhyming words depends on whether the words follow one another on a list or are separated by other words.
- Initial sound recognition depends on whether the sounds follow one another on a list or are separated by words.
- A high percentage of children had some book knowledge, but many were unable to read words from a page (not an expected outcome).
- Many children understood and were able to express knowledge of some of the concepts, while others scored poorly (such as reading – only able to read one word).
- While concepts of print were generally held by a large number of children, some concepts required explicit instruction.

Although the data demonstrate that the Pre-primary students made gains in all areas of the literacy skills, it could be assumed that these same children would be expected to make a reasonable gain in this area during the Pre-primary year. However, anecdotal evidence and teacher comments to mentors indicate that, through direct involvement with this project and encouragement to design teaching programs linked to the test results, teachers were more confident in designing programs targeted to children's specific learning needs.



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Unintended outcomes of the FIELD project relate to the different levels of commitment from principals, with only 50 per cent of principals described as showing strong interest in the intentions and outcomes of the intervention. There were different levels of involvement from the parents, and only a small number of schools set out to improve parents' knowledge that a young child's literacy development depends on a strong partnership established between the school and home. The successful outcomes of such a partnership are evident in the comments from one classroom teacher:

'I had parents come in and assist during our 'literacy block' time. They would supervise a small group of about seven students and assist them in a literacy task. During the activity, parents would record what they observed on a checklist or by writing an anecdote; this provided me with feedback about the activity completed by the children. One of the positives that came from this was that parents observed their own child doing work in class and I didn't need to tell them that their child was struggling or doing well – they could see it for themselves.'

Lessons learned

'Based on the outcomes of the LLANS tests and more information we had gained from home, specific planning for intervention could occur for each child recognised as 'at risk'. As a result, more explicit teaching occurred. Also, sustained conversations with children during play and in the class with adults were encouraged by the mentor, and this helped me discover new skills.'
(Classroom Teacher)

Testaments such as these from the teachers involved in the FIELD project point to collaborative professional learning partnerships as a powerful form of capacity building for teachers, which, in turn, impact on student learning outcomes in literacy. Importantly, teachers discovered that the essential elements of explicit and systematic literacy instruction were useful for all students, not just those deemed 'at risk'.

In this sense, an intervention such as FIELD depends on the support of a mentor or 'expert other'. This kind of partnership could be instituted in schools through a whole-school approach to professional improvement, led by highly accomplished or lead teachers. The collegial conversations at the heart of FIELD were seen by the teachers as instrumental in increasing their confidence and capacity to teach literacy in an explicit and systematic way. Further, these conversations improved their capacity to use data about students to plan for individual, small-group and whole-class learning.



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Professional learning relevant to FIELD

- [In Teachers' Hands](#)  website
- The CLOS-R Observation Survey: *Teaching for Growth*, Louden, Rohl & Hopkins 2008, p 107)
- [Language Support Program](#) 

Next steps

'Because the FIELD project was there encouraging me to be a reflective, confident and resourceful teacher, I know I am a better teacher.' (Classroom Teacher)

It is intended that the conclusions from the lessons learned from FIELD will be disseminated to a wider group of Pre-primary teachers through the interactive resource pack (including CD). The FIELD method of professional learning will underpin future support for teachers in Pre-primary classrooms. Copies can be obtained from: eblake@ais.wa.edu.au.

Academic staff at Edith Cowan University have committed to a third stage of professional support for teachers in Pre-primary classrooms. They have initiated Phase Three of the FIELD project with three new schools: one Islamic school and two small Christian schools.

The outcomes of the FIELD project support the observations of Louden, Rohl and Hopkins (2008, p 91), that effective teachers 'showed evidence of taking into account the developmental levels of children as they broke up literacy tasks into smaller parts, gave regular group as well as individual feedback and used a wide variety of teaching.

"FIELD drew from the Teaching for Growth project, which explores the relationship between children's growth in literacy and numeracy and teachers' classroom teaching practices." [Teaching for Growth](#).

Research base

'I am now a far more deliberate teacher. I am by nature a reflective person; however, I think my reflections are now more specific and analytical and this will influence my teaching more [than before the FIELD experience].'
(Classroom Teacher)



Research has shown that those children who enter school with inadequate language-rich experiences and ‘literacy-related knowledge’ (Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998, p 5) face greater risk of not mastering the wide range of literacy skills and knowledge required of them for learning and for life. Studies have confirmed the importance of early intervention for these students to help develop foundation skills in oral language, concepts of print and understanding of everyday literacy practices. Moreover, research suggests that students ‘at risk’ in the early stages of literacy development are most affected by the instruction of the teacher (Ehri & Roberts 2006; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). These students need explicit and systematic teaching in the areas of phonological awareness and letter recognition, and practise using these skills in reading and writing (Ehri & Roberts 2006; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). A dominant challenge of the early years of schooling is for the teacher to assist young learners to connect spoken language with written text (Christie 2000).

“Research suggests that students ‘at risk’ in the early stages of literacy development are most affected by the instruction of the teacher.”

Two large-scale studies

Two large-scale studies conducted in Australia have highlighted the relationship between students’ early language/literacy-related knowledge and effective teaching. The first, *In Teachers’ Hands* (Louden et al 2005, [Link](#)) established a relationship between the average growth of students’ scores in standardised literacy tests and the observed presence of particular teaching practices developed from an extensive review of literature about effective teaching, effective teaching of literacy and early-years literacy teaching (Louden, Rohl & Hopkins, 2008, p 106). The second, *Teaching for Growth* (Louden, Rohl & Hopkins 2008) focused in part on students in their Pre-primary year in Western Australia. Findings from previous research established that these children found assessment items focusing on early knowledge of features of language and concepts of print more difficult than other children in the 1999 national LLANS sample (Meiers et al 2006).

The literacy tasks used in LLANS include:

- environmental print tasks
- phonemic awareness tasks
- book-orientation tasks;
- retelling tasks
- print-concepts tasks.



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“Compared with a national sample of children in government schools assessed when they were approximately the sample age with the same research instrument [LLANS] in 1999, Western Australian children’s performance was significantly lower.”

In applying the same research instrument (LLANS) to a new sample of Pre-primary students in 2007, Loudon, Rohl & Hopkins found that there was relatively little growth overall, particularly at the lower end of the achievement distribution, and a large amount of growth at the higher end. Importantly, compared with a national sample of children in government schools assessed with the same research instrument in 1999, when they were approximately the sample age, Western Australian children’s performance was significantly lower. These researchers also applied close observations of teachers in Pre-primary classrooms, using an observation schedule developed by Loudon et al 2005; adapted by Loudon, Rohl & Hopkins, 2008.



Table 3: Classroom Literacy Observation Schedule – Revised (Louden and Rohl, 2008)

Respect	1. Rapport	The teacher creates a warm, positive and inviting classroom where relationships with children encourage literacy learning (Scheerens & Bosker 1997; Snow et al. 1998; Brophy & Good 1986; DfEE 2000; Hattie 2003; Pianta 2006)
	2. Credibility	Children’s respect for the teacher enables her to maintain order and lesson flow (Brophy & Good 1986; Scheerens & Bosker 1997; DfEE 2000; Hattie 2003)
	3. Citizenship	The teacher promotes equality, tolerance, exclusivity and awareness of the needs of others (Education Queensland 2002)
Knowledge	4. Purpose	Children’s responses indicate tacit or explicit understanding of the purpose of the literacy task (Mazzoli & Gambrell 2003; Wray et al. 2000)
	5. Substance	The teacher provides a lesson/task that leads to substantial literacy engagement, not busy-work (Education Queensland 2002; Hattie 2003)
	6. Explanation word	The teacher clearly explains specific word, letter or sound strategies or concepts (Ehri & Roberts 2006; Juel 2006; Byrne & Fielding Barnsley 1991)
	7. Explanation sentence	The teacher clearly explains specific grammatical strategies or concepts (Snow et al. 1998; Wray et al. 2000; Rego & Bryant 1993; Tunmer & Hoover 1992)
	8. Explanation text	The teacher clearly explains specific textual strategies or concepts (Mazzoli & Gambrell 2003; NRP 2000; Snow et al. 1998; Duffy 2003; Duke & Pearson 2002)
	9. Metalanguage	The teacher provides children with language for talking about and exemplifying literacy concepts (Olsen 1994; Education Queensland 2002; Morrison, Connor & Bachman 2006)
	10. Oral language	The teacher focuses on the development of children’s oral language (Snow et al. 1998; Senechal, Ouelette & Rodney 2006; Dickinson 2001)
	11. Oral/written language	The teacher makes logical connections between oral and written language (Dickinson 2001; Dickinson et al. 2006; McKeown & Beck 2006)



Orchestration	12. Awareness	The teacher has a high level of awareness of literacy activities and participation by children (Hattie 2003; Snow et al. 1998)
	13. Environment	The teacher uses the literate physical environment as a resource (Hattie 2003; Snow et al. 1998; Wray et al. 1998)
	14. Structure	The teacher manages a predictable environment in which children understand consistent literacy routines (Brophy & Good 1986; DfEE 2000; Hill et al. 1998; Scheerens & Bosker 1997)
	15. Independence	Children take some responsibility for their own literacy learning (Education Queensland 2002); Mazzoli & Gambrell 2003; Snow et al. 1998)
	16. Pace	The teacher provides strong forward momentum in literacy lessons (Brophy & Good 1986; Wray et al. 2000)
	17. Transition	The teacher spends minimal time changing activities or uses this time productively (Bloom 1976; DfEE 2000; Strickland 2001)
	18. Attention	The teacher ensures that children are focused on the literacy task (Rowe & Rowe 1999; Wray et al. 2000)
	19. Stimulation	The teacher motivates interest in literacy through the creation of a pleasurable, enthusiastic and energetic classroom (Brophy & Good 1986; Hattie 2003; Mazzoli & Gambrell 2003; Scheerens & Bosker 1997; Snow et al. 1998)
Support	20. Assessment	The teacher uses fine-grained knowledge of children's literacy performance in planning and teaching (Hill & Crevola 1999; Loudon et al. 2000; Wray et al. 2000)
	21. Scaffolding	The teacher extends literacy learning through reinforcement, modification or modelling (Bloom 1976; Brophy & Good 1986; Taylor et al. 2000; Snow et al. 1998; Wray et al. 2000)
	22. Feedback	The teacher intervenes in timely, focused, tactful and explicit ways that support children's literacy learning (Bloom 1976; Hattie 2003; Strickland 2002)
	23. Responsiveness	The teacher is flexible in sharing and building on children's literacy contributions (Brophy & Good 1986; Hattie 2003; DfEE 2000)
	24. Persistence	The teacher provides many opportunities to practise and master new literacy learning (Brophy & Good 1986; Snow et al. 1998)



Differentiation	25. Challenge	The teacher extends and promotes higher levels of thinking in literacy learning (Brophy & Good 1986; DfEE 2000: Education Queensland 2002; Hattie 2003)
	26. Inclusion	The teacher differentiates literacy instruction to recognise individual needs (Education Queensland 2002; Hill et al. 1998; Mazzoli & Gambrell 2003; Snow et al. 1998; Taylor et al. 2000; Wray et al. 2000)
	27. Connection	The teacher makes connections between class or community literacy-related knowledge for individuals or groups (Education Queensland 2002; Hill et al. 1998; Mazzoli & Gambrell 2003)

Louden, Rohl & Hopkins found that there was a strong relationship between the scores teachers received on the observation schedule and the residual scores on the LLANS. The higher the growth in the students' literacy, the more likely the teachers were to have demonstrated those teaching practices aligned with the evidence-based research in best practice in teaching, teaching of literacy and early-years literacy teaching. Those teachers assessed as most effective included a stronger focus on oral language; systematic focus on the explicit teaching of phonological awareness and phonics; and clear and substantive connections between oral and written language.

The implications from both studies are that teachers need support to incorporate more of this best practice in their teaching, and that addressing the language- and literacy-learning needs of students identified as 'at risk' is an urgent matter of access and equity. These findings are consistent with those of Rowe (2005, p 38) who argues that 'quality teaching and learning provision has the greatest impact on student achievement in literacy'.



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Further reading and links

Christie, F 2000, 'The language of classroom interaction and learning', in L Unsworth (ed) *Researching language in schools and communities*, Cassell, London.

Ehri, LC & Roberts, T 2006, 'The roots of learning to read and write: acquisition of letters and phonemic awareness', in Dickinson DK & Neuman SB (eds), *Handbook of early literacy research*, vol 2, pp 113–131, The Guildford Press, New York.

Classroom Literacy Observation Schedule - Revised (CLOS-R) by W. Louden and M. Rohl. The University of Western Australia, Perth 2008. © Commonwealth of Australia 2008.

Louden, W, Rohl, M, Barratt-Pugh, C, Brown, C, Cairney, C, Elderfield, J, et al. 2005, *In teachers' hands: effective teaching practices in the early years of schooling*, Australian Government: Department of Education Science and Training, (retrieved March 2012) ([Link](#)).

Meiers, Marion; Khoo, Siek Toon; Rowe, Ken; Stephanou, Andrew; Anderson, Prue; and Nolan, Kathy 2006, '[Growth in Literacy and Numeracy in the First Three Years of School](#)' . *ACER Research Monographs*.

Rowe, KJ 2005, *Teaching reading: national inquiry into the teaching of literacy*, Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra.

Snow, CE, Burns, MS & Griffin, P (eds.) 1998, *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*, National Academy Press, Washington DC.

Contacts

The FIELD method of professional learning will underpin future support for teachers in Pre-primary classrooms. Information about the interactive resource pack can be obtained by contacting AISWA by email at: atp@ais.wa.edu.au.

Website: www.ais.wa.edu.au 