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Making the links: literacy across learning areas in secondary school settings

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Summary

Teachers in secondary schools have raised concerns about the spelling and vocabulary knowledge in their middle years (years 7–9) classrooms, suggesting that many students reach this phase of schooling unable to successfully comprehend complex subject area texts or write extended text that is representative of their knowledge of the subject. Some of the research can be found on the [Making Links](#)  site.

This project was based on the belief that the progressive development of literacy knowledge and skills is essential for success in all learning areas, and is the responsibility of all teachers. The project aimed to give participating teachers guidance in how to work with literacy within their learning area.

The main objective was to improve the educational outcomes for all students by providing targeted support to students who needed it most. The project was designed around a two-year collaborative learning initiative, aimed at helping learning area teachers (years 7–9) incorporate improvement and bring about change in the ways that literacy across the curriculum is perceived and taught in the middle years.

The approach taken to the professional learning resulted in identifying a process whereby teacher participants were encouraged to be engaged in a sustained and substantial conversation over a period of time. The teachers identified the conversations about the student's literacy skills and how to support them as one of the benefits of involvement in the project, as this led to more differentiated teaching and learning.

Having that data at the start of the year and then being able to launch into the differentiated assessment and support the kids through different programs – that was useful. (Mentor teacher)

Overall, the opportunity to deepen teacher knowledge through professional dialogue and allowing teachers time to apply this new knowledge in practice, followed by time to reflect on the results with colleagues, were critical components of this collaborative learning initiative (Faulkner 2012, p. 46).



Target student group

Table 1: Schools involved in the project

Year	Number of schools
2009	5 schools
2010	4 of the original schools, plus 4 new schools
2011	8 schools continued with the project

In 2009–2011, there were six mentor teachers involved, 70 teachers and 600 students. All schools were in metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas.

Method

The project was based on a belief that it is not too late when students enter secondary school to support spelling, vocabulary and comprehension development. A research-based approach to professional learning was adopted, which required sustained substantive conversation. Teachers relied heavily on a range of research into major learning areas as a basis for the ongoing professional conversations.

The project introduced the school to the Words Their Way material but, importantly, made the material accessible by providing the scaffolding to make use of the material. (Principal)

The project evolved through three phases:

- Phase 1, 2009 (Term 4): Focus on spelling assessment and instruction.
- Phase 2, 2010: Teachers engaged in implementing a range of strategies related to spelling, vocabulary and comprehension, including the use of graphic organisers, note-taking, reciprocal teaching and think-alouds.
- Phase 3, 2011: Addition of a mentor teacher in each of the participating schools to support teachers as they continued to implement.

In 2011, mentor teachers became an additional aspect of the professional learning communities (PLCs). This group met regularly for the purposes of learning, planning and problem solving, with a specific focus on building the evidence base of what works to improve literacy outcomes in their schools. Each meeting of the PLC offered time for reflection and inquiry into best practice.



The mentors were either people who participated in the project in the first year and were willing to take on a leadership role, or people nominated by the Making the Links coordinator as likely to provide excellent leadership in literacy across the curriculum. Over the second year, the main professional development was providing support and professional development materials to the mentors so that they could then go back to their schools and work with their team of cross-curricula colleagues. The model for professional learning (see page 18 of the [Final Report](#) ) illustrates the way the mentors were supported, and how they then worked in the same way with their cross-curricula colleagues. For example, Phase 1 was about collecting data and analysing data. The mentors learned about the assessments to be administered, how to analyse the data and how to run similar sessions with colleagues. The mentors then returned to their schools and collected data. The next phase of the 'training' was about feedback and critical discussion.

We have thought on our feet a bit, tried many new things, experimented. I am not sure if they all necessarily worked, but we are deciding what worked. [It is] a long-term process, not a short-term process: skill levels need to be built with teachers and then the students need to have their skills scaffolded ... The hardest part is the building of teacher skills. (Teacher mentor)

Results

A number of qualitative and quantitative data-gathering methods were employed on this project.

Qualitative data

1. Pre-project questionnaire administered to mentor teachers and teacher participants from each school.
2. Ongoing data collection during meetings; notes made of mentors' questions and responses.
3. Individual interviews: mentor teachers plus teacher participants.
4. Focus group interviews: some mentor teachers, teacher participants or school administration.
5. Classroom observations: a university researcher observed teaching practice and created video clips to show teaching practice.



Quantitative data

Pre-and post-assessment data focused on spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension. The project used the Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading (PAT-R): Comprehension, Vocabulary and Spelling (ACER, 2008).

Overall, the 2010 results showed that comprehension skills and vocabulary knowledge in reading and vocabulary had marginally improved in the year 7 and 8 cohorts. Less improvement was achieved in spelling, especially in year 8. Specific results for each case study school are available in the [Making Links](#) report.

The results were similar in the 2011 phase of the project, with an overall improvement in comprehension and vocabulary scores. However, while there was a slight improvement in spelling, this aspect continued to provide challenges for the teachers.

Having the data (PAT-R) at the start of the year, and then being able to launch into the differentiated assessment and support the students through differentiated programs, was very useful. Being involved in the Making the Links project initiated conversations about students' literacy skills and how to best support them. This led to more structured differentiation of learning than had previously occurred.
(Principal)

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) commissioned the University of Western Australia (UWA) to investigate the project outcomes related to improving teacher knowledge of how to support spelling, word knowledge and vocabulary development. The data support the claims that teachers must develop a deep understanding of the developmental aspect of spelling and word knowledge, as well as explore the links between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. The data also confirm the value of students being explicitly supported in building word knowledge, of applying this knowledge across the curriculum, and using this knowledge to become more strategic readers.

Starting a new school, it was fantastic to have this focus and now it is part of the culture of the school. When we started up, we said we wanted to have a focus on literacy, but I do not think we would have had the tools to do that without investment in this project. The project gave us some tools and some accountability, some benchmarks to work towards. We have been far more critical of ourselves as a result of the involvement. The real strength of the project was the professional learning provided by the Making the Links team. (Principal of a new school)



Lessons learned

While student outcomes were positive, an unexpected outcome was a change in focus to planning and programming, which in turn led to a phased introduction of the Australian Curriculum.

While challenges remain for subject area teachers to view these skills as part of teaching and learning, it was clear to the teachers that the rationale of the Australian Curriculum provides a strong impetus for all teachers to take responsibility for the teaching of literacy.

Within the project, time was seen as a constraining factor, resulting in limited opportunities for teachers to engage in planning discussions on how to incorporate the strategies of the Making the Links initiative into their teaching. This impacted on collaborative planning, and led to teachers simply trying to incorporate the strategies in their own class rather than planning as a learning area. The Making the Links project ensured that all participant teachers were familiar with a range of generic literacy strategies.

However, it became evident over the life of the project that not all literacy skills were easily transferable. Although the literacy instructional strategies developed through the project seemed to fit well with the goals of the initiative, they were often reluctantly considered – or rejected – by teachers from various disciplines because they appeared to represent a competing pedagogy. As a result, learning area literacy, which is intended to be embedded across the curriculum, competed with all other curriculum.

I am not sure if [the strategies] have all necessarily worked, but we are working out what has worked. [It is] a long-term process, not a short-term process: skill levels need to be built with teachers and then the students need to have their skills scaffolded ... The hardest part is the building of teacher skills. (Mentor teacher)

Next steps

It became clear that the mentor had a pivotal role and this was recognised in the final evaluation (Faulkner et al 2012). In fact, in the evaluation it was reported the mentor assumed several roles: mentor as linchpin, mentor as team builder, mentor as literacy leader, and mentor as outsider.

Results in the participating schools varied, and these are reported as case studies in the 2012 UWA report. Overall, the learnings included the acknowledgement that assessment data provides evidence; targeted teaching is time well spent; and literacy supports content learning.



Sustainability, in relation to the Making the Links project, is based on two critical factors. The first is the acknowledgement that literacy knowledge – including spelling, vocabulary development and reading comprehension – will enhance learning area knowledge. The second is that the organisational conditions must be in place to ensure that these dimensions of literacy are embraced by learning area teachers.

Continuing a 'stepped' professional learning process over a substantial period of time will initially help to keep teachers' interest levels. However, the critical element is teacher and school commitment over a longer time frame. Researchers maintain that the teacher is the most important factor when considering student growth in learning (Darling-Hammond & Youngs 2002; Guskey 2002; Hattie 2009; Timperley 2008). The Making the Links project supports this notion, and encourages administrators and the Catholic Education Office (CEO) to continue working closely with teachers and schools to enhance the literacy teaching and learning for students in the middle years of schooling (Faulkner 2012, p. 69).

The evaluation (Faulkner et al. 2011) identified key principles for pedagogical change:

- Use data to determine instructional needs when supporting literacy learners across a range of key learning areas.
- Modify (differentiate) the curriculum – as well as the pedagogy – to encourage more targeted teaching.
- Link appropriate literacy strategies to different learning areas.
- Challenge teacher assumptions about their role in literacy instruction through ongoing discussions in PLCs.
- Develop teacher skills in the use of literacy instructional strategies to encourage students to engage in problem solving and 'talk' when working with text.

Acknowledge that pedagogical renewal in the area of literacy instruction across the learning areas is a slow change process, not a 'quick fix'.

Research base

The foundation of the project was an acceptance that literacy is 'the cornerstone of student achievement' (Wise 2009, p. 373). Despite this, large numbers of students in Australia and internationally struggle with literacy or subject-related literacy skills. Further, the project design drew on the work of Lee & Spratley (2010), who identified that different kinds of literacy skills are required from one discipline to the next. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2006) recommended that literacy should continue to be taught throughout schooling, and is the responsibility of all teachers.



This project combined theory about spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension development; demonstration of how to support spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension across the curriculum; and opportunities to practise with students within their school context (Faulkner et al. 2012, p. 2).

The design of the professional learning as developmental, was influenced by Guskey, who suggests that 'change is primarily an experientially based learning process for teachers' (2002, p. 384), Hattie (2009), Darling-Hammond & Young (2002) and Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009). What emerged was a six-step process whereby teacher participants were encouraged to engage in a sustained and substantial conversation over a considerable length of time. The steps involved collection and analysis of baseline and diagnostic data; identifying areas that required targeted support; challenging teacher assumptions in relation to literacy and literacy teaching across the learning areas; extending teacher knowledge around literacy and instructional literacy strategies linked to different learning areas; implementing structures to extend good literacy learning and practices; and exploring ways of sustaining the change process for meaningful and effective pedagogical renewal (Faulkner et al. 2012, p. 2).

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