

Future Directions in Literacy
Conference
*and Certificate in
Primary Literacy Education*



2009

Friday 11 & Saturday 12 September 2009
Harold Park Function Centre, Glebe NSW

Hosted by

Division of Professional Learning
Faculty of Education and Social Work
The University of Sydney

Website: www.profllearn.edsw.usyd.edu.au



The
University
of Sydney

Proceedings of the Future Directions in Literacy Conference September 11- 12 2009

Publication of Academic Papers

The papers published in these proceedings were collected from presentations given at a two-day conference entitled, *Future Directions in Literacy Conference*, hosted by the Division of Professional Learning at the Faculty of Education and Social Work on September 11- 12 2009, and on September 5- 6 2008. All authors presenting at the conferences were offered peer review in a double-blind review process by the international review team. Fourteen papers were received from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Fiji and South Africa and 6 authors submitted their paper for full review.

Review process

The conference program chair established two committees: an international scientific committee and a conference advisory committee. The Future Directions Advisory committee was composed of 6 people with backgrounds in schools and university teaching who reviewed the abstracts of papers submitted for the conference. The international scientific committee (board of reviewers) was composed of 12 people with expertise in the area of literacy research and education. The members came from a range of different countries, with personnel drawn from both Australian and universities from other countries. This team reviewed the papers submitted for publication.

Each manuscript submitted was read by two reviewers selected from the international board of reviewers. To achieve consistency, reviewers were provided with a Reviewer's Guide and detailed assessment criteria. The international review team provided detailed, formative feedback for the authors. This process enabled the papers to be recommended for revision or rejection. The papers with positive recommendations from the two reviewers were allowed time for revision. Once revisions were made the papers were sent back to the original reviewers for final comment. Comments were collated by the program chairs and papers were then accepted for publication depending on the final peer reviewed ranking.

Editor: Dr Alyson Simpson, University of Sydney

ISBN: 978-1-74210-174-3

November 2009

Published by: The University of Sydney

Division of Professional Learning, A35

Faculty of Education and Social Work

The University of Sydney, NSW 2006

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Proceedings of the Future Directions in Literacy Conference September 11- 12 2009

The Future Directions in Literacy Conference 2009 was proudly hosted by the Division of Professional Learning in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at The University of Sydney. It was held during National Literacy and Numeracy Week to signal the important role that literacy has in all our learning and teaching.

We thank our sponsors, e:lit, the Primary English Teaching Association, and Walker Books for their contributions to the conference. e:lit is a national professional association which serves as a forum for the sharing of current research and practice relevant to the teaching and learning of language – spoken, written and visual. Walker Books is a world wide publishing group that develops and promotes children’s literary texts as well as teacher support materials. The combination of these two sponsors represents the richness that this conference addresses.

The recent focus of literacy education in Australia has been on the development of a National curriculum. National testing and reporting also continue to strongly influence how teachers operate in their classrooms. A common complaint heard during the year was the pressure to teach to the test. This became so powerful that numerous teachers have said there is no time to read aloud to their students. Others commented that creative approaches to thinking and learning about reading and writing are fine in theory but will only be squeezed in once they believe they have prepared their students with sufficient practice with likely test questions. The tension for the immediate future direction of literacy education is to highlight how balanced approaches, authentic resources and creative and imaginative thinking in fact enhance children’s literacy development and will lead to better achievement in tests such as NAPLAN.

This is the context in which the 2009 Future Directions in Literacy conference was held. Debates around significant issues that are not easy to solve were held. Directions forward informed by these debates with evidence from classrooms, research, and policy were planned with the aim to reach an educational goal in which equity, creativity and intellectual rigour are supported by an overarching pedagogical framework.

The research that informed our conversations this year included voices from Fiji, Singapore, New Zealand as well as Australia. The conference stimulated professional conversations about future developments in literacy pedagogy and practice. As in previous years the forum provided an opportunity for teachers, students, academics and policy makers to share concerns as well as potential solutions to the current problems facing literacy educators. The scope of papers, workshops and presentations covered issues pertinent to the age range K-8: infants to the middle years.

We aimed to be provocative, however we realize that for new ideas to become accepted practice there needs to be reflective discussion. In this spirit we publish these papers to provide the chance for readers to engage with the presentations in their own context.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alyson Simpson". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and larger than the others.

Alyson Simpson

Conference convenor

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**Oral language foundations to literacy success:
Teaching literate vocabulary**

Carolyn Cole

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Oral language foundations to literacy success: Teaching literate vocabulary

Abstract

Oral language is integral to successful literacy learning and the specific skills of vocabulary, complex syntax, oral narrative, and inferencing, in combination with knowledge and metalinguistic skills, underpin reading comprehension. Scope and complexity in these language areas is not culturally universal despite reliance on these skills for successful participation and learning in mainstream curriculum, and it is often socioeconomically marginalised communities whose sociolinguistic practices are often most distant from the language demands of school. In order to give children from low income and linguistically diverse families, entry into the language of school, explicit teaching of school oral language skills is necessary. This paper provides information about the requisite oral language skills for successful literacy learning, and discusses embedded, explicit teaching of vocabulary as one specific component of oral language instruction that supports reading comprehension.

Literacy is tool for communication, recreation and learning and it is considered a life skill, necessary for successful participation in Western society. There are many different kinds of literacy that are relevant to the contexts in which they operate – home literacies, community literacies, academic literacies, curriculum literacies and so on, serving many different purposes and functioning in diverse ways. *School literacy* refers to the range of texts and purposes that are common in the domain of schooling and which are also central to mainstream, Western society’s discourses of power and knowledge. In order to become competent in the written and technological texts that are part of education, fluent use of literate oral language is essential.

Literate oral language rests on a foundation of culturally located skills, values, understanding and practices and there is widespread recognition that early childhood language experiences that complement school language practices, act to prepare children for the language and literacy demands of formal schooling (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; Heath, 1982; Neuman, 2006; NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Westby, 2004).

There is a clear relationship between social class and both oral language and literacy (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Bus, 2002; Heath, 1983; Tomblin, 2005) with children from low income families considered to be at much greater risk of having difficulty learning to read than their middle-class peers (Dickinson & Snow,

1987). Sociolinguistic practices in these communities can be considerably divergent from the language patterns and functions that are required for school, resulting in a mismatch between the language skills a child brings to school, and the language expectations of mainstream curriculum.

This paper explores the links between oral language and literacy and discusses how explicit vocabulary teaching strategies can be embedded within universal instruction. to target students whose early language experiences and skills place them at a disadvantage for school literacy learning. Although children from culturally and linguistically diverse background are the focus here, recommended strategies also have application to students with language and learning disabilities.

Literate Language

Literate language – the language of school, calls upon uncommon and interesting vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and non-literal forms of language such as metaphor and idioms. Literate language is powerful within the cultural contexts that value its use, such as scholarly articles, professional presentations, adults’ and children’s literature, negotiations, personal recounts, proposals and hypotheses. Take the following extract from one of the Harry Potter novels as an example:

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lop-sided creature, and it was flapping in Harry’s direction. He stood quite still, watching it sink lower and lower. For a split second he hesitated, his hand on the window-latch, wondering whether to slam it shut, but then the bizarre creature soared over one of the streetlamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realising what it was, leapt aside. (Rowling, 1999, p.11)

Literate language is very descriptive and enables nuances of meaning to be captured, amplified, manipulated and packaged eloquently in sentences that are rich in information and linguistic complexity. This is not, however the language that is yelled from the sidelines of an Under 10s soccer match. Nor does it assist in mobilising a 17 year old to tidy his room and empty the dishwasher, unless of course it is part of a larger

negotiation which is bound to consequences and outcomes that rely on fulfilment of promises! Literate language has its place.

The issue we have, however is that considerable power is afforded those people who are proficient literate language users as literate language is the language of tertiary education, politics and persuasion – language described by Bernstein in the 1960's as *elaborated* (Bernstein, 1964). Literate language is the dominant discourse of school and as schools become increasingly academically focused, their investment in and expectation for competent literate language use, grows (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Development of literate language skills has been shown to be socially located (Heath, 1982; Tabors, Roach, & Snow, 2001; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997; van Kleeck, 2007) in middle and upper income communities with social class differences in language development evident as young as age two. These differences persist well into high school (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997)

Using Bernstein's model of language and power, people who are not proficient users of literate language, who instead rely on a *restricted code*, are limited in their access to the social capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that literate language enables. The 'restricted code' is described as having limited diversity, greater contextual reliance, greater redundancies and more informality and predictability. Use of a 'restricted' language style in writing is considered typical of weak writing skills (Horowitz & Samuels, 1987).

The major limitation of Bernstein's model is the implication that there are in fact just two distinct language forms in use in Western society, when there are multiple languages and literacies in operation across the diverse communities that make up our society. Nonetheless, understanding the broad characteristics of school language and literacy as they currently operate is necessary both to recognise how a dominant code can act to exclude children from fully participating in education, and to support the building of bridges between home languages and the language and literacy demands of school.

Family influences on literacy and literate language

Children from low income families are considered to be at much greater risk of having difficulty learning to read than their middle-class peers (Dickinson & Snow, 1987) and this risk is intimately related to their language and literacy experiences before entry into school. For these at-risk children all prereading domains are likely to be weak – that is their phonological awareness, print-related knowledge, vocabulary, background knowledge, oral narrative skills and mastery of complex grammar (Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Hart & Risley, 1992; Torgesen, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Literate language, then, is located in family culture.

Children in middle-class families in the United States are estimated to have experienced some 1000 hours of being read to when they enter school, compared with only 25 hours of reading time provided in low-income families (Neuman, 1999). Similarly, the amount of talk that occurs in US college and tertiary educated households is estimated to be nearly three times as much as occurs in low income homes, and this is correlated with both the vocabulary size and vocabulary learning trajectories of children from these households. Where parents sustain high levels of verbal interaction with children, social class differences in vocabulary outcomes do not occur as children mainly use the words their parents use with them in conversations (Hart & Risley, 1995). Similarly Tizard, Cooperman, Joseph and Tizard (1972) found that two to five year olds living in orphanages showed vocabulary levels commensurate with the amount of adult-child talk that occurred. Orphanage children who were spoken to infrequently developed much smaller vocabularies.

Differences in vocabulary size have been shown to persist, leading to the conclusion that the experience of schooling and immersion in school language is not in itself sufficient to impact children's language learning outcomes. Thus there is a call for literacy programs to specifically address the oral language skills of at-risk readers as part of preventing long term reading difficulties (NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Literate Oral Language

Literate oral language includes the kinds of meaning and structure based skills that are typical of written language, and are differentiated from general oral discourse which generally uses less complex grammar, simpler vocabulary, greater repetition and relies more on shared understandings between speaker and listener (Westby, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Whilst most children develop competency in their community oral discourses, it cannot be presumed that the preferred, literate discourses of education have also been acquired.

For teachers, whose early childhood experiences of language have often included extensive literate language interactions, the role of adults talking with children, reading to children, discussing books, explaining ideas and introducing new words may appear intuitive or 'natural and normal'. These language and literacy interactions however are deliberate approaches that parents use with their children as part of valued, cultural practices. These practices are largely evident in white, middle and upper income communities. For those children who do not have a solid foundation of literate language experiences, explicit teaching of literate language in the preschool and school years is a matter of social justice.

Oral language experiences that support literacy

The early language experiences that have particular relevance to children's literacy outcomes can be clustered into two age-related phases: babies/toddlers and preschoolers.

Babies and Toddlers

Research shows that different levels of parent engagement in play and different amounts of talking at home before children turn three are strongly related to young children's

vocabulary learning (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hart & Risley, 1992; Rush, 1999; Tabors et al., 2001). Talk in these years has been identified as a critical indicator of quality in childcare with verbal responsiveness identified as a key component in attachment, relationships and wellbeing between carers, parents and children (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998; Thompson, 2004; Winter, 2004). This early talk with toddlers also serves to begin building children's knowledge of themselves and their environment, and adopts topics that also frequently arise in preschool such as colours, shapes, family and food (Snow, 2004).

The Preschool Years

The next major period of language learning occurs with preschool children between the ages of three and five years, when children typically from middle class households learn "how to do" the language of school. Through experiences of joint book reading and family conversations children learn how to answer questions, use descriptive vocabulary, give explanations, hypothesize and predict, and talk in extended discourse without the turn-taking support more typically available in conversations (Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001; van Kleeck, 2007). The use of *nonimmediate* talk (DeTemple, 2001) or *decontextualised* language (Westby, 2004) is considered to be particularly important in preparing children for the language demands of reading and writing. Middle-class parents gradually shift their book-sharing conversations from literal 'in context' discussion to comments and questions that go *beyond* the actual pictures and text (Hammett, Van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2003; van Kleeck & Beckley-McCall, 2002) giving their children opportunities to hear and practice engaging with forms of language that are frequently used in school.

Literate vocabulary

Vocabulary is the central pillar of literate language and a comprehensive literate vocabulary not only supports our ability to talk and write in complex and detailed ways, it also supports us to think and understand about the world in more elaborate and precise ways (Stahl, 1999). This precision is powerful in helping us express and interpret exact

meanings, for example separating a feeling of *annoyance* from that of *exasperation*, both of which might otherwise be collapsed into the general emotional reaction of anger.

Literate vocabulary includes the kinds of words that “are likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in the written and oral language of mature (literate) language users” (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Students who are competent, literate language users are able to take advantage of indirect vocabulary learning opportunities at school and will learn more words from experiences such as listening to stories, than children with smaller vocabularies (Robbins & Ehri, 1994). In addition, children who read widely are likely to have repeated experiences with novel and complex words which leads to even further expansion of their vocabularies. On the other hand, children with smaller vocabularies and slower rates of vocabulary acquisition will need vocabulary *instruction* in classrooms (Beck et al., 2002) as well as knowledge or schema building to support lexical learning (Hirsch, 2003; Neuman & Celano, 2006).

Categorising vocabulary

The idea of ‘tiers’ of vocabulary (Beck et al., 2002) is useful in identifying which words need to be taught. In this model, assuming we are considering a literate language user, “Tier 1” words are the common or garden variety of words – the most basic, simple words that can usually be expected to be part of all student’s vocabularies, and those which are also commonly occurring in everyday talking. For example *chair, walk, sad, food*. The second tier of word contains the kinds of words that mature, literate language users will include across a wide variety of contexts, such as *flexible, distressed, convenient* and *purposeful*. (Beck et al., 2002). These ‘interesting’ words are literate in style. Take for example, *Russell and the Lost Treasure* (Scotton, 2006), a story about a sheep that finds a treasure chest only to discover it is full of “useless stuff” including an ancient camera. Finding the camera leads Russell to make his own treasure – a photo album of his friends and family. Despite fairly minimal text, this children’s picture book includes words such as *admire, peered, clattering, invention, brimming* and *rummaged* – a veritable treasure of tier 2 words!

Beck et al (1982) advocate teaching around 400 tier two words per year as this has been shown to positively impact word knowledge and text comprehension. The criteria for identifying these words include the usefulness and frequency of occurrence of the word (eg *debate* versus *cogitate*), the teachability of the word and the potential variety of ways the word can be used (eg *deterioration* versus *genuflect*), and whether or not the student is likely to already have an understanding of the general concept that the word represents, which provides a platform on which more specific word meaning is built (eg *controversy* can be built on the idea of *argue* or *disagree*).

Tier three words tend to be domain/subject specific and are not high frequency, for example terminology in biology, or within a particular interest area such as *colonial knot* (embroidery) or *crankshaft* (mechanics). These are immediately recognisable as words that will need to be explicitly taught in order to learn the specific subject content.

Monitoring meaning

A framework to consider the extent of word knowledge is useful and there are many descriptions available in the literature (e.g. Beck, McKeown, & Omansen, 1987; Calfee & Drum, 1986; Dale, 1965), some of which have been in circulation for nearly 70 years (Cronbach, 1942). Dale’s approach which uses four stages of word knowledge moving from “Never heard it before” to “Knows it well”, is appealing because of its simplicity, and in my clinic I have used a similar construct referring to ‘traffic lights’ as a cuing system for level of word knowledge (See Lubliner, 2006). In this system ‘red light words’ are those that are not known, ‘yellow light words’ as words that are ‘sort of’ known but the meaning may be vague, and ‘green light words’ are confidently understood and can be explained. This approach serves not only to give adults and children a common language to discuss word knowledge, that is, a metacognitive strategy, but also teaches children a process of thinking about the words they encounter in reading. Through discussion of red and yellow light words and the exploration of their meaning, an underlying construct of ‘I *expect* to understand and when I don’t I can *do something* about it’ is established. This supports students to reflect on meaning

during listening and reading, and positions them as agents of understanding, empowered to seek out meaning not just hope that it happens.

The influence of context on word meanings (both tiers one and two) is another important ‘meaning monitoring’ aspect of vocabulary teaching. For example, the word *take* shifts meaning subtly from *Take* a photo, to *Take* a tablet, to *Take* your school bag, to *Take* someone’s purse. A literate level of vocabulary knowledge enables examination of these shifts in meaning and connections to networks of contexts and synonyms which accurately reflect the different meanings.

Teaching vocabulary explicitly

Whilst there is some evidence that children can acquire new vocabulary by being exposed to novel words during reading (Robbins & Ehri, 1994) the words that are most readily learned in this context are those that are concrete and descriptive (McFalls, Schwanenflugel, & Stahl, 1996; Schwanenflugel, Stahl, & McFalls, 1997). Incidental vocabulary development is most effective for students who already have an extensive vocabulary (Nicholson & Whyte, 1992) and these students are also more likely to read extensively and be competent at making inferences. For these students an estimated five to fifteen words out of every one hundred unknown words will be learned (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999) Students from low income households are less likely to benefit from incidental vocabulary learning opportunities as they may not have the vocabularies or literate language experiences to benefit from immersion. Immersion is like adding more water to the swimming pool and assuming that this in itself will result in non-swimmers being able to swim.

The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) identified that in addition to incidental learning and indirect vocabulary teaching, vocabulary should be taught directly, including multiple exposures to words, embedded within rich, engaging contexts, using scaffolding and technology and using a diverse range of instructional methods. The integration of vocabulary

instruction as a means of enabling students to participate in school discourse, whilst valuing and building on community language skills, can be challenging for classroom teachers given their reasonably homogenous literate language backgrounds and the ease with which literate language participants seem to extend their lexicons. There is, therefore a need for teachers to have access to a range of explicit teaching strategies, embedded in authentic literacy and learning experiences. (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2007; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003; Justice & Ezell, 2004; Williams, 2006).

Explicit teaching

Explicit teaching in this paper is not intended to imply the “skill and drill” approach taken in direct instruction. Rather, it is presented as a merger of Rosenshine’s (1986) process of task definition, demonstration, guided learning and constructive, specific feedback – a ‘learning’ (Krashen, 1976) or cognitively explicit approach – with a experiential or ‘acquisition’ approach (Krashen, 1976) which is contextually bound, typified by repetition in naturalistic contexts (both in terms of communication events and partners) with gradual expansion of understandings to other situations. In other words, vocabulary instruction not only needs to be purposeful, relevant and meaningful to the task at hand, but also needs to empower students in conscious approaches to accessing and manipulating the vocabulary they use as they pursue “complex and exact ways of talking about the world and of understanding the ways that more complex thinkers see the world” (Stahl, 1999).

I would add to this description of explicit teaching, the need to facilitate *engagement* in the process of learning by making language learning fun and *intriguing* (Beck et al., 2002). We want to spark in our students the motivation to actively seek out meaning. Looking up a word in a dictionary and putting it into a sentence does not bring a word to life and dictionary meanings are not always helpful for students with poor vocabularies. Take for example the word *manoeuvre* in the sentence “He *manoeuvred* himself into the Franklin household” – on checking a dictionary definition of the word *manoeuvre* we are given:

n **1** skilful movement. **2** contrived, complicated, and possibly deceptive plan or action. ♦ *pl*
3 military or naval exercises. ♦ *v* **4** manipulate or contrive skilfully or cunningly. **5**
perform manoeuvres. (Collins, 2002)

In the absence of any discussion, reliance on dictionary definitions will probably not help the student understand the intended meaning in the text.

It is also essential that children understand that language is *empowering* – something that is worth paying attention to and which can enhance meaning, add weight and authority, convince, control, reflect and define in ways that are valued and rewarded within education and mainstream cultures. It is therefore important to start by teaching words that give the most leverage in terms of comprehension, applicability and teachability.

The following explicit teaching strategies have been drawn from clinical experience and from a range of sources such as (Alderete et al., 2004; Annandale et al., 2005; Beck et al., 2002; Culatta, Aslett, Fife, & Setzer, 2004; Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; Duke et al., 2007; Gillam, Fargo, & Robertson, 2009; Hindman & Wasik, 2006; Justice & Pence, 2005; Justice & Kaderavek, 2004; Justice, Mashburn, Pence, & Wiggins, 2008; Kamil, 2004; Neuman & Celano, 2006; Westby, 2004). The intention is to focus on strategies that are deliverable in any teaching and learning situation that teachers can embed within day to day, meaningful curriculum contexts.

Knowledge, definitions & contextualisation

Knowledge activation ‘turns the lights on’ in the relevant areas of a child’s lexicon, and this initial activation helps with later word retrieval for use in talking and writing. For example, when embarking on reading the book ‘Mr Seahorse’ (Carle, 2004) we would first talk about the sea in general, then discuss what we know about seahorses, perhaps using a thinking framework such as “Facts, Negatives, Positives”, based on deBono’s ‘6

Thinking Hats' (deBono, 1999). We would go to Google Images for pictures of seahorses, and to YouTube to watch footage of a seahorse giving birth.

Identifying Tier 2 words & giving definitions

Once background information has been 'turned on', the next step is to identify relevant Tier 2 vocabulary to teach, bearing in mind the selection criteria of likely frequency of occurrence, existing conceptual underpinnings, importance in text comprehension and teachability.

Once words are identified, Beck et al advise using "student-friendly explanation" (2002, p.35) which include describing the typical usage of the word as well as explaining the meaning in "everyday language".

For example, the word *sinister* is used to make a reader feel fear, anticipating that something bad is going to happen. *Sinister* means there is a threat of something bad. *Sinister* is also used to mean evil or wicked and usually suggests that the character is *planning* some kind of horrible things to hurt someone *on purpose*.

Contextualising meaning

Going on to relate the word to the context in which it has been used helps illustrate the meaning as it applies in the text. It is also useful to talk about how the author has used the word as a device to evoke certain feelings, meanings or reactions.

For example, the word *despondent* is used in A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning, in the sentence "Klaus was too tired and despondent to speak..." (Snicket, 1999). This refers to the fact that Klaus feels like the situation they have found themselves in is *hopeless*. He thinks there is *no way out*, that they are *doomed* and he feels so *powerless* that he doesn't even want to talk to anyone. It is like there is a great weight on top of him and it is so heavy he can't stand up and he feels like he will be *stuck there* forever. So the author has chosen this word *despondent*, to show us that Klaus is feeling *more than sad*. *Despondent* means that Klaus is unhappy, but *so unhappy* that he doesn't

think things will ever get better. *Despondent* is a really strong word and the author has used *despondent* rather than just unhappy, to show us how *very unhappy* Klaus is.

Multiple examples

Giving multiple examples is important in creating a ‘map’ of the meaning, so that students can understand the word beyond the single context in which it has appeared. So in the case of *despondent* there might be examples from my experience as well as the students’ experiences that help further exemplify its meaning.

For example, one day I had to take my dog to the vet because she was very sick. The vet wasn’t sure if she could make my dog well and told me she would have to do some tests first. I had to leave my dog at the vet’s office overnight, and when I went home I felt very *despondent*. I was *really really sad* because I thought my dog might die. I was really *despondent* – not just a little bit sad, a LOT sad. *Despondent*.

Students would then be invited to give their examples of times they felt *despondent*, and they would be encouraged to think of a variety of situations, not just when an animal or someone they know might die. It is very important that *despondent* can be understood as applying to a variety of contexts, because we feel sadness in a variety of contexts, each of which influences precise meaning.

Embedding vocabulary instruction into reading aloud

Being able to invoke explicit vocabulary teaching during text reading is important, as this is the process we want students to use. Interestingly this is actually done at times during the Snicket books, for example: “Klaus sighed and relinquished – a word which here means “gave to Count Olaf even though he didn’t want to” – the book on nuptial law.” (Snicket, 1999). Similarly we can explain meanings as we read aloud, interspersing the text with explanations and examples. Where this has disrupted the flow of the story, it is easy enough to just go back over what was read a second time.

For example, “Russell the sheep was perfecting his triple somersault” – who here knows how to do a somersault? A *somersault* is when you roll over (gestures added) – look, like Nathan is showing us! That’s a *somersault*. We’ll try some *somersaults* on the oval later this afternoon. So “Russell the sheep was perfecting his *triple* somersault” – rolling over *three times in a row* – “when he was distracted by a passing crow”. (Scotton, 2006)

Bringing words to life

Dramatisation

This is the fun part. Have you ever tried to describe *limping* without actually doing a demonstration? Showing can be far more powerful than describing, and great fun can be had when students join in. Picture the whole class *limping* – they will soon have the idea. Contrasting with *not limping* also adds to the understanding of the word. Then acting out scenarios that result in *limping* further add to the enjoyment.

For example: “Josh imagine your running in a race and you suddenly trip over a rock. Start running and now...TRIP! Oh dear, I guess when you get up you’ll be *limping* because you’ve hurt your.....”

Drawing pictures

Visual representation of meaning is powerful and a quick diagram or icon to represent the underlying concept (eg a sad face to accompany the explanation of despondent) can help clarify meaning. Pictures can include a quick sketch to show for example, the sequence of events that result in a new word. Students can also be encouraged to draw pictures that represent the situations that the new word might apply to. This is particularly useful for younger children and can serve as a meaning prompt in the process of vocabulary acquisition.

Linking to personal experiences

This is an essential part of establishing meaning, as it is often the personal situations (or the powerful situations) that help commit word meanings to memory. For example the child who has recently twisted their ankle during soccer can use this experience to map the word *limping* into their lexicon. The child whose budgie escaped and flew away may well associated this experience with feeling *despondent*, and the student who has just been watching a documentary on great white sharks might use this association to understand the word *sinister*. Personal experiences add meaning and help connect a new word to more specific, differentiated understandings. Discussions about personal experiences also provide opportunities to give additional models of the new vocabulary, and for the students to practice using new words.

Hands on experiences

For young children and particularly children with language learning disabilities there is nothing quite like hands on experiences to map words onto real, concrete situations. For these children, hands on experiences may be needed to learn Tier 1 words. For example, getting *stuck in mud* – the problem in Mr Gumpy’s Motor Car (Burningham, 1973) – can be demonstrated by making mud and contrasting moving a toy car along wet bitumen then trying to move a toy car through some sticky mud. Giving children turns at pushing the car and letting them feel the gooey mud serve to very clearly explain what mud is and what it is like. After these experiences, events in the story such as “The car sank deeper into the mud. “Now we’re really stuck” said Mr Gumpy. They all got out and pushed.” will have more salient meaning.

Humour

The power of over-acting, being funny and even ridiculous add power to explanations. It is hard to forget the sight of your teacher, hand on forehead, groaning as they *limp* around the classroom having just “tripped” over an imaginary dog, uttering *despondently* that they might never be able to walk properly again and they will have to *limp* to school , *limp* to the classroom, and *limp* around the oval during fitness, no doubt beginning to *feel limp* at the thought of all the *limping*. We want children to be intrigued by words and to have fun with words. This is in fact, the earliest stages of

language based humour, when children start to move beyond slapstick into the realms of meaning manipulations for the purpose of entertainment. Who can forget, “How did the tissue climb out of the bucket of water? It *limped*.”

Guiding and mapping meaning

Connecting meanings

Guiding children’s understanding and meaning associations is critical. We need to know if understandings are inaccurate as this helps to create more specific and accurate definitions and connections. For example, the child that connects the word “grab” specifically someone snatching their texts away while they are still using it, may misinterpret the subtle meaning difference of this word in other contexts, such as “Let’s grab a burger on the way home tonight.” For children with language impairments, this point of securing accurate and multiple applications of meaning is especially important.

Word webs are one approach to mapping meaning, for example a word web or concept map (e.g. Brace, Brockhoff, Sparkes, & Tuckey, 2006) about sheep could outline habitat, diet, products, and physical descriptions. Alternately a word web could map synonyms, so that we might have ‘sad’ as the central word, mapping synonyms around it – despondent, unhappy, low, upset, dejected, miserable, gloomy. It is also useful to explore scales of meaning, so that we might consider sadness on a continuum from just a little bit sad (unhappy, gloomy) through to extremely sad (despondent, miserable). Lubliner (2006) uses “word scales”, and locates “strong and interesting words” on a scale from minimal levels (eg annoyed = a little bit mad) through to intense (eg livid = really mad). Similarly Westby (2004) uses “emotional thermometers” to map feelings words, for example going from *dismayed* to *petrified* as expressions of fear.

Deriving meanings

Of the 10,000 unfamiliar words American 5th graders are likely to come across during reading, an estimated 40% of these words will be derivatives of other, more frequently occurring words (Nagy, Osborn, Winsor, & O’Flahaven, 1994). Knowledge of root or

base words, therefore, can help students build meaning. If, for example, a student is familiar with the root *aqua*, meaning water, even though they have not come across aqueous or aquatic before, they could possibly work out that these have something to do with water. These base words can be systematically taught as a support strategy for vocabulary building and in conjunction with work on prefixes and suffixes (See Annandale et al., 2005; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008) add to students' repertoire of strategies to help them to work out meanings.

Practice & inspiration

Getting pronunciation right

One critical aspect of word learning is how the word is actually said. A clear phonological representation of the word is necessary in order to precisely store it in the lexicon and to differentiate it from similar sounding words. For example, many language impaired children have difficulty differentiating *telescope*, *microscope* and *binoculars* from a sound pattern point of view, even though they might be able to mime their different uses. For children who are not efficient word learners, attention to the detail of the sound patterns is necessary, followed by practice saying the word on its own, and then saying the word in sentences, the latter being more phonologically demanding and requiring a more stable underlying representation. This in turn supports retrieval of the word both for speaking and writing.

Practice tasks

Multiple exposures to new words facilitates their acquisition (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Senechal, 1997). There are many examples of activities that facilitate practising new words so that children become confident in their use, making these words an "active part of their vocabularies" (Beck et al., 2002). For example, sentence completions or cloze activities (e.g. Lubliner, 2006), associations (I feel ecstatic when...), building relationships between new words such as 'Would you be despondent if something exhilarating happened?' (Beck et al., 2002), and group discussion, for

example on reading “Russell and the Lost Treasure” children could talk about their ‘treasures’ and perhaps bring some in for show and tell.

Adding intrigue

Without doubt parents’ and educators’ enthusiasm for words, interest in the pursuit of meaning, capacity to be playful with words, and belief in the power of words serve as inspiration for children’s language learning. Passing this baton on to children in a way that builds on and is respectful of home and community literacy practices, and that acknowledges the effort involved for children with language learning difficulties, is the speech-language pathologist’s language mission!

Conclusion

This paper has discussed literate oral language pedagogy - how the thread of explicit oral language instruction can be woven into the cloth of curriculum. Even though it is yet to be established whether or not this immersion in vocabulary instruction or “vocabulary instruction flooding” is feasible in ‘real time’ teaching, (Pressley, Disney, & Anderson, 2007) it is nevertheless clear that children whose language learning experiences don’t prepare them for the language of literacy and school, need regular oral language instruction embedded into their day to day learning in order to redress the significant school language and literacy disadvantage that can result from cultural and linguistic differences.

Literacy is like an engine that is essential in the drive for freedom. If literacy is the engine, then language is the fuel by which the engine operates. Not just any fuel though – our Western literacy engine requires enriched, highly literate fuel. Without this the literacy engine sputters, and freedom becomes an uncertain journey.

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**Cultural Insights Into Indigenous Literacies:
Royal Far West School Case Study**

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INTRODUCTION

The Royal Far West School (RFWS) at Manly in Sydney is one of the participating schools in the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (QTIP) and is the subject of this case study. The QTIP project comes under the umbrella of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Project in partnership with the New South Wales (NSW) Department of School Education and focuses on teachers, teaching practices and styles in the context of the teachers' students, schools, and community. Each participating school has an academic partner to provide a theoretical background and advice to the QTIP team in each school. Advice is in accordance with the direction that the team wishes to develop their action learning plan. The RFWS team includes the Principal (team leader), the Speech Therapist, the Aboriginal Education Assistant, some Teachers and some Teachers' Special Aids in a dynamic relationship.

There are two papers written on the case study. This paper focuses on the theoretical background; professional development and advice provided to the RFWS QTIP team. The other paper, written by the Principal and her QTIP team, focuses on the practical application of the team's action learning plan, the process of its development. It also explains the development of the 'Sounds, words And Yarning' (SWAY) program and the teaching styles and practices involved.

The success of the dynamic relationship between the academic partner and the other members of the QTIP team, the team's absolute commitment to improving outcomes for Indigenous students, the eclectic and complementary variety of the team's expertises and skills and good leadership sees RFWS well positioned as a model. It took great courage for RFWS staff to invite the academic partner into the classroom to sit in on lessons at each stage of the action learning plan development where staff put into practice the styles and practices utilising their expertises in conjunction with professional development. The academic partner and team members met immediately after lessons to debrief and refined anything that emerged from the discussions. The children come there with their parents/carers from regions from all over New South Wales for very short stays. There are significant numbers of Aboriginal students at any given time and staff members are dedicated to teaching Aboriginal cultural knowledge with a focus on language. The QTIP team sought to have professional development in language inclusive of Aboriginal English, which includes Aboriginal cultural knowledge, and views of the world. The dialect of AE provides linguistic access to Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

The RFWS is unique in a number of ways. The students are only there for a few days and programs are relatively short. This gives staff the opportunity to refine what did not work last lesson and improve what worked. The QTIP team works in equal partnership with the local Guringai Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in the planning, decision making, delivery and evaluation of programs. The RFWS has a higher staff/student ratio than most other schools and this gives each staff member more

time to focus on their part in the delivery of programs. The team is exposed to students from a larger variety of Aboriginal linguistic and cultural backgrounds in NSW, learning and behavioural difficulties and they have immediate access to the parents/caregivers. The Quality Teaching framework accommodates and supports teaching literacy and numeracy to Indigenous students through the inclusion of Indigenous cultural knowledges, ways of knowing, language/s, the local Indigenous community (AECG), social practices and experiences. Narratives are a culturally appropriate means to achieve this as storytelling ('yarning') is one way that Indigenous peoples teach in a decontextualised way (Hanlen, 2002a). These teaching styles and practices are based on the Quality Teaching area of 'Significance' which addresses the culture, narratives and language in teaching literacy. The term 'Aboriginal' is generally used in this paper in reference to Indigenous Australians in NSW and the term 'Indigenous' is generally used in reference to Indigenous Australians nationally.

A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH

A sociocultural perspective addresses the cultural, social, linguistic and demographics of the Indigenous students in schools and communities.

From a sociocultural perspective, *literacy as social practice* relates Indigenous literacy to cultural beliefs, values and social practices of a child's family and community situated in the contexts of social construction, social inequity, disadvantage and marginalisation. It includes the dynamic relationship between the perspectives and social practices of the child and family, and those of the teacher, curriculum, pedagogies, assessment and contemporary social issues, which collectively determine literacy outcomes (Comber & Kamler, 1997; Lankshear, 1998; Luke, 1994; 1998a; 1998b). (Hanlen, 2002a, p 25)

Every person has a cultural view of the world. This is how we interpret and make sense of what happens around us. The Anglo-Australian cultural world view is the most dominant in Australia. Australia's parliamentary, judicial, education and bureaucratic systems were originally based on those of the British and have now developed into a distinctly Anglo-Australian character. Evidence suggests that there are cultural, social and linguistic issues that form the basis for Indigenous Australians (Eades, 1995, Hanlen, 2007; Lester & Hanlen 2004). To help understand these issues a little more clearly we need to know how some fundamental cultural ways of knowing in Western and Indigenous societies are almost polemic.

Descartes was an early founder of Western philosophy (Meyer, 1998). His notion of 'I think therefore I am' is egocentric in nature (Hanlen, 2002a, Meyer, 1998). It looks at the needs, rights and desires of the individual, is the basis of competition and it eventually became the basis for capitalism (Hanlen, 2002a, 2007). Formal education, work, leisure, family, health and housing and so on are separated in different bureaucratic departments. Aspects of life are often separated from each other and can be conceptualised as being box-like or square shaped for ease of explanation (Hanlen, 2002a, 2007).

Indigenous world views consider the knowledge of oneself comes through others' knowledge that you exist through interaction with others (Meyer, 1998). All aspects of life are dynamic, for example, there

are kinship relationships which determine social obligations to each other, and education is a lifelong process, not separate from family and other daily routine activities (Hanlen 2002a, Hanlen, 2007). Goals of the community are more important than the goals of the individual. All aspects of life are interconnected and dynamic and social practices are reciprocal and for ease of explanation, can be described circular in nature. (Hanlen, 2002a, Hanlen, 2007).

If we accept conceptually that Western ways of knowing are square and that Indigenous ways of knowing are circular then this produces difficulties for Indigenous students when they enter formal school education and for teachers who may realise that their teaching strategies, good intentions and programs are often not producing successful literacy and educational results (Hanlen, 2002a, Hanlen, 2007). The Anglo-Australian cultural context of the classroom which is based on the beliefs, values, language and social practices of Anglo-Australia and the language of the classroom is Standard Australian English (SAE) (Eades, 1995). Indigenous children, prior to school, are fluent in Aboriginal English (AE), the first language of most Aboriginal students in NSW and prior to school and onwards, they grow up in the knowledge of their cultural view of the world and their families' beliefs, values and social practices (Hanlen, 2002a; Hanlen 2007). The children come to school waiting to learn in 'circular' concepts and the teacher teaches using 'square concepts' (Hanlen, 2002a). Generally, what the teacher is saying does not generally resonate or make sense to Aboriginal students, and they often cannot interpret the information linguistically or conceptually (Hanlen, 2002a).

The Indigenous literacy and social practices discussed here are very much generalised and there are many Indigenous Australians who have full literacy competency and some being gifted and talented. However, the purpose of the discussions contained here is to inform educationalists and practitioners of situations and issues that they *may* encounter in their interaction with Indigenous students, their families and communities. Indigenous Australians live at the interface of two cultures (Nakata, 2001, Hanlen, 2002b). Even in remote areas of Australia, Indigenous Australians' everyday social practices may be centred on Indigenous world views but they are also interacting to varying degrees in Anglo-Australian contexts in terms of government interagencies, shopping, social clubs, education and so on. Generally, for non-Indigenous Australians, most social practices involve some forms of literacy practices (Hanlen, 2002a, 2007). Waking in the morning, there may be the need to take a medication. Literacy competency is required to read the medication instructions. The dynamic relationship between literacy and social practices in Australian society determines that we need literacy competency for almost all aspects of life for example, using an Automatic Teller Machine; filling in forms; notes to and from school for parents; getting a driver's license; minutes at social club meetings; looking up phone numbers; street directions; reading a TV guide and so many more everyday daily routine activities (Hanlen, 2002a).

For those Indigenous Australians who have little or no literacy, they are often marginalised from mainstreamed society (Hanlen, 2002b). The education system has seriously failed the educational needs of Indigenous students in the past (Fletcher, 1989; Eades, 1995; Hanlen; 2002b). There has been money,

time, programs and good intentions invested in Indigenous education, yet there has been minimal improvement in outcomes (Lester & Hanlen, 2004). It would appear that the QTIP program is now addressing the real cultural and linguistic needs of Aboriginal students, through the area of 'Significance' which addresses the inclusion of Indigenous cultures and communities in school programs potentially empowering Indigenous students with equity in SAE and the social protocols of Western society, not at the expense of their own language and cultures, but continuing to value and nurture their home language and cultural protocols. The linguistic skills gained when children are able to learn to read and write in their first language/dialect are easily transferred to the learning of the second language/dialect (Hagan, 1987). Aboriginal children in NSW generally speak Aboriginal English (AE) as their first dialect. Education staff need to be empowered with skills to identify the needs of the students in their locality, working in partnership with the local Indigenous community (AECG) and includes the provision of strategies for staff to address these needs.

Due to poor literacy competency generally in Aboriginal families, the children are not exposed to the levels of literacy practices associated with social practices that most non-Indigenous Australian children are exposed to before they go to school (Hanlen, 2002a). Education practitioners need to know what AE is and have an idea of which students in their school may speak it (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) so that they can discern the difference between language difference and learning difficulties, and cultural differences and behavioural problems (Eades, 1995, Hanlen, 1998). Culture is embedded in language (Eades, 1995) hence the need to become aware of the cultural, social and linguistic implications for Indigenous students at school in the students' communities and school localities.

ABORIGINAL ENGLISH

Aboriginal English is rule governed and is as linguistically complex as any other dialect of English whether it be Australian, American, Scottish and so on. Children speaking dialects of the standard language of countries around the world are found to be some of the most disadvantaged children educationally (see Eades, 1995; Hagan, 1987). There are seventy two different Aboriginal language groups in NSW. Each variety of AE is influenced by the students' traditional language. While most Aboriginal students in NSW may never have heard their traditional language spoken, nevertheless, the English that they speak today is influenced by the English that was learned and passed on by their families for around four or five generations. Aboriginal Englishes have their own phonology (sound system), morpho-syntax (grammar), lexico-semantics (words and meaning), pragmatics (how language is used) and paralinguistic features (communication means other than the spoken word) (Eades, 1995). Differences in these fields may vary between students and regions. It is only possible to demonstrate that there are differences but it is not possible to do this in any detail so it is best to refer practitioners to the work of Dr Diana Eades who has researched the Aboriginal Englishes of Queensland and NSW and who

wrote the book 'Aboriginal English' which is a part of the 'Aboriginal Literacy Resource Kit' (NSW Board of Studies, 1995). The examples given here are extremely minimal.

In traditional Aboriginal languages there is no [th] sound and this may mean that some Aboriginal students may pronounce it with a [d] sound for example, 'this' and 'that' may be pronounced 'dis' and 'dat' (Eades, 1995). Some grammatical structures are similar to other non-standard varieties of AE for example, 'I seen nothing' which in SAE means 'I have seen nothing'. Traditional language structure can influence based AE language structure for example, 'e good girl' where the pronoun in traditional languages are non-gendered and there is no copula (verb 'to be') (Eades, 1995). There are different word meanings for example, 'deadly' in AE means 'great, terrific, good and in SAE it means 'having the potential to kill' (Eades, 1995). The area of how English is used by speakers of AE is probably the most difficult for teachers and students alike and it is more likely to be the similarities between the dialects that are the cause of misinterpretation and communication breakdown because speakers of both may recognise the words that each other use and they may think that they have mutual intelligibility, for example, although many students do, some may not use 'please' and 'thank you' as in traditional languages these protocols were not necessary due to the reciprocal nature of their kinship obligations not requiring this.

...to understand a speaker's meaning it is not enough to know meanings of words and phrases and to understand grammar. We also need to understand the speaker's cultural background, often called the socio-cultural context.
(Eades, 1992. p.26)

'Gratuitous concurrence' means that:

Aboriginal English speakers often agree to a question even if they do not understand it. That is when Aboriginal people say "yes" in answer to a question it often does not mean "I agree with what you are asking me". Instead, it often means "*I think that if I say "yes" you will see that I am obliging, and socially amenable and you will think well of me, and things will work out between us*".
(Eades, 1992. p.26)

One paralinguistic feature includes 'eye contact avoidance' (Eades, 1995) due to cultural protocols which consider that it is rude and confronting to look someone in the eye who is older than you, someone of the opposite sex and someone who is in a position of authority, and teachers would be in at least two of these categories. Another is long periods of silence when they are asked questions and between utterances (Eades, 1995).

DISCOURSES

Indigenous families teach their children in contextualised hands on learning situations with little or no verbal instruction and teach in decontextualised situations using storytelling 'yarning' (Hanlen, 2002a). An Aboriginal woman in western NSW is a joint primary carer for her grand/great grandchildren. She describes the role of adults in teaching children below:

With your children I think they take notice of what you do... An' a man does this and Mum does that. If you want the child to take notice and learn things, y' got 'o do things... You get a nineteen... year-old boy an' showin' his little brother how t' play basket ball or football. I think the huncles [uncles], they've got a good say in things too you know, in sports... They all play a part with kids... Kids are not taught much now... All this (the old practices) is lost now with the kids like when we were kids, our family members used t' teach us... *tell* us stories. In those days a lot of people didn't read an' write. But their stories were good. They was there t' share it with their children round the campfire... We'd all sit around it. Mum an' Dad an' my older sisters... We were told everythink then. (YT3 44-95)
(Hanlen, 2002a pp. 193-194)

There are a number of taken-for-granted discourses in Anglo-Australia that may be interpreted very differently by Indigenous students. For example, 'What do you want be when you grow up?' An Indigenous student may reply in dismay, 'A woman/man'! We need to note that it is not generally the experience of many Indigenous children to have family members in chosen careers in formal employment and this is not something that is discussed as it is generally in mainstream society where a young child may reply 'a helicopter pilot' for example.

Verbal teaching in Indigenous communities may consist of short statements about introducing the children to their environment or family members for example, 'this your aunty' or 'this a leaf' but it is generally done in context (Eades, 1995). Anglo-Australian parents often teach in abstracts and use question/answer format for example, the minute a baby is born it is common for family members to see the new baby screw up its face and the adult may say 'Oh, what's the matter?' and when baby burps it is followed up with something like 'Oh that's what it was, you had a pain in the tummy'. When the child is a little older, adults may say 'Where's Mummy/Daddy gone?' and follow it up with, 'There she/he is!' Non-Indigenous Australians generally are exposed to the question/answer format from the minute they are born. By the time they enter school they are quite familiar with the Anglo-Australian cultural context of the classroom which relies heavily on teachers' use of this format as it is the most efficient means to elicit information. However, in Aboriginal communication this can be very confronting and even offensive. In AE a question takes the form of a short statement followed by the tag 'eh' for example, 'the kids are back, eh?' (see Eades, 1995).

... there are considerable culturally different assumptions about appropriate and effective ways of seeking information. These different assumptions are often present even where both parties are speaking very similar varieties of English...
Information is sought as part of a two-way exchange. Silence and waiting till people are ready to give information, are also central to Aboriginal ways of seeking any substantial information.
(Eades, 1992, pp. 27- 28)

The issue of language/dialect difference also impacts on numeracy for teaching and assessment of Indigenous students. When asked, quantifiable questions there are different Indigenous cultural responses to those of Anglo-Australia.

...Aboriginal speakers often tend not to use expressions of quantifiable specification, or to use them vaguely, inaccurately or inconsistently...

Aboriginal specification in statements (including replies to questions) frequently refers to physical, social, geographical, climatic events and states of affairs. For example, time reference for past or future events usually involves reference to a social event or situation, rather than clocktime or calendar time.

(Eades, 1992. p.29)

IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' NEEDS

It is important for practitioners to value, respect and occasionally allow the use of AE and Indigenous protocols in the classroom for specific activities especially in the early childhood period. However, it is vitally important for Indigenous students to be empowered in SAE and Western protocols so that they can compete equitably in educational and employment opportunities but not at the expense of their first dialect.

- Make a contrast analysis of work samples, conversations and interactions between Indigenous students with each other, their non-Indigenous peers and with the teachers themselves by writing down each instance where the teacher perceives that the language and protocols used are different to SAE and Western protocols.
- See if any patterns emerge for individuals or a number of students

Complex issues need not be complicated to address. As far as possible address all language and cultural issues in class instruction time rather than continuing to address individuals which could damage self-esteem.

- It is important to stress that there are different ways of saying/doing this but the language/ways of the classroom are... Don't forget to say why we do it this way in the classroom and remember that this is never at the expense of their first language or their cultural protocols. For example, "Sometimes we can say 'butfly' (AE) and sometimes we can say 'butterfly' but in the classroom we always say 'butterfly' because that is the language of the classroom and the workplace". "Sometimes we do not need to say 'please' and 'thank you', but in the classroom we always use 'please' and 'thank you' because that is the way of the workplace..."
- Give a purpose for everything even if it means often stating, what you may perceive to be, the obvious.
- "We go to school so that we can learn what we need to know in order to *choose* the type of job we would like when we leave school".
- When teaching geometry, for example, the teacher can say that "we are learning about geometry because this is useful to know, for example, if you buy something in a kit form and it needs to be

assembled, knowing about measurement and angles may be necessary". Students may be interested in becoming a builder, carpenter, fashion designing or architect and knowing these concepts could be useful.

- Be sure to maintain these practices from early childhood education right through to the last week of high school education. Through no fault of their own many Indigenous parents may not have been empowered with SAE or Western protocols. It then becomes the role of teachers at the interface with students in the classroom to ensure that all Australian students are empowered in SAE and Western protocols. Fortunately, what works with Indigenous students also works with affirmation for non-Indigenous students (see Eades, 1995; Hanlen, 2002c).

CONCLUSION

It is anticipated that the theoretical background and the RFWS case study may be useful to all teaching and education practitioners in NSW and hopefully beyond to provide cultural, social, linguistic and demographic connections from the time Indigenous students enter education contexts and maintain these throughout the formal education. Otherwise, Indigenous students run the risk of 'downing tools' as early as the age of five years (Munns, 1996) and pass through the motions of school education without ever engaging with curriculum, teachers and leaving school without being empowered with literacy to choose the what they want to do in future employment (Hanlen, 2002a, Hanlen, 2007).

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Teachers learning about grammar: experiences and challenges during a graduate TESOL paper

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Introduction

I am a trained primary school teacher with qualifications including a Bachelor of Education, Graduate Diploma in Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages, and a Masters in Applied Language Studies. Despite these qualifications my understanding of English grammar is often not explicit enough to be able to identify or explain grammatical features in texts. Currently, I lecture on a graduate TESSOL (Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages) programme to practicing primary and secondary school teachers and have discovered anecdotally that many of these teachers also lack an explicit knowledge of English grammar.

In response to this apparent lack of knowledge, the programme's teaching team (five lecturers including myself) decided in 2004 to include a grammar component on the course. This paper describes some of our experiences and challenges. In order to contextualise these, international literature and research in the area of teachers' knowledge about grammar is also reviewed. This review, coupled with our own observations prompted a research project investigating the knowledge and beliefs about grammar teaching held by teachers currently on the course. Preliminary findings from the project will be outlined along with emerging implications for teachers and teacher educators.

Background: teaching grammar within the TESSOL programme

In 2004 lecturers teaching on the TESSOL programme decided to adopt a more explicit approach to the teaching of grammar than had previously been implemented. This decision was based on international trends towards a more explicit approach to the teaching of grammar (Ellis, 2006) and a belief that our teachers needed a working knowledge of the English language to meet the needs of their English Language Learners (ELLs). Along with Collerson, we believed that a knowledge of grammar would help teachers "understand how language is being used and talk with children about their use of it" (1994, p. vii).

The first challenge was selecting a core textbook, which would be useful and appropriate for both primary and secondary teachers. As lecturers we favoured a functional approach to grammar, that is "a grammar that shows them [children] how their language operates as a resource to make meaning and that helps them to make informed choices as writers and speakers" (Scott, 1994, p. v). However, we knew teachers' knowledge of grammar would be based on more traditional structural grammar which, in contrast to functional grammar, views grammar teaching as "the presentation and practice of discrete grammatical structures" (Ellis, 2006, p. 84). Such an approach emphasises the teaching of form over meaning. It was therefore important to select a text which would bridge teachers' understanding between the two approaches. We were mindful that innovations in classroom practice "be accommodated within the teacher's own framework of teaching principles" (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001, p. 472).

The text chosen was Beverly Derewianka's 'A grammar companion for primary teachers' (1998). This book is written clearly and includes practical ideas for teachers to use in the classroom. Despite the title,

it has proven to be of value to secondary teachers, along with their primary counterparts. Derewianka explains that the text is intended to extend teachers' understandings of traditional approaches to teaching grammar to include a functional perspective. As such she concedes that the book does not take a purely functional approach (Derewianka, 1998).

Arguably one of the most significant challenges for the lecturers has been meeting the teachers' disparate grammar learning needs. Those enrolled in the programme (usually numbering between 80 and 90 in each cohort) vary considerably in their explicit knowledge of English grammar. This explicit knowledge of English grammar means having "sufficient metalinguistic knowledge both to explain grammatical rules and to respond to learner error" (Elder, 1994, cited in Elder, Erlam, & Philp, 2007). When asked about their explicit knowledge of English grammar, some teachers admit that they struggle to define simple parts of speech such as nouns and verbs, whilst others report a sound understanding of traditional grammar terms.

Not only do the teachers vary in their KAG, they also differ considerably in their previous learning experiences, and their beliefs and attitudes towards the teaching of grammar. This means that the course needs to be tailored to ensure each teacher is sufficiently challenged, whilst at the same time not overwhelmed by too much new material. The overriding aim of the research project is to ascertain the effectiveness of current approaches.

Literature Review

An literature search signalled three important questions which had relevance for the topic under investigation:

1. What does knowledge about grammar (KAG) mean for teachers?
2. What is already known about teachers' KAG?
3. Do teachers working with primary and secondary aged students need KAG?

What is knowledge about grammar?

Knowledge about grammar (KAG) (Borg, 2001) is a part of a broader construct: teachers' knowledge about language (KAL) or sometimes called teachers' language awareness (TLA). Andrews (2003) explains that TLA includes subject matter knowledge and language proficiency, metacognition, and an awareness of the learner's language needs. Put simply, "a linguistically aware teacher not only understands how language works, but understands the student's struggle with language and is sensitive to errors and other interlanguage features" (Wright, 2002, cited in Elder, Erlam, and Philp, 2007, p. 226). The TESSOL programme endeavours to support teachers to become 'linguistically aware' as Wright describes. The current research project seeks to investigate teachers' KAG as well as their beliefs about grammar teaching.

What do we know about the extent of teachers' KAG?

In recent years there has been increasing interest from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers in teachers' knowledge about language, including grammar. Researchers have investigated aspects such as teachers' explicit or declarative KAG, their language proficiency, their beliefs, and pedagogical practices and relationships between these (for examples see Andrews, 1999, 2001 & 2003; Borg, 1999, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Bigelow & Ranney, 2005; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Morris, 2003). Although most research has investigated second and foreign language teaching situations, Andrews (2003) asserts that many of the arguments and observations may apply to teachers of English as a mother tongue. A detailed and comprehensive review of these studies can be found in Borg (2003a & 2003b). It is unnecessary to replicate these reviews here, however to contextualise the current research project the pertinent key findings can be summarised.

One trend to emerge was the generally low levels of teachers' declarative KAG. The research studies reviewed included pre-service primary trainees, post-graduate primary trainees, foreign language teachers, English teachers, and native as well as non-native speakers of English. (all outlined in Borg, 2003b). These teachers generally held "inadequate levels of grammatical knowledge" (Borg, 2003b, p. 98). A more recent investigation of Malaysian trainee English teachers by Elder, Erlam, and Philp (2007) mirror the findings in Borg's 2003 review. They found that the trainees varied widely in their knowledge and as a group performed "rather poorly" (Elder et al, 2007, p.233) on a metalinguistic knowledge test.

Borg (2003b) also reviewed studies which investigated teachers' beliefs about formal instruction. Three main conclusions are drawn from this review. Firstly it appears that formal instruction in grammar is still prevalent in L2 and FL classrooms. Secondly, teachers reported the strong impact of their prior language learning experiences, on their own beliefs about grammar teaching. Finally, there were considerable differences between students and teachers regarding aspects of grammar teaching. It is suggested that these differences may impact negatively on the effectiveness of formal instruction teachers provide (Borg, 2003b).

It seems evident from the literature reviewed that teachers and trainees, including language teachers, lack an adequate declarative knowledge of grammar. As Borg laments in a more recent publication, many of them may be "confidently ignorant" (2006, p.3) about grammar. Furthermore, teachers and students vary considerably in their beliefs about the teaching of grammar.

Is KAG important for primary and secondary school teachers?

My own experiences teaching NSs and ELLs would indicate that students can learn to read, write, speak, and listen despite my inadequate KAG. Students undertaking the TESSOL programme include secondary subject teachers (e.g. mathematics, science, accounting), English teachers, foreign language teachers, ESOL teachers, and mainstream primary teachers. A question they would no doubt like to ask me is: will

improving explicit knowledge of grammar help to teach ELLs and NS students more effectively? They deserve carefully considered answers.

Explicit metalinguistic knowledge is not strongly linked with language proficiency (Alderson, Clapham & Steel, 1997, p. 93). It is nevertheless “one component of the more global knowledge a language teacher must call on in teaching grammar” (Borg, 2006, p. 112). An investigation of teachers’ perceptions of their KAG found that this did indeed influence their practice in several ways including the extent to which they taught grammar; their willingness to talk spontaneously about grammar, and the information they provided their students about grammar (Borg, 2001). Further evidence is provided by Andrews (2001), that a teacher’s *actual* KAG has considerable impact on pedagogical practice. He argues that teachers need to be able to call upon a grammatical knowledge base which can be readily accessed as many teaching tasks need “to be performed spontaneously and in ‘real time’” (Andrews, 2001, p. 81). When supporting students in the extremely complex task of learning English then, knowledge of how the language works is one tool language teachers should be able to call upon. But what about mainstream teachers and subject teachers in secondary schools?

Ministry of Education documents illustrate the extent to which *all teachers* may need to call upon KAG. The recently released New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) makes explicit the need for students to have a sound and in depth understanding of the English language. The ability to communicate accurately and fluently in both spoken and written modes is only one aspect of this understanding. Students need to “know how language works so that they are equipped to make appropriate language choices and apply them in a range of contexts” (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.18). Moreover, the English Curriculum includes the expectation for students at all levels to engage in critical literacy. This requires students to understand how grammar works and is used by authors to convey meaning in texts. Further to this, it is stated that each learning area (English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social science, technology) “has its own language or languages” (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. 16). Students who are new learners of English, the document states, “need explicit and extensive teaching of English vocabulary, word forms, sentence and text structures, and language uses”(p. 16). This statement has implications for all teachers, including secondary subject teachers. If teachers are to teach students about the word forms, sentence and text structures and use of language in their subjects, then they need to have an explicit understanding of these themselves.

Research with teacher trainees and L2 and FL practicing teachers indicates that KAG is an important part of a teacher’s competency. It is acknowledged that explicit KAG “is not sufficient by itself to ensure that that teachers will deal with grammar-related issues in ways which are most conducive to learning” (Andrews, 2001, p. 83). However, without KAG, teachers don’t know what they don’t know. The explicit references to grammar in the NZ Curriculum and other recently released documents (Draft Literacy Learning Progressions, 2007a, and the English Language Learning Progressions, 2008) also signal that KAG is a necessary aspect of teacher competence. Teachers and teacher educators need to heed these signals.

Research Project

The teachers undertaking a graduate TESSOL course, were invited to participate in a research project investigating their knowledge and beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching. The specific research questions are:

1. Do primary school teachers' beliefs and reported practices about grammar teaching alter during a graduate TESSOL (Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages) paper with a specific focus on functional grammar?
2. Does teachers' explicit knowledge about grammar improve during the course?

Teachers of students in years 5 through 8 were invited to take part in pre and post course interviews (see Appendices A and B). Due to time constraints it has only been possible to interview a small number of teachers hence the decision to focus on a more homogenous group. If the research is conducted with cohorts in subsequent years, different year groups can be targeted. Six teachers in the target group volunteered.

All teachers in the course (83 teachers including ESOL, mainstream primary and secondary subject teachers) were invited to complete a grammar knowledge test (Appendix C) at the start, and then the end of the course. It was explained that the tests were not part of the course assessment, but that teachers should view the task as an opportunity for self-assessment. Thirty-six students volunteered and sat the pre-test.

Grammar Knowledge Test

The teachers' scores ranged from 16% to 100%. The mean was 47.8%, with a standard deviation of 20.6. In raw scores, the range was from 5 to 30 out of 30. The distribution of scores can be seen in figure 1.

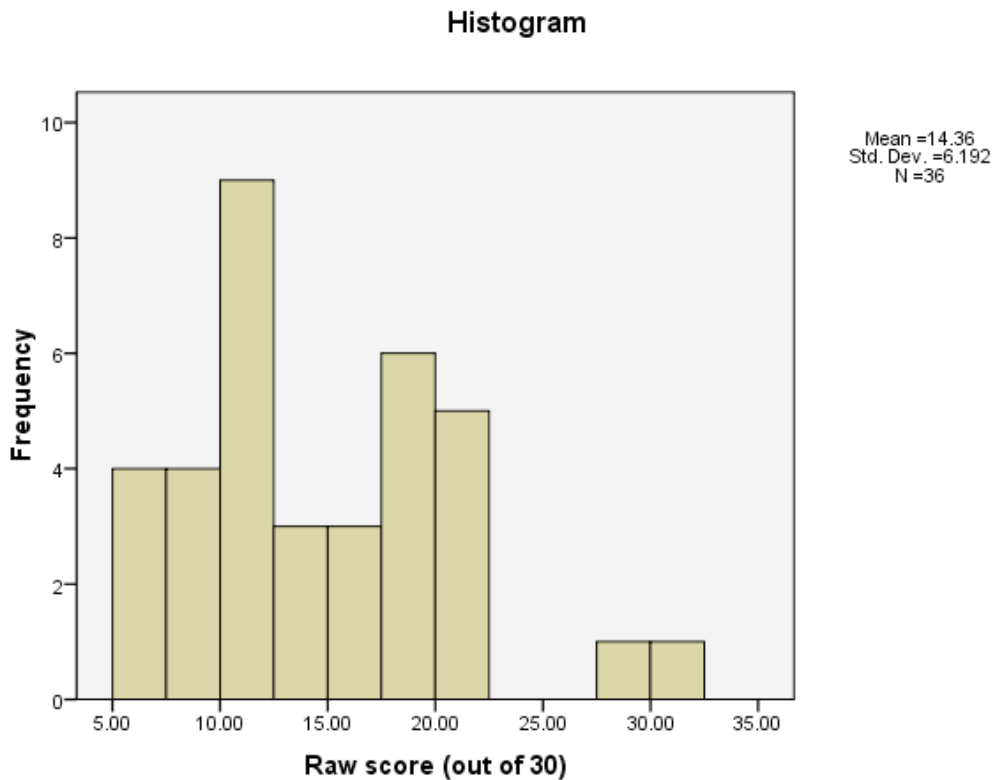


Figure 1 Distribution of raw scores for grammar knowledge pre-test

A correlation test showed no statistically significant differences between primary and secondary teachers' scores. Similarly, there were no significant correlations between test scores and other variables: subjects taught; age of teachers; number of years teaching; number of languages spoken; English as the first language. With a relatively small number of scores, it is unlikely that statistically significant correlations will emerge. There are however some interesting trends which begin to emerge, on close analysis of some scores.

It was decided to look more closely at the scores of those teachers who may need to call upon KAG more often in their teaching: ESOL teachers, and secondary English teachers. Six ESOL teachers, and five English teachers sat the test. Their results are illustrated in tables one and two below.

Table 1: ESOL teachers' KAG test scores

Name	Age range	English L1	Number of languages spoken	Score as %age
Nancy	35-44	Yes	1	23
Dayah	35-44	Yes	2	26
Val	25-34	Yes	1	38
Leanne	55-64	Yes	1 +	58
Sam	35-44	Yes	1	60
Diane	45-54	Yes	1	70

All except one of these teachers (Leanne) teach ESOL withdrawal groups in primary or intermediate schools. Leanne is new this year to teaching ESOL to year 9 and 10 students, having previously taught geography. None of the teachers have had specific training for their ESOL roles, until undertaking their current study at the beginning of 2008. The average score for these ESOL teachers was 45%, similar to the overall average. However, three of the ESOL teachers scored well below 50%.

Table 2: Secondary English teachers' KAG test scores

Name	Age range	English L1	Number of languages spoken	Score as %age
Mia	25-34	Yes	1+	45
Faye	25-34	Yes	2	45
Sue	25-34	Yes	1	65
Kate	25-34	Yes	1+	96
Michelle	45-54	Yes	1	100

The average score for the secondary English teachers, 70%, is higher than that of the ESOL teachers, and higher than that of the total sample of 36 teachers, at 47.8%. It is of interest and perhaps some concern that two of these teachers scored below 50%. With a few exceptions, the KAG pre-test scores reflect concerns for the 'generally inadequate levels of grammatical knowledge held, especially by potential language teachers' (Borg, 2003, p. 98).

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings, is not with the scores that can be seen here, but rather, with the fact that less than half of the teachers in the programme volunteered to sit the test. There are several possible explanations for, and interpretations of, this somewhat disappointing response.

Firstly, the test was administered during class time, at the end of the usual two and half hour session. Having taught all day, teachers arrived at class at 4.30pm. It could be that the opportunity to leave half an hour early after a long and demanding day rather than sit the test was too tempting!

Another possible explanation could be teachers' reluctance to sit the test because of fear of finding out how inadequate their grammar knowledge might be, and an unwillingness to make this information available to the lecturer. If this is the case, the scores which can be seen here, may be indicative of teachers more able or confident in terms of their KAG. This problem of "volunteer bias" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 437) needs to be acknowledged. The true average may be much lower than 47.8%. Unfortunately, and frustratingly, there appears to be no current solution to finding more accurate information about the KAG of all 83 teachers.

Perceived KAG

The interview questions were divided into three sections: perceived knowledge of grammar; beliefs about grammar teaching; and pedagogical practices related to grammar. The emerging themes from each section will be outlined and discussed.

When asked to describe their knowledge of English grammar all but one teacher described their knowledge as adequate to sound. Although these teachers responded fairly confidently initially, they often qualified their answers as they continued to talk. For example Kelly explained “It’s good, but it’s not academic knowledge... in terms of actually knowing the technical names of things I’m not very good.”

Similarly Carmel qualified her answer: “ I have an adequate knowledge I suppose. I wouldn’t say I had an excellent knowledge. I know there’s areas I have a weakness in.”

One teacher, Sian, was very confident, stating

I think my knowledge is fairly good, because I went to a private high school, and it was traditionally taught... and I’m older than a lot of other people so I came through the schooling system when it was taught.

The one exception was Leila who describes her knowledge as, “Pretty rubbish... I can write a grammatically correct sentence but I don’t know how to go about it.”

Unfortunately not all the teachers who volunteered to be interviewed, volunteered to sit the test and so it is not possible to compare their self-perceptions of KAG with their actual KAG as indicated by the test. Table three compares teachers’ perceptions with test results where available. These teachers were quite accurate in describing their KAG, although Leila seems to have a better understanding than she thinks. When comparing her score with some other teachers, she is above average.

Table 3: Teachers’ self perception of KAG and test scores

Teacher	Self-perception of KAG	Grammar test score %age
Leila	<i>Pretty rubbish</i>	56.7
Carmel	<i>Adequate, not excellent, areas of weakness</i>	60%
Sian	<i>Fairly good</i>	70%

When asked what they thought had contributed to their levels of knowledge, teachers mentioned primary and high school experiences, individual teachers, personal reading, parents, and being corrected in academic writing as a student. None of the teachers mentioned teacher training, and even when asked Kelly said, “there wasn’t a heck of a lot at training college about the nitty gritty of English. It was mostly, no, I can’t remember doing a lot of grammar at training college.”

Four of the six teachers felt their knowledge of grammar was sufficient for teaching students they teach. However, Kelly felt his knowledge was inadequate for working with ELLs saying

... because I'm teaching English second language kids I need to know the more technical sides of English so that I can isolate things and work on them. Not that I need to know the words for the kids, but just so that it's clear in my own mind what I'm doing.

The responses reinforce anecdotal evidence gathered from the teachers, that perceived knowledge about grammar varies greatly between individuals. It seems that KAG has been gleaned mainly from primary and secondary schooling experiences, parents, and reading. This finding reflects Chandler's (1988) study with English teachers, who stated that their language learning experiences at school were their main source of grammatical knowledge (cited in Borg, 2003b). Teachers have no immediate recollections of grammar being included in their teacher training programmes.

Beliefs about grammar teaching

All teachers believe that explicit grammar teaching is important. Four teachers mentioned the importance of teaching grammar in context. Carmel explains what she means by this approach.

I think there are times when you need to discuss things like tenses, but then move on to putting it into a context... you need to be able to put it into an authentic context... then when they're writing... when they're discussing, you use it in the correct tense for example.

Individual needs, or working with groups of students was mentioned by four teachers. These teachers talked about the importance of noticing when students made specific errors in either speaking or writing, and addressing these. For example, Carmel says

I also take out of samples of writing I pick up, where they've got a weakness and work with them as a group and try and construct say if it's a sentence... as a group we'll construct it together to make it make sense...

The beliefs espoused by the teachers here seem to indicate that despite the swing away from explicit grammar teaching in the past, teachers now see a need for its inclusion in their programmes. This trend reinforces Burgess and Etherington's contention that "grammar is being rehabilitated" (2002, p.433). Methods of approaching this teaching are however quite varied. This is not surprising as Ellis laments that "more than 20 years of research have failed to yield firm guidelines for grammar teaching methodology" (1994, cited in Borg, 1999, p. 157). The methods teachers reported implementing are outlined next.

Pedagogical Practices

The teachers were asked if they taught grammar in particular ways, and if so to give examples of these. They were asked about formal teacher fronted lessons, correcting grammar in written and oral language, and planning tasks with a specific grammatical focus.

All teachers stated that they do teach traditional teacher fronted lessons dealing with specific aspects of grammar such as conjunctions or adjectives. These lessons are evidence that form focused instruction,

where the primary focus is on language form rather than meaning is happening in classrooms. Leila gives a clear example.

We did this thing at the beginning of the year on what makes a sentence... and then we did subjects and predicates. I had no idea what that was about but I figured it out...so the kids were able to underline the subject and underline the predicate...

Another example of form focused instruction is given by Kay.

Yes, I do it often on a Friday. I do like a little half hour, 25 minute lesson, just teach the 'why it's there, when we use it' give some examples then put a sentence up.

Some teachers did explain that the forms they chose to focus on in these lessons were related to common errors in students' work or specific writing tasks. Carmel explains:

I'll choose an aspect of the language resources that are needed perhaps for a narrative or for a persuasive text. So, we'll go through lots of texts and we'll pull out those words and then we'll make meaning of what that word is.

Whilst lessons such as these are focusing on a specific grammatical form, meaning is clearly paramount.

All teachers correct grammar in students' writing, but vary in their approach to this. They prefer to correct grammar while conferencing students about their writing, but explain that this is not always possible because of time constraints. One teacher, Sian explained that correcting grammar in writing depends on the learning intention for the lesson, saying that she would not correct grammar if the writing was completed in a science lesson for example.

When asked about correcting students' oral language all teachers said they made implicit corrections by recasting, and also explicit corrections whereby they told a student they had made an error, and then corrected them. Explicit correction of student talk including a metalinguistic explanation, was less common. Only three teachers said they would do this and it seemed to be dependent on the student and the situation. For example, Sian said

It depends on the child, particularly if they're an ESOL child I will correct them, not all the time, but I will correct them... but I won't always go into why we say it because at year 5 and 6 they won't always have that understanding anyway...some Asian children they've been taught all the rules and they do know those rules so yes I would [give them a metalinguistic explanation].

When asked about planning tasks or activities with a grammatical focus, all teachers said that they did do this, making the grammar focus clear to the students. Only three teachers said that they might plan a task without making the grammar focus clear to the students, but this was usually for a specific purpose such as assessing whether or not students had retained a grammar structure previously taught. For example Kelly explained, "I had taught them earlier in the term that explanations were in present tense, I was kind of interested to see if they'd remember and most of them had which is good."

Making the grammar focus explicit to students is to be expected in New Zealand classrooms where teachers are in the habit of explaining learning intentions. The importance of this aspect of formative

assessment, is clearly a shared understanding among teachers. Kelly's explanation illustrates the 'taken for granted' nature of this aspect of teaching and learning: "yes, that [sharing the learning intention for specific tasks] would be the general rule. That's been handed to us over the years – have a learning intention, relate it to an activity."

With such ingrained understandings it is not surprising that planning tasks where the grammar focus was made explicit to the students was identified by three of the teachers as the most frequent way they dealt with grammar in their classroom. Two teachers reported that their most frequent practice would be to correct individual students and deal with grammar incidentally, and one teacher, Sian, said she would use all methods, depending on the situation.

One clear finding then, is that teachers explicitly teach grammar in their classrooms. The ways they do this varies considerably, although form focused instruction was reportedly happening in all six teachers' classrooms. Planning lessons with a specific grammatical focus which is made evident to the students seems to be a common approach to dealing with grammar, whilst providing metalinguistic explanations about errors is less frequent.

Implications and Next Steps

In drawing to a close, it does not seem appropriate to have a conclusion or recommendations, as the research project has only just begun. However, some tentative statements about what has emerged thus far can be made, along with implications for teacher educators and further research.

The concern raised in the introduction about teachers' KAG, has been substantiated. Teachers' declarative knowledge about grammar varies considerably, with many having poor levels of understanding, including some who teach English, and some who teach English as a second language. If we concur with Ellis (2006) that there is now much evidence to support the teaching of grammar, the levels KAG indicated here are cause for concern. Moreover, the New Zealand curriculum and supporting documents require teachers to have a sound understanding of grammar. The writers of these documents assume that teachers are competent and confident to implement them. These assumptions may be naive.

Although some teachers are not confident in their KAG, those interviewed all believe in the importance of teaching grammar explicitly to their students. They are making conscientious efforts to teach grammar, adopting approaches that they believe are appropriate. Whilst this may be admirable, it could also be cause for concern. Teachers may do more harm than good teaching something they know little about. Where teachers have gaps in their knowledge it may be better not to engage in form focused instruction (Elder, Erlam, & Philp, 2007).

The teachers interviewed are aware of the importance of teaching grammar in meaningful ways, within authentic contexts where possible. It was encouraging to hear about some sound and effective methods of teaching grammar being implemented. There were also some approaches described which appeared to

lack any sound rationale or basis, and on the surface at least did not appear very effective. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this research project to observe actual classroom practice, to determine whether in fact teachers do what they say they do. One recommendation for further research would be to include this aspect.

There is some evidence that teachers would like more guidance both from a national and school level, about what to teach, and how. The Ministry of Education and schools need to consider professional development opportunities for teachers in the area of grammar. It is hoped that findings from the completed project may provide the necessary impetus for the support teachers are seeking. Those tested and interviewed for this study, although small in number, provide some insights into teachers' understandings about grammar.

Some are clearly crying out for support.

I know enough personally – I can write essays and stuff for university...creative writing, I can do all that... but me as a teacher being able to explain and teach it – not so much. I know how to do it without doing it, without thinking. But when it comes to thinking about it I wouldn't have a clue. It's like driving a car, you just do it automatically. (Leila)

Teacher educators, both pre and post service need to consider whether their programmes adequately prepare teachers like Leila to effectively implement the curriculum.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of The University of Auckland for providing funding for this project. Also, my colleagues Dr Susan Gray and Margaret Kitchen have been extremely supportive with their research ideas and knowledge about grammar. Finally, Dr Jenefer Philp and Dr Rosemary Erlam provided initial guidance with research design. They have also encouraged me with their ongoing interest and enthusiasm for the research.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview (pre-course)

Knowledge of English grammar

How would you describe your knowledge of English grammar?

What do you think has contributed to this level of knowledge?

Do you think your understanding of English grammar is sufficient for you as a teacher? Why/ why not?

If you think you need to know more about grammar, what would help you to increase your knowledge/understanding?

What makes it difficult for you to learn about grammar?

Beliefs about teaching grammar

What are your beliefs about the teaching of grammar in general?

What are your beliefs about how grammar should be taught for your year ____ students?

What do you think has influenced your beliefs?

Teaching grammar in the classroom

Tell me about the most recent time you dealt with an aspect of grammar in your classroom (either with an individual, group, or the whole class).

Do you teach grammar in any of the following ways? (if so give an example)

- A teacher fronted formal lesson dealing with a specific aspect of grammar e.g. conjunctions, adjectives;
- Correcting grammatical errors in students' written work;
- Explicit correction of student talk which includes a metalinguistic explanation e.g.
S: Yesterday I goed to the beach.
T: You should say 'Yesterday I went to the beach' because 'went' is the irregular past tense form of the verb 'go'
- Explicit correction of student talk which does not include a metalinguistic explanation e.g.
S: Mary and Sione likes going to movies.
*T: No, we say 'Mary and Sione **like** going to the movies.'*
- Implicit correction of student talk by recasting e.g.
S: David is riding horse.
*T: David is riding **the** horse.*
- Planning a task with a specific grammatical focus, in which the students will need to use the target structure. The target structure is not made explicit to the students e.g. An oral sequencing task in which the students will need to use temporal conjunctions such as first, next, finally.
- Planning a task with a specific grammatical focus, in which the students will need to use the target structure. The target structure is made explicit to the students (perhaps in the learning intentions) prior to the task e.g. students need to use the causal connective 'therefore'.

Which of these ways of teaching grammar would you say you used most often? Why?

Which of these ways of teaching grammar would you say you used least often? Why?

Are you happy with the way you deal with grammar in your classroom?

Why/ why not?

What makes it difficult for you to deal with grammar in your classroom?

What makes it (or would make it) easy for you to deal with grammar in your classroom?

Appendix B
Semi Structured Individual Interview Schedule 2 (at the completion of the course)

Knowledge of English grammar

How would you describe your knowledge of English grammar now?

Do you think your knowledge of grammar has increased since our first interview? What makes you say that?

Do you think your understanding of English grammar is sufficient for you as a teacher? Why/ why not?

What has helped you to increase your grammar knowledge while you have been doing the course?

What has made it difficult to you to learn grammar while you have been doing the course?

What could we (the lecturers) do to help you more?

Beliefs about teaching grammar

Do you think your beliefs about teaching grammar have changed during this course? Explain.

In our first interview you said that... (talk about any points not discussed in the first question). Do you still think this is true? Why / why not?

What do you now believe about how grammar should be taught for your year ___ students? Why?

Teaching grammar in the classroom

Do you think the students in your class have a sufficient grasp of grammar? Explain.

Tell me about the most recent time you dealt with an aspect of grammar in your classroom (either with an individual, group, or the whole class).

Do you teach grammar in any of the following ways? (if so give an example)

- A teacher fronted formal lesson dealing with a specific aspect of grammar e.g. conjunctions, adjectives;
- Correcting grammatical errors in students' written work;
- Explicit correction of student talk which includes a metalinguistic explanation e.g.
S: Yesterday I goed to the beach.
T: You should say 'Yesterday I went to the beach' because 'went' is the irregular past tense form of the verb 'go'
- Explicit correction of student talk which does not include a metalinguistic explanation e.g.
S: Mary and Sione likes going to movies.
T: No, we say 'Mary and Sione like going to the movies.'
- Implicit correction of student talk by recasting e.g.
S: David is riding horse.
*T: David is riding **the** horse.*
- Planning a task with a specific grammatical focus, in which the students will need to use the target structure. The target structure is not made explicit to the students e.g. An oral sequencing task in which the students will need to use temporal conjunctions such as first, next, finally.
- Planning a task with a specific grammatical focus, in which the students will need to use the target structure. The target structure is made explicit to the students (perhaps in the learning intentions) prior to the task e.g. students need to use the causal connective 'therefore'.

Which of these ways of teaching grammar would you say you used most often? Why?

Which of these ways of teaching grammar would you say you used least often? Why?

Are you happy with the way you deal with grammar in your classroom?

Why/ why not?

What makes it difficult for you to deal with grammar in your classroom?

What makes it (or would make it) easy for you to deal with grammar in your classroom?

Have you changed the ways you deal with grammar in the classroom as a result of doing this course?

Why / why not?

Appendix C
Grammar Knowledge Pre-test

Read the following joke

Two elephants went on holiday and sat down on the beach. It was a very hot day and they fancied having a swim in the sea. Unfortunately they couldn't: they only had one pair of trunks.

Identify the following grammar items from the joke and give a definition if you can. The first one is done for you as an example.

Grammar feature	Example from text	Definition
A pronoun which relates back to the <i>two elephants</i> .	they	A pronoun takes the place of a noun. <i>They</i> is the personal pronoun referring to the <i>two elephants</i>.
1. An irregular verb in the simple past tense.		
2. A regular verb in the simple past tense.		
3. A common noun.		
4. A verb phrase.		
5. A prepositional phrase.		
6. A countable noun.		

7. A quantity adjective.		
8. An adverbial.		
9. A singular noun		
10. A plural noun		
11. A compound sentence		
12. A finite clause		
13. A definite article		
14. An indefinite article		
15. A coordinating conjunction		

Leadership, literacy and learning with technologies

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Abstract

In 2006, three Australian teaching-principals in small, country schools in New South Wales established themselves as a cluster to assist them improve the quality of their teaching and learning, and in particular the literacy levels of the students within their respective schools. Funding from the Australian Quality Teacher Education Programme, New South Wales, enabled the establishment of the cluster with the involvement of an academic partner from the University of Canberra. An action learning approach informed their work. Several strategies including the use of information and communication technologies were incorporated into the students' learning to assist their literacy development. Data were collected to guide the directions of this project. Both students and their respective school principals used evidence throughout the project to inform its' future directions. This paper outlines and reflects upon the strategies undertaken by members of this cluster as they implemented their literacy action learning plan, which included the use of partnerships between the three school principals and the 'academic partner'. The concepts of 'leadership', 'literacy' and 'learning with technologies' came together in the work of these schools in country New South Wales to assist students to improve their literacy levels and to develop high quality learning outcomes.

Introduction

Investigating the inter-connections and inter-dependencies in the field of education has been interesting policy-makers and practitioners alike in recent times. Over the past decade the two bodies of research: 'literacy teaching and learning', and 'teacher effectiveness' have combined (Louden, Rohl, Pugh, Brown, Cairney, Elderfield, House, Meiers, Rivalland & Rowe 2005). More recently trends in education developments include bringing together the theory and practice of 'leadership', 'literacy' and 'learning with technologies' in schools (Moyle 2006). To explore these respective concepts, this paper draws on both the literature and the experiences of the teaching-principals in three small schools in country New South Wales (NSW) who used action learning processes to improve the quality of their literacy teaching and learning.

The concept of 'action learning' advanced by Revans constructs action learning as 'a means by which people learn with and from each other by attempting to identify and then implement solutions to their problems/issues' (1982, p.65). In the NSW context, action learning involves educators working with and learning from each other in collaboration with an academic partner from a University. The purposes of the schools-university action learning teams include to explore possible ideas and solutions to specifically identified issues within schools, and to inform future decision-making in those schools. An important characteristic of action learning in this context is that it involves processes of cyclic planning, doing, and reflecting, which leads to the next cycle and so on (cf Bettison & Bradburn 2006). This action learning approach underpinned the work of the teaching-principals in the three small schools whose work is outlined in this paper. They used action learning strategies to improve students' literacy levels and to foster high quality learning outcomes with the use of information and communication technologies (ICT).

The teaching-principals involved in this initiative were located in the schools of Jerangle, Numeralla and Bredbo in country NSW. They established the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' to collaborate across the three schools. Jerangle Primary School is a P-6 school which had seven students in years from Kindergarten to Year Six in 2006. It is located twenty-nine kilometres from the nearest town with facilities. Numeralla Primary School is also a P-6 school, and in 2006 it had thirteen students in Kindergarten to Year Six. It is located twenty kilometres from the nearest town. And Bredbo Primary School is a P-5 school which had twenty-seven students in 2006. The three schools are well resourced and have established libraries and reading programs. In 2006, the schools also received a rollout of computers, and so each school had sufficient computers for all its students. Given the small size of each of these schools however, one of the challenges for the teaching-principals is how to teach multi-levels of students in the one class.

The teaching-principals identified several goals for their action learning initiative: both for the students and themselves. While the two overarching goals for those involved in this project were to work on improving students' literacy levels and fostering high quality learning outcomes, the teaching-principals also identified other goals that specifically related to their own professional growth. Geographic and professional isolation are issues in these small rural schools for teaching-principals. At the beginning of the project, the principals expressed their views about isolation this way:

We want to eliminate the professional isolation of our small schools through the pursuit of a common goal that will necessitate regular communication, sharing of successes and challenges and improve the ICT skills and literacy levels in our schools ('Brenumerangle Cluster' 2006a, p.6).

To assist them with their initiative the three teaching-principals sought and received funding for 18 months through the Australian Government's Quality Teacher Programme (AGQTP), *Quality teaching action learning* initiative in NSW. The AGQTP *Quality teaching action learning* initiative was designed to support individual and small clusters of schools to apply action learning models to their professional learning activities. In their submission seeking funding, the teaching-principals indicated that to improve the quality of their teaching and learning, they wanted to develop authentic and inclusive quality learning environments, and to develop a close collegial network.

This paper, written from an 'insiders' point of view, outlines and reflects upon some of the strategies used to implement a literacy action learning plan within the 'Brenumerangle Cluster'; and on the partnerships developed between the three school principals and the 'academic partner', to achieve their goals.

Background

The respective fields of literacy, learning with technologies and leadership are in various stages of development but the relationships between these fields are under-developed and emerging from practice. Some of the characteristics in each field are discussed here with a view to investigating the inter-relationships between these fields, based upon findings from previous research and on the practices drawn from the three schools in this project.

The literature on literacy teaching and learning is well developed (Louden et al 2005). In Australia, there is a range of government commissioned studies concerning the quality and extent of students' literacy, as well as work by individual researchers (cf Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) 1998; Luke, Freebody & Land 2000; Meiers & Stephanou 2000; Rowe 2002). Areas of interest covered in these papers and reports indicate that the debates about teaching and learning of students' literacy is highly political, and that the issues for research range from the types of strategies that ought to underpin literacy learning through to educational testing, accountability and teacher effectiveness.

Several authors in Australia and overseas (cf Louden et al 2005; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998) discuss the complex nature of literacy development and in particular the teaching of reading processes. They suggest that developing students' literacy skills requires students to use reading to obtain meaning, which requires teachers to provide frequent opportunities for students to read and write; to support students to understand the structure of spoken words and the alphabetic principle of the English writing system; and for students to be exposed to frequent, regular spelling-sound relationships (Louden et al 2005). The links between literacy learning and learning with ICT however, are less well researched. In their study reported in 2001 though, Snow, Burns & Griffin identified that computers appeared 'promising' in terms of teaching children to read, and in preventing reading difficulties. Furthermore they indicated that the addition of speech to on-screen text, hypertext and word processing functions for writing would assist students' literacy learning.

In Australia, a 1997 report called *Digital Rhetorics* (Lankshear, Bigum, Green, Morgan, Murray, Synder, & Wild), outlined the results of a two year study investigating the relationships between literacy, technology and learning. In that report and subsequently, the authors argue that in the 'electronic age', educators' pedagogical approaches ought to develop students' literacy skills using multiple strategies including the following ICT-based approaches:

- text-based computing software through (for example), word processing and desktop publishing;
- information-based computing software through (for example), using databases and spreadsheets;
- programming-based computing through (for example), learning some simple approaches to programming; and
- games-based computing software such as the online and digital games like *SimCity*.

At that time they argued that at the end of the 20th century, students' literacies skills should include three integral dimensions: operational, cultural and critical. Drawing upon Green's '3D' approach to literacy (Green 1988), they made the following distinctions between these different sorts of literacies:

The operational dimension involves being able to read and write within a range of contexts in an adequate and appropriate manner employing conventional print and electronic media. Teaching mechanical skills of reading, writing, spelling, keyboarding, etc., should be relatively direct, insistent and demanding, but grounded as far as possible in everyday purposes and pursuits familiar to learners.

The cultural dimension involves understanding texts and information in relation to the contexts - real life practices - in which they are produced, received and used. Without the cultural dimension, language users are unable to understand what makes particular ways of reading and writing appropriate or inappropriate, adequate or inadequate, within a given situation or setting.

The critical dimension involves being able to innovate, transform, improve, and add value to social practices and the literacies associated with them. It makes the difference between merely being socialised into sets of skills, values, beliefs and procedures, and being able to make judgments about them from a perspective which identifies them for what they are (and are not) and recognises alternative possibilities (Lankshear 1999, p.142).

Lankshear (1999) further argued that the operational, cultural and critical dimensions of literacy must be learnt in contextualised ways and not simply through 'tests' of students' encoding and decoding skills, decontextualised from students' lives.

Combining the research fields of 'literacy teaching and learning', and 'teacher effectiveness' has occurred over the past decade. Louden et al (2005) have shown that teachers' literacy pedagogical practices vary according to teacher effectiveness. They assert that effective teachers demonstrate a wider variety of literacy strategies than do less effective teachers. The relationships between 'literacy teaching and learning', 'teacher effectiveness', 'learning with ICT' and 'school leadership' however, have received very little investigation to date, and similarly, the practicalities of providing school leadership that fosters the integration of ICT into teaching and learning has also received only limited investigation in Australia. A report about the relationships between school leadership and teaching and learning with technologies (Moyle 2006), and two (then) Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST)-funded reports however do provide some insights.

The DEST reports *Making Better Connections* (Downes, Fluck, Gibbons, Leonard, Matthews, Oliver, Vickers & Williams 2001), and *Raising the Standards* (DEST 2002) both investigated the issue of school leadership as part of broader projects and made recommendations concerning the importance of school leadership in relation to the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. *Making Better Connections* mainly focused upon professional learning issues and ICT leadership, and *Raising the Standards* addressed leadership standards for the integration of ICT into schools. The *Leadership and Learning with ICT* (Moyle 2006) report indicates however, that according to the participants in the study, all of whom were educational leaders in varying contexts across Australia, that students require literacy skills and understandings so they can check the veracity of information they locate in online environments. Furthermore, the participants also identified critical literacy skills as essential for students so that they can make meaning from what they are accessing from the Internet. In addition, the participants in the *Leadership and Learning with ICT* study indicated students have to learn how to question written information rather than to simply accept it as the 'truth'. Each of these three reports, consistent with research about school leadership (cf Day & Leithwood 2007; Fullan 2008, 2001), further indicated the central importance of school leaders, and in particular school principals, to bringing about specific changes within their schools.

Overseas studies investigating the relationships between school leadership, literacy and incorporating technologies into teaching and learning in schools also reiterate the lack of a 'critical mass' of studies upon which to draw. In her study for example, the Canadian Dianne Yee (2000) observed that the daily work of principals in schools that are 'ICT-enriched' has not been well examined in educational leadership research. She states that 'a review of literature pertaining to educational leadership provides limited research about the relationship between educational leadership and ICT in education' (Yee 2000, p297). While in the United Kingdom (UK), a review of literature by the British Education Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and the National Council for School Leadership (NCSL) indicates that the qualities identified as being important for school leaders who are taking account of ICT in their work are 'pragmatism; clear educational principles to inform ICT developments; and an ethos that encourages innovation and risk-taking' (BECTA & NCSL 2003).

To date however, there is a lack of research and literature that investigates the inter-connected nature of the issues with which the three small schools in country NSW set out to address: literacy development, high quality learning environments, leadership, teacher effectiveness and learning with technologies. As such, this paper now draws upon their experiences using a literacy action learning plan which included the use of partnerships between the three school principals and the academic partner, to highlight some of the strategies employed to assist students to improve their literacy levels and to develop high quality learning outcomes.

Approach

The starting point for the three teaching-principals in the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' was the aim to improve their students' literacy skills, and in particular the reading and spelling skills of their students, including with the assistance of ICT. All three schools identified literacy and ICT priorities and targets in their respective school plans for 2006-2008. As such, the schools' respective strategic planning contexts for the development of literacy action learning plans linked directly with each school's teaching and learning and professional learning aspirations. Furthermore, while the teaching-principals were keen to improve their approaches to literacy development within their respective schools, they were also keen for the students to develop deeper understanding about learning with technologies.

The teaching-principals specifically wanted to work together to improve the literacy of their students using the Connected Outcomes Groups (COGs) and the *Scope and Sequence* parts of the NSW curriculum statements. They agreed to try out teaching the students with a shared problem that was consistent across the three schools and to then reflect upon their practice with their colleagues. They collectively planned different activities for the students each term. In each of the classrooms they then implemented strategies to achieve their agreed goals in the ways appropriate for the particular students and school, and collected data to share across the Cluster.

The funding received through AGQTP NSW enabled the establishment of the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' with time release for the teaching-principals and for the involvement of an academic partner from the University of Canberra. The creation of the name of the 'Brenumerangle Cluster', which is an amalgam of the three schools' names, occurred organically among the group and was important for enabling the group to rapidly gain an identity. Members of the group identified with being a member of the 'Brenumerangle Cluster': they envisaged themselves both as a teaching-principal of one of the schools in the group, as well as a member of the 'Brenumerangle Cluster'.

Action learning processes underpinned the work of the three teaching-principals in collaboration with their academic partner, and informed the nature of their professional learning activities. They used cycles of inquiry to plan, implement, observe, describe, discuss, reflect upon and evaluate the processes and outcomes being undertaken by them collectively to improve the quality of the teaching and learning being undertaken in their schools. To reflect upon their practices, members of the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' formally met face to face once or twice a term. The purposes of these meetings included to share information and observations of how they felt their teaching and learning was progressing; to review and update the plans they had made; to document achievements; to discuss and share teaching and learning strategies; and to reflect on how the directions of the project were progressing and whether any redirections or refinements were required. Data was used to assist with decisions about questions such as 'where to next?'

Together the principals and the academic partner took responsibilities for a role within the Cluster. One of the teaching-principals took the role of coordinating the arrangements across the Cluster; while another teaching-principal took responsibility for liaison with the NSW Department of Education concerning information technology (IT) issues as required; and the other teaching-principal provided support to the group about how to use specific IT applications to assist their teaching and learning. The academic partner's role was to provide critical mentoring support to the team, and to assist the principals use school-based data to inform their work. At the beginning of the project, the teaching-principals articulated their expectations of the academic partner as follows:

Our academic partner will assist us develop a deeper understanding of the quality teaching framework. She will also help us to develop effective action learning strategies e.g. gathering data, evaluating evidence, providing feedback and developing processes to sustain quality improvement. She will also assist with refining of our action learning plan and she will play a significant role in the evaluation of the project e.g. preparing and writing of the progress and final reports. Our academic partner will also be our critical friend/professional colleague supporting the team through observation and sharing feedback on our classroom practices ('Brenumerangle Cluster' 2006a, p.3).

All members of the group brought to the table their expertise in curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment and reporting.

Using data

One of the professional goals of the teaching-principals was to use existing data and to gather additional data, to inform their work both as leaders and teachers. At the beginning of the project the team planned what they would do in their respective classrooms and what data they would require. Several sources of evidence were identified to guide the directions of this action learning project including student feedback; students' performance in reading and writing on the state's *Basic Skills Test* and on other tests administered by the teaching-principals themselves; as well as their own observations and reflections, and those of the academic partner. At the outset of the project the teaching-principals had data on students' reading levels and they decided upon their test of students' ICT capabilities. In their first progress report to the NSW Department of Education they indicated that

We have agreed upon a common assessment of reading levels for all students to be recorded and shared as a beginning benchmark for the project. We are in the process of assessing the ICT skills of all students in the three schools ('Brenumerangle Cluster' 2006b, p.2).

The teaching-principals and the academic partner reviewed the data available within the schools and together agreed on the types of additional testing they wanted to do to establish a 'base line benchmark' for the initiative. It was found that the reading comprehension levels across the students within the three schools and across the three schools varied. The challenge for the teaching-principals then was how to teach students across the range of school year levels in one class, that included students whose reading comprehension skills within specific years levels ranged from above to below the state average.

The teaching-principals also agreed to administer the same spelling test to the students in each of the schools, to ascertain the spelling levels of students across the Cluster. This testing also showed that in the three schools the spelling ability of the students was largely at or above the state average but with a few students below that and requiring special assistance. The three teaching-principals also took stock of their students' capabilities with using computers and the Internet. After reviewing a range of tests of students' ICT skills, they agreed among themselves what skills and abilities they wished to assess and in doing so found that the students could word process, import text, insert photos, save documents to a file, search the Internet and use email.

It was on the basis of these findings that the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' confirmed their plans to use technologies to assist students to develop their reading comprehension and writing literacy skills, and concurrently continue to develop their students' ICT literacy skills. The teaching-principals could see the potential of the students using technologies to develop their reading comprehension and spelling skills.

Using technologies

During the course of this initiative several ways of fostering students' literacy were undertaken. Technologies such as the computer and the Internet, and in one school, digital cameras and film-making were explicitly included into the classroom activities of the students, with the use of these technologies specifically aimed at supporting the students to develop their reading and spelling skills using authentic and meaningful tasks. To foster writing, one of the classroom student activities involved the students emailing to their peers in the other schools, electronic resources such as URL sites and/or learning objects that were appropriate to the learning outcomes they were all undertaking. Another common activity involved students using the intranet to compare their views of online learning objects. The emphases in the student activities were on the students reading for comprehension and spelling accurately in their writing: whether the students were preparing the storyboards for a film or writing an email to a student in another school.

The teaching-principals determined the common rubric learning outcomes they wanted to be achieved and in what ways certain technologies would be used to assist the students to be able to meet those learning outcomes. In this way, the technologies were one means to an end (ie developing students' literacy levels) rather than the end in themselves. Indeed, the purposes for the use of technologies included to encourage the students to read and write using technologies in ways that connected with their daily lives. An additional motivation was to build the size of the student community so that the students could develop relationships with other students beyond the individual school walls.

Establishing teaching and learning activities to develop students' literacy levels with the use of technologies meant though, that the teaching-principals themselves also developed their ICT skills. Each of the teaching-principals commenced this initiative with varying levels of sophistication with the use of technologies. The collegiate nature of the group however, allowed for mentoring and sharing of expertise both in terms of pedagogical practices with ICT, and for the 'back-end' work required to make sure the IT systems would run and were robust. Through teamwork, the teaching-principals were each able to successfully include technologies in their suite of strategies for building their students' literacy levels.

The use of technologies within each of the schools was undertaken within the context of the NSW Department of Education's policy framework and its' ICT network. Before implementing their teaching and learning approaches they ensured that the functionality they required was available and working. One of the teaching-principals liaised with the regional IT support officers on behalf of the group to ensure they and their students could securely browse the Internet. For example, in May 2006 the 'Brennumerangle Cluster' reported that

We are all in the process of the introduction of Secure Internet Browsing from the NSW Department of Education ('Brennumerangle Cluster' 2006a: 3).

After the initiative had been operating for about 18 months the schools each decided they wanted to showcase the activities that had been undertaken by the students to develop their literacy skills. Each of the schools held a parents afternoon where the students demonstrated their activities and achievements. One of the teaching-principals arranged for this activity to occur in the local town hall and the students showcased their work electronically. The teaching-principal in another of the schools worked with the students to produce a DVD of their work.

Conclusion

The two overarching questions that drove the development of the literacy action learning plan developed within the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' were:

1. how can we improve the literacy levels of the students in our schools?; and
2. how can we foster high quality learning outcomes in our students?

To inform their work addressing these two questions, several other considerations then flowed for the three teaching-principals involved in this initiative. These considerations included issues such as how to develop students' literacy levels using meaningful and authentic tasks with their students. These educators also wanted to decrease the isolation that affected them as lone teaching-principals and also for the students in their schools. To address these issues, they took the approach of positioning themselves as learners, using the action learning model of planning, acting, observing, describing and reflecting, and revising plans, for further action to take place.

Drawing on Lankshear et al (1999), these teacher-principals approached literacy development through technologies by fostering students' operational and cultural dimensions to their reading and writing capabilities through encouraging activities grounded in the students' everyday lives, and developing students' understandings of what is appropriate and inappropriate writing that forms parts of emails and other web-based communications. Students were also supported to build upon their reading and writing capabilities in online environments, to reflect critically on what they were learning and to make decisions about alternative possibilities for conveying messages to others. Furthermore, the teacher-principals recognised that in order to teach their students to use technologies, and to teach through and about technologies in the most competent and creative ways, that they had to be skilled, informed and critical users themselves.

To inform their plans and directions and to assist their reflections and recognition of achievements, the members of the 'Brenumerangle Cluster' collected and used a range of data to inform their decision-making. Professional conversations were conducted around the nature of the data collected, about what it showed, and what actions ought to be taken in light of the evidence before the group. Because the members of the group identified with the group called 'Brenumerangle Cluster', then the interpretations of the data collected, the problems that arose and the solutions proposed were all shared. Using data to determine the literacy levels specifically in reading and spelling through this initiative provided the group

with base-line data upon which insights into the distance travelled over the course of the project could be determined.

While the quantitative data on the reading comprehension and spelling tests reflected students' improving in their respective literacy levels in spelling and reading comprehension, there were also less quantifiable and unexpected outcomes that flowed from this action learning initiative. The teaching-principals found that the students concentrated and were engaged with reading and the writing tasks focused on spelling that were undertaken using technologies, and that through the use of email between the students in each of the schools, the walls of the schools did seem to get bigger. And indeed in practical terms they have. Since the introduction of this initiative, the enrolments in each of the schools has grown, with Numeralla growing from twelve students in 2006 to twenty-two in 2008.

The strengths of the approach taken by the 'Brenmerangle Cluster' include that they

- Used base-line data to inform plans and activities for both the students and the professional learning requirements of the teaching-principals;
- Identified common tasks for use in each of the schools' classrooms across the Cluster;
- Made sure the technology worked before using it with their students;
- Established and worked to agreed communal timelines; and
- Demonstrated outcomes to both the students and their parents.

Since the conclusion of the funding for this action learning initiative, those involved in the 'Brenmerangle Cluster' have continued to network and share ideas about literacy and improving pedagogy. It is through the development of collegial networks such as these, that these school leaders and teachers were able to share and apply their understandings about teaching and learning, literacy and learning with technologies in ever thoughtful, challenging and insightful ways. The success of this project reiterates the important role school leaders play in bringing about change, supporting the development students' literacy capabilities and in promoting teaching and learning with technologies. Through the use of action learning and the collection and interpretation of school based data these teacher-principals informed their own practice and provided leadership to their students and to their school communities.

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