FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW: ENHANCING LITERACY LEARNING FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

Overall, the educational achievement of rural and regional students is lower than that of students elsewhere. To address uneven student achievement, a regional NSW high school, in collaboration with the local university, adopted a whole school approach to literacy teaching and learning. The literacy pedagogy adopted by the school has been applied to meet the specific literacy demands of each learning area. How teachers implementing the pedagogy have been supported by a school-university partnership is documented in this paper. A key outcome of the professional learning is that teachers in years 7 and 8 are expected to develop a language shared with colleagues and students for talking about the literacy demands of the learning areas so literacy knowledge and skills gained in one learning area can be applied in other learning areas.

Key words: Literacy teaching and learning, literacy pedagogy, school-university partnerships

BACKGROUND

In rural and regional communities, the cultural and social experiences of school students differ from those of students in urban areas, yet rural and regional students must develop communication and critical thinking skills at least equivalent to those of their urban peers, and become increasingly resourceful and entrepreneurial (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The sustainability of rural and regional communities in Australia depends on young people whose future is tied to these areas building high levels of literacy **(**Bartholomaeus, 2012**)**, where sustainability is defined as *an intergenerational concept that means adjusting our current behaviour so that it causes the least amount of harm to future generations* (Owens, 2001, p.xi: cited in Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007). This view of sustainability underpins the 'notion of rural literacy' proposed by Donehower, Hogg and Schell (2007) in North America. They used the term 'rural literacies' to describe the *kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas*; that is, *pursu[ing] the opportunities and creat[ing] the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities* (p. 4). Similarly, in Australia, Green and Corbett (2008) argue for *a notion of rural literacy based on a concept of sustainability* (p. 120), with a focus on the relationship between literacy studies and rural education in this *undervalued and misrecognized area*.

This paper documents a whole-school literacy initiative implemented in a regional NSW secondary school in partnership with the local university. The school, with a staff of about 50 teachers, is partially selective. Of the approximately 700 students in the school, 14 per cent are Aboriginal and eight per cent have a language background other than English. In 2013 the school invited teacher

educators from the university to provide professional learning for Years 7 and 8 teachers in curriculum literacies in the context of the NSW Literacy Continuum and the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012). The professional learning, developed collaboratively with the school project team, aimed, first, to build teachers' knowledge about language (KAL); and, second, to guide teachers in *unpacking* and *repacking* discipline knowledge for students, and to make explicit the *work* of language in writing across the curriculum (Humphrey, 2012).

The adoption of a whole school approach to literacy by the regional NSW secondary school, as reported below, was motivated by uneven student achievement. The educational achievement of rural and regional students in general is lower than that of students elsewhere (Pegg & Panizzon, 2007). This is partly because engagement in education is *complex as a result of their context* (Bartholomaeus, 2012, p.132). For this reason, in regional and rural areas of Australia there exists:

> … *a consistent pattern of student under-achievement … relative to coastal and metropolitan regions. This is arguably exacerbated, the further west and inland one goes – with some notable (regional) exceptions* (Green et al., 2008, pp. 4-5).

Rural and regional schools exhibit a *wide diversity in terms of location and context, student population, [and] school size …* (Bartholomaeus, 2012, p.132). While students in these contexts experience tangible benefits, such as small class sizes, factors specific to rural areas can impact negatively on student achievement (Rothman & McMillan, 2003). These impacts include, for example, more limited educational opportunities for students in Years 11 and 12, in particular, students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, alongside reduced access to peers who can model successful academic achievement and fewer opportunities for tertiary study (Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009).

The complexity of the rural and regional educational context is also exacerbated because not only must rural students be educated to live in their community, but, as Sher and Sher (1994) argue, they must also be prepared for living successful adult lives in urban locations. Because these students must embrace the cultural life of both rural/regional and urban communities, teachers must appreciate the *possible bicultural nature* of their students' lives (Bartholomaeus, 2012, pp. 135-136). Thus, teachers of rural and regional students are responsible for preparing students for futures in both rural and urban contexts. As students progress through school, they encounter a *formal curriculum and testing and assessment procedures … often focused on lives outside rural locations* (Bartholomaeus, 2012, p.136). This phenomenon has implications for literacy learning since not all students will possess the background knowledge necessary to comprehend and compose texts for specific purposes more relevant to urban contexts (Bartholomaeus, 2013).

SECONDARY DISCOURSES IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Successful writing across the curriculum can be understood in terms of secondary Discourses, defined as *ways of behaving, valuing, thinking, communicating and interacting of a social group focused on a set of activities, priorities or interests* (Bartholomaeus, 2012). Each curriculum learning area, for example, Science or History, is represented by a secondary Discourse, each with its own lens on the world and distinctive ways for explaining phenomena, expressed in particular types of texts. How confident and fluent students become in the secondary Discourses of the high school learning areas predicts success at school and beyond (Gee, 1996). In other words, mastering the secondary Discourse of each learning area involves mastering the literacy demands of the learning area.

Being literate, according to Gee (1996), includes the ability to communicate confidently and fluently with those who are not family members or members of familiar communities. In secondary school, becoming literate means gaining control of the literacy practices of each learning area. Teachers play an important role in guiding students into literacy practices that enable them to be both successful at school and later in the workforce and the community (Gee, 1996). Furthermore, teachers must engage students in stimulating and challenging literacy experiences (Luke 2010), while not 'dumbing down' student expectations or implementing pedagogies linked to low expectations (Anyon, 2003).

Economic and employment factors impacting rural and regional communities help *determine the secondary Discourses familiar to students* (Bartholomaeus 2012, p. 141). Students who are not familiar with the secondary Discourses of the secondary school rely on their teachers to build the values, patterns of action, reasoning and communication styles that together comprise each secondary

Discourse (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). A mismatch between the primary Discourses of the home community and the secondary Discourses of the school means that some students have little option but to withdraw from school literacy practices, and, therefore, from learning (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1994). While literacy practices of rural communities are typically valued by teachers working in these communities, when teachers fail to link out-of-school literacy practices with classroom literacy practice, students can become disengaged (Donehower, 2003; Peterson, 2011). If teachers integrate the primary Discourses of the community with the secondary Discourses of power and opportunity, the result for students is 'double power' (Yunupingu, 1999).

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LANGUAGE AND A TEXT-BASED APPROACH

The approach to literacy teaching and learning adopted by the NSW regional secondary school aligns with the dynamic view of literacy underpinning the *Australian Curriculum*. With advances in technology challenging communication practices in rural, urban and global contexts, students need to acquire a literacy that is dynamic and responsive to a wide spectrum of communication media, audiences and subject matter (Unsworth, 2001). This dynamic view of literacy is reflected in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2012), in which literacy is identified as a *general capability*, involving students in *listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts* (ACARA, 2012). In this curriculum environment students are required to:

> … *develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society* (ACARA, 2012).

By identifying literacy as a *general* capability, the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2012) promotes literacy as a capability transcending traditional boundaries between learning areas. Each learning area is embodied in a specialist language which needs to be taught to students explicitly. To make explicit the specific language and literacy demands of each learning area requires a shared language teachers and students can use to talk about the language of the discipline; and, more specifically, how text structure, grammar and vocabulary are deployed in the texts that represent the valued knowledge of the discipline. The emphasis in the *Australian Curriculum* is on how language functions to make meaning. From this viewpoint *knowledge about language* (KAL) is defined as *a coherent, dynamic, and evolving body of knowledge about English language and how it works* (ACARA, 2012). The challenge for teachers is to incorporate the teaching of literacy into their programs, including the *knowledge about language* students need in order to achieve curriculum outcomes, for example, knowledge about how to compose texts for a range of purposes, including, for example, description, explanation or persuasion (Derewianka & Jones, 2012).

While teachers are experts in their discipline areas, this does not mean they recognise consciously, and explain explicitly to students, the language and literacy demands of their discipline area, nor that they have knowledge about language, or literacy development and pedagogy. The aim of the whole school approach to literacy teaching and learning adopted by the regional secondary school was to make visible to teachers the literacy demands placed on students in their learning areas, and to provide teachers with shared knowledge about language and a literacy pedagogy they could use to help students meet these demands through consistent teaching across the school that reinforced student literacy development from one learning area to the next.

The literacy pedagogy chosen by the regional secondary school is a text-based, or genre-based pedagogy. This approach to language and literacy is founded on the premise that learning language is a process of *learning how to mean* through which we grow our *meaning potential* (Halliday, 1992, p.19). Building on this idea, Martin (1985), Rothery (1996), Christie (2005), Rose and Martin (2012), and others have designed:

> … *a genre-based approach with the goal of making the language demands of the curriculum explicit so that all students have access to the linguistic resources needed for success in school and to the powerful ways of using language in our culture* (Derewianka & Jones, 2012, p.4).

Recently, the notion of genre, that is, identifiable structural patterns that distinguish different types of texts used to achieve different social purposes, has been applied to the investigation of the spoken and written texts that comprise school discourses. Learning to recognise and to work with these

genres enables students to understand how to comprehend and compose texts to meet educational and employment purposes with a critical orientation, in other words, how to mould genre patterns to their own communicative purposes (de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2012, p.16). The text-based approach is a *visible* pedagogy, in which what is to be learned, and the roles of the teacher and students are made explicit. This approach to language and literacy development promotes language and literacy learning that has the potential to achieve more equitable outcomes for all students across a range of educational contexts (Axford, Harders, & Wise, 2009; de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2012; Gibbons, 2009; Unsworth, 2001).

ADOPTING A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO LITERACY IN A REGIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOL

The starting point for developing a whole school approach to literacy teaching and learning at the school was the school's participation in a state-wide NSW Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) project, *Write it Right* (2013-2014), concerned with improving literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students in NSW. The two teachers who were asked to coordinate the project's implementation at the school soon discovered among the staff a demand for professional learning related to explicit literacy instruction. Here, these two teachers describe what happened.

First steps

Spurred on by the first *Write it Right* conference, we returned to our school to focus on the establishment of a *Write it Right* project team, the employment of a Support Officer and the completion of a Local Activity Plan. An important goal for the project team was to ensure that this project resulted in sustained and enduring change in the teaching of literacy across the school and an improvement in the outcomes of *all* students, including Aboriginal students.

In May 2013, the school's *Write it Right* project team organised a planning day to discuss project aims and the direction for literacy in our school. Key points for inquiry included:

- an investigation of text types across the curriculum and the place of literacy in each discipline within the context of the NSW syllabus documents for the *Australian Curriculum;*
- an examination of teaching writing and how it is being done in the school, and how we might develop strategies for teaching writing within and across the disciplines; and
- an exploration of alternative opportunities for promoting the literacy development of Aboriginal students, including story writing projects and increased involvement of community elders.

In our curriculum learning area teams, we also focused on:

- a review of the new syllabus for the learning area;
- literacy goals for the learning area; and
- resources and strategies for teaching particular writing skills linked to the syllabus for the learning area.

We used the planning day as an opportunity to identify what members of the project team, and the staff as a whole, needed in terms of professional learning to enable us to teach literacy across the learning areas more effectively.

A need for data

The *Write it Right* planning day promoted an awareness of the need for a more detailed analysis of the school's *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) data. Following the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008, the school's results have been trending steadily below or substantially below schools with statistically similar populations.

For 2008-9, the Year 7 results for both the *Spelling* test and the *Grammar and Punctuation* test were below statistically similar school populations, and below Australian school averages. The results in both areas improved from 2010 onwards, with the introduction of specific strategies targeting spelling, grammar and punctuation in junior English classrooms, supported by the substantial intervention of the Student Learning Support Officer (SLSO). A further contributing factor to this improvement was the introduction in 2010 of a Year 7 selective stream. From 2010, in *Reading*, Year 7

results have been generally on par, or slightly above both statistically similar school populations and Australian school averages. Nevertheless, while Year 7 results remain on par with national averages in *Reading*, *Spelling*, and *Grammar and Punctuation*, the result that causes most concern in the school has been the disappointing trend in the *Writing* results, which fell below the Australian school average, and in particular, the *Writing* results of Aboriginal students, as well as a significant cohort of non-aboriginal students.

The need for professional learning for all teachers

Following the planning day, we conducted a teacher survey. The initial results, together with our own reflections, suggested that the teaching of academic writing skills was not occurring systematically across the school. Many teachers felt ill-equipped to teach students the literacy they needed to meet the literacy demands of their learning area, and did not feel they had the skills to move students from everyday spoken English to the academic English needed for writing tasks at school.

We assumed several contributing factors including the following:

- Students arrive at high school with the ability to write at a certain level and we 'start' from that level.
- Teacher training has not in the past addressed the teaching of literacy across the school disciplines so some teachers may lack confidence in their ability to teach explicitly the skills needed for literacy development in their learning area.
- The pressure of a 'crowded' curriculum can produce programs driven by content.

We grappled with issues related to teachers' confidence and skills in teaching literacy across the curriculum and considered what type of professional learning might address the needs of our teachers.

In summary, the school's *Write it Right* project emphasised the role of professional learning and the development of a whole-school literacy plan as key strategies towards improving the literacy outcomes of Aboriginal students, especially writing outcomes, based on the argument that a whole-school approach would have a 'flow-on' effect; in other words, that the literacy skills of the target group would improve if the skills of all students improved. While this argument may be justified, we were aware that specific strategies needed to be implemented to support Aboriginal students as they developed the literacy skills necessary for success at school. We also acknowledged the role of the school's *Write it Right* Support Officer and Aboriginal tutors as fundamental to the success of Aboriginal students, and, for that reason, we welcomed their continued involvement in this project.

A need for a whole school approach to literacy

The need for a whole school literacy plan emerged as a key finding of the school's *Write it Right* planning day. We, therefore, decided that professional learning for teachers should focus on promoting the following:

- a shared metalanguage for talking about literacy across all learning areas;
- explicit teaching about the types of texts used in each learning area;
- improved scaffolding designed into tasks used to build students' literacy ;
- an increased focus on teaching grammar by providing all teachers with *knowledge about language;*
- increased independent sustained writing opportunities for all students; and
- enhanced teacher confidence and competence in the assessment of writing.

We also decided that our Year 7 and 8 students needed to achieve the following outcomes:

- Recognise and be familiar with the types of texts specific to the discipline of each learning area, and use these types of text effectively.
- Use language with intention and effect for a range of purposes across a range of contexts.
- Build and use discipline specific vocabulary across a range of contexts.
- Engage in sustained independent writing across a range of contexts.
- Participate in self- and peer assessment of writing.

The school's *Write it Right* project was underpinned by the argument that improved student outcomes will be delivered if teachers are trained to teach academic writing skills explicitly. The project team resolved to design a professional learning plan to expand the knowledge and understanding of literacy and literacy pedagogy of all teachers. Specifically, we planned to provide teachers with discipline specific literacy skills related to the teaching of English, History and Geography, Science and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE), supplemented by resources and materials to enable them to integrate literacy strategies into their classes. Our decision to focus on English, Science, History/Geography and PDHPE was based on the conclusion that, of all core areas, these learning areas had some of the highest literacy demands, especially in relation to writing. Coincidentally, the design of new English, Science and Geography syllabus documents provided an opportunity for embedding these literacy strategies into these three learning areas.

Subsequently, we turned our attention to implementing professional learning for our teachers during 2013 and 2014. At this point we contacted teacher educators at the local university who designed and delivered a professional learning program to our specifications. The program content was adjusted as needed to address the literacy demands of different learning areas. The professional learning comprised three workshops. Two whole day workshops were held in 2013. The first focused on the literacy demands of Science and PDHPE followed by the second focusing on the literacy demands of English and History/Geography. At the end of 2013, teachers participated in a 'continuation' workshop in which they showcased the literacy interventions they had integrated into their programs, and the resulting literacy gains made by the students. Early in 2014, half-day workshops were held for Industrial Arts and Mathematics teachers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR LITERACY LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

At a general level, the school literacy project team hoped for enduring change in the teaching of literacy across the school. Implementing enduring change in educational contexts, however, is challenging at any stage of the change cycle - *initiation, implementation* and *continuation* - as emphasised by Fullan (for example, 2001, 2006, 2007), in particular, because enduring change demands efforts designed to *simultaneously and more fundamentally change the **culture** and **working conditions** in which educators work* (Fullan, 2007, p. 291). Each stage of the change cycle is detailed below in relation to the school's activities and research agenda.

Initiation stage

As described by the teachers above, the pressure for change that led to the provision of professional learning included the uneven trajectory of NAPLAN results over five years, a changing curriculum and syllabus environment and the school's decision to participate in the statewide *Write it Right* literacy project, in other words, a combination of interacting local and external variables (Fullan, 2007, p. 86). Professional learning that best contributes to changing the practice of individual teachers is collaborative, responsive, and recognised by teachers as relevant to the demands of both the curriculum and the classroom (Guskey, 2003; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Joyce & Showers, 1995; Joyce & Weil, 1996). Specifically, models of professional development that effect positive change in teaching practice are distinguished by three main characteristics:

(i)   clear goals and objectives tied to teacher and student needs (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Suk Yoon, 2001);

(ii)   provision of time for teachers to engage with the content over an extended period of time (Garet et al., 2001; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005) and explore active learning opportunities (Garet et al., 2001) as well as opportunities for feedback and reflection; and

(iii)   collaboration (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Joyce & Showers, 1995).

With this in mind, the teacher educators collaborated with the school project team to customise the professional learning to the culture and needs of the school, accommodating the findings of the teacher survey. The teacher educators had backgrounds in curriculum literacies and professional learning for educational change (Feez, 2002; Styslinger, Clary, & Oglan, 2014). The objectives emerging from the collaboration included providing teachers with a framework for thinking about

knowledge about language and about literacy development, and with practical tools, instructional strategies and resources, faculty teams could adapt collaboratively to their curriculum area and implement individually in their classrooms (Fullan, 2007, pp. 30-31).

Implementation stage

Two whole-day workshops, held in Term 3, were attended by 25 teachers in faculty teams: Science (five teachers) and PDHPE (five teachers); English (eight teachers) and History/Geography (seven teachers), all of whom taught Years 7 and 8. More than half the teachers had ten years or more teaching experience, while others had less than five years' experience. The teachers were asked to bring to the workshop samples of student writing from their curriculum area, including both successful and unsuccessful responses to assessment tasks. Each workshop session was video recorded, and teachers were asked to record their impressions of the workshops on Google docs.

In the **first session** of the workshop the teachers reviewed the goals of the school's *Write it Right* project, their own strengths and weaknesses, expectations and concerns, in relation to literacy education, and how the professional learning might assist them to improve the writing outcomes of students in their curriculum area, especially those at risk. The faculty teams reviewed the literacy demands of their learning area for Years 7 and 8, and the literacy learning needs of the students in their classes in relation to these demands. The following questions guided their discussion:

- What are the literacy demands of the classroom and assessment tasks in your discipline?
- What knowledge about language and image do students need to comprehend and compose written texts effectively on your discipline?
- What images do students need to compose successfully in writing tasks in your discipline (e.g. illustrations, diagrams, flow charts, timelines, concept maps, graphs, animations)?

Each team was provided with a checklist for analysing the literacy demands of assessment tasks which required students to write extended texts. The teachers used the same checklist to compare successful and unsuccessful student responses to these tasks in order to determine what less successful students still needed to learn in order to meet the literacy demands of assessment tasks in their curriculum area. The checklist was designed to help the teachers identify the features of successful student writing, and to diagnose student literacy learning needs in their curriculum area, across all levels of language: whole text, paragraph, sentence and word. This analysis clarified for teachers the types of texts students in their curriculum area need to master in order to display their knowledge of the discipline successfully.

At the beginning of the second session, the teachers used the assessment checklists to review their own knowledge about language and to identify the knowledge about language they still needed to support the literacy development of students studying in their curriculum area. The teachers were then provided with model texts and an overview of knowledge about language they could select from to program the teaching of literacy in their curriculum area.

For each area of knowledge about language, the teachers were provided with strategies and resources for scaffolding the development of literacy skills in their curriculum area organised into an instructional sequence comprising modelled, guided and independent literacy practice. In other words, the teachers were shown how to organise literacy teaching strategies as a cycle of literacy teaching and learning, a 'literacy development cycle' (following Unsworth 2001), for teaching incrementally knowledge about the structure of the types of texts through which knowledge is assessed in each curriculum area, the patterns of grammar and vocabulary used in these types of texts, and the skills needed to write these types of texts successfully.

For the first stage of the text-based cycle of literacy teaching and learning, the modelled writing stage, teachers were given strategies for taking a central and authoritative role in the development of literacy knowledge and skills. These strategies included activities in which texts of the target type are used in purposeful and meaningful ways, for example, as a model, or mentor, to illustrate how texts of this type are used in context. It is during this stage of the cycle that teachers also provide activities in which students:

- build the knowledge of the content being taught – the field;
- reflect on the demands placed on writers in this discipline area by different audiences; and

- consider how writing in this discipline area differs from spoken language.

To be able to implement the **second stage** of the cycle of literacy teaching and learning, the guided writing stage, teachers were provided with strategies for increasing student contribution to the composition of texts of the target type. This stage of the cycle requires teachers and students to have a shared metalanguage to talk about the language features of texts of the target type, so the teacher can guide student composition. As the students gain more control of the language features of this type of text, the teacher's contribution to the composition of texts is gradually reduced.

Finally, the teachers were shown how, in the **third stage** of the cycle of literacy teaching and learning - the independent writing stage - students can be supported to respond to a writing task independently by researching, planning and drafting their own writing. Once they have successfully written a text of the target type, they can be given opportunities to reflect on this type of text and its use in the discipline area.

The three-stage literacy development cycle and the repertoire of strategies provided by the teacher educators were used by the teachers in the final session of the workshop to design sequences of literacy teaching activities to embed in units of work for delivery over the next two school terms. Using the literacy learning needs diagnosed in the first session and knowledge about language gained in the second session, the teachers drafted literacy objectives linked to the reading and/or writing of a type of text relevant to their curriculum area. They then designed a sequence of literacy teaching activities to teach to these objectives, a sequence they could integrate into their teaching program. This included preparing assessment tasks and assessment rubrics to monitor student progress and to assess student achievement. Finally, teachers were also introduced to action research techniques to record, reflect on, evaluate and adjust the implementation of the literacy intervention they had designed. Following the professional learning workshop, teachers returned to their classrooms to implement the literacy teaching sequences they had designed during the workshop. As a means of follow-up support, teachers were given time during faculty meetings to review the implementation of the teaching sequence with each other.

Continuation stage

At the end of Term 4, teaching teams presented to their colleagues the results of the literacy intervention across the four learning areas: English, History, Science and PDHPE. This workshop represented the first step of the **Continuation** stage (Fullan, 2007, p. 100ff). At the 'continuation workshop,' each teaching team presented the literacy teaching sequence they had embedded in their program, and provided samples of student writing collected *before* and *after* the intervention. All teachers reported improved student engagement, and improvement in the quantity and quality of student writing following the scaffolding and guidance provided by the literacy development cycle; students were also increasingly able to undertake writing tasks independently. The successes reported by the teachers at the continuation workshop inspired others to request similar professional learning opportunities. As a result, in Term 1, 2014, two further workshops were held for Industrial Arts and for Mathematics faculty teams.

TEACHERS' EVALUATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WORKSHOPS

The goal of the professional learning workshops was to show teachers how to embed sequences of explicit literacy teaching into their units of work. At the continuation workshop, participating teachers reported that the workshops were *extremely valuable*, and more specifically, that designing sequences of literacy teaching and learning specific to their learning area and embedding these in existing units of work was beneficial, and that the shared metalanguage for talking about the literacy demands of their curriculum area equipped them to teach academic writing skills explicitly. Initially, some teachers expressed concern about *cramming yet one more thing* into their programs, and found the metalanguage presented in the workshops was *too Englishy*. Others noted the value of a shared whole school approach, as reported by one teacher in the following way:

> To some degree, all teachers model the desired text type for their students, but it was very useful to be on the same page with this whole school focus. Our program for the term followed the Literacy Development Cycle and this seemed to work well.

Teachers also reported having a greater understanding of the specific literacy demands of their discipline area. As a result, for example, the History teaching team designed literacy-focused assessment tasks for each of the following years:

- Year 7: Constructing paragraphs.
- Year 8: Writing a historical report.
- Year 10: Writing a feature article.

A key teaching strategy presented in the workshops was the use of graphic organisers, or structured overviews (Morris & Stewart-Dore, 1984), to guide note-taking during reading and preparation for writing. Teachers from all learning areas reported using graphic organisers to scaffold teaching about types of texts relevant to the literacy demands of their learning area, as stated by a Science teacher: *We used the scaffold to summarise information from a range of sources. Students then used it to write their own report.* In general, teachers reported that graphic organisers are a valuable scaffolding strategy because they increased student engagement. One teacher noted, however, that such techniques could be time-consuming, at least initially:

> *Teaching students how best to write a procedure took an awfully long time on the first attempt, but hopefully the next time it will be a lot easier for them and I will spend less time supporting some students. There are still some who are struggling.*

Another strategy teachers from all faculty teams found valuable was using a scaffold based on acronyms and visual images to teach paragraph structure. As one teacher reported:

> *The use of the paragraph scaffold, with modelling, has had a great impact. Students immediately recognise how to write in paragraphs from now.*

While some faculty teams tried one or two specific literacy teaching strategies, the English team embedded the whole literacy development cycle into their programming. This team has since allocated a portion of their faculty planning days to consider how this instructional cycle might be integrated into existing units of work. Others, however, acknowledged that while they made well-intentioned efforts to raise the profile of literacy in their classroom using strategies learned in the workshops, they subsequently 'lost direction' and would have liked guidance to navigate their way once back in the classroom.

STUDENT WRITING OUTCOMES

While it is not yet possible to measure change in student outcomes following the workshops, teachers have reported improvements in student engagement in reading and writing activities and noticeable improvements in the quality of student writing. As one teacher reported: *There have been some great results in student product that has been achieved through more explicit teaching in literacy.* Other teachers have observed students taking greater pride in their writing as a result of the enhanced literacy focus. Furthermore, while teachers report that student writing of specific text types is still developing, they have also observed that students now recognise different types of texts and the purposes these achieve in particular discipline areas.

Overall, based on students' work samples, the teachers agree that the sequence of explicit teaching about the literacy demands of writing tasks results in students becoming more engaged in class, and better equipped to meet the demands of writing tasks. For example, teachers reported that students enjoy understanding more about the purposes of the different types of texts, and how these are valued in the discipline and wider society, and feel more supported and confident because they understand the specific structural and linguistic demands of each task.

Thus, even at this early stage of the intervention, the literacy team coordinator has been able report *significant successes in the writing outcomes for all students, including Aboriginal students, after only a short period of time and small interventions.* Student writing samples collected before and after the intervention support these initial impressions. For example, some very significant gains by individual students emerged as a result of the PDHPE faculty team implementing the literacy development cycle. As the PDHPE teachers noted:

The most significant achievement was the ability of the poorer writers to:

- construct paragraphs,

- remember content,
- show more confidence to begin a writing task independently.

The time and effort in addressing key aspects of writing in conjunction with the topic has definitely contributed to an improvement in completing extended response questions. The students were not only well aware of their content, it was clear that they had a better understanding of the expectation of the writing task.

Such gains were immediately obvious in a comparison of texts written by individual students before and after the literacy intervention. For example, a student, whose initial text comprised three short, barely legible, spoken-like disconnected sentences on the topic of smoking (e.g. *Smoking can make you get …*), after taking part in the sequence of explicit literacy teaching, wrote a mature well-presented and well-organised four-paragraph information report on the topic of puberty, comprising an introduction, two well-structured paragraphs, the first describing physical changes and the second describing social changes, and a concluding paragraph.

DISCUSSION

Observations by the project team suggest that the new knowledge and skills about literacy teaching, and the energy unleashed by the professional learning workshops, have caused a positive 'ripple effect,' a feature of the *continuation* stage that has lead to a number of school-based literacy initiatives, including, in Term 1, 2014, well-received staff development and staff meetings dedicated to the literacy project. Other initiatives have included timetabled Drop Everything and Write activities, culminating in a school-wide story competition with high levels of student participation.

As 2014 unfolded, it became apparent that the cycle of change was recursive and happened in overlapping waves. For example, the continuation workshop at which the English, Science, History/Geography and PDHPE teachers showcased their progress sparked the interest of the Industrial Arts and Mathematics teachers, who then requested implementation workshops. Meanwhile, the original four teaching teams pushed forward with the 'Continuation stage' as they integrated a literacy component in all assessment tasks. On the surface, the process for change seemed to follow a textbook account indicative of how factors of 'implementation' and 'continuation' can *reinforce or undercut each other as an interrelated system* (Fullan, 2007, p. 105).

At the end of 2014, the teachers decided that *this valuable professional learning*, and the school-university collaboration, should continue. Their plans to extend the 'Continuation stage' of the literacy project can perhaps be understood as a reflection of *new collective capacities* (Fullan, 2007, p. 299). In Term 1 2015, Years 7 and 8 English, Science, PDHPE and HSIE teachers, supported by academic partners, will participate in a 'Lesson Study' program. Collaborating in pairs, teachers will design teaching sequences that embed a literacy focus into the lesson content. Each teacher in the pair will deliver the lesson, while their partner observes and evaluates the delivery, before they use the evaluation to refine the lesson further.

This literacy project's modest success appears to be based on three key factors. First, the continuing school-university partnership was beneficial, because, in the words of the school literacy project leader, what the university offered was *directly related to our core business – improving student outcomes. The success of the initial collaboration encouraged us to seek ways to continue the partnership*. While some aspects of the school-university partnership may have been 'serendipitous,' its success is derived from the involvement of individuals with commensurate experience and priorities, including a commitment to invest considerable time and effort in the project (Guskey, 2003). Second, a Science teacher, not an English teacher, led the project. The project leader has been described by colleagues as *the driving force in the school* responsible for establishing an enthusiastic dialogue about literacy among teachers across all faculties in the school. Third, this *bottom up initiative* (Fullan, 2007, p. 81) has the support of the school executive. In particular, the Principal has encouraged whole-school discussion about literacy, attended planning meetings, provided release for teachers to attend professional learning, and made literacy the focus of staff meetings. As identified by Fullan (2007), the *centrality of principal leadership* is an essential condition for successful school change (p.161).

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The project itself took a long time to 'get going.' Generating the momentum for change requires time for individuals to digest and invest in the initiative (Guskey, 2003), for project leaders to build partnerships, and for school leaders to provide resources and an infrastructure to support and sustain the initiative (Fullan, 2007). An initial challenge for the school-based project leaders was to convince teachers of the relevance of the program and possible applications in their learning area. Teachers needed assurance that the professional learning would focus on practical applications, skills and resources, and not on theories difficult to align with classroom practice (Guskey, 2003). Accordingly, the project team was faced with the challenge of 'tailoring' the professional learning to each faculty, and to each staff member, given the range of literacy knowledge and skill, and varying levels of receptiveness, among teachers at the school.

A main goal of the project was to improve literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students; however, the impact of the project for Aboriginal students has been difficult to isolate, as the literacy coordinator reports:

> By going about our project the way we did, we did not really record how the project addressed the real and immediate needs of all our Aboriginal students. For example, we did not record the number of Aboriginal students in classes in which the literacy intervention has been implemented, their level of engagement in these classes, nor the provision of specific interventions for Aboriginal students. However, we could not even start to address these issues from a teaching of literacy perspective until our teachers felt more confident and able to recognise the literacy demands of their learning areas, to assess student writing and to develop teaching sequences that specifically address literacy. There can only be benefits to all students from this approach.

As part of the 'Continuation stage', at least three staff meetings per year continue to be dedicated to literacy programming to build on Aboriginal students' developing literacy capabilities across the curriculum, and targeted professional learning (e.g., *Accelerated Literacy*) is offered to teachers.

CONCLUSION

The project described above is a school-based initiative focused on *literacy across the curriculum*. It applies a social view of language that underpins the Literacy as a *General Capability* of the Australian Curriculum, with the aim of making the literacy demands of all subject areas explicit. From modest beginnings, this regional secondary school is now taking charge of developing a whole school approach to improving literacy outcomes for students in Years 7 and 8. Teachers are now expected to develop a language shared with colleagues and students for talking about the literacy demands of the learning areas so literacy knowledge and skills gained in one learning area can be applied in other learning areas. This project represents a major achievement for a secondary school community committed to improving literacy achievement and student learning outcomes in a rural and regional context.

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