

A LITERACY ENRICHMENT PROGRAM FOR SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

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There is now general agreement about the disadvantages associated with all levels of 'rural' and 'remote' education. To some extent these are being overcome by advances in distance education delivery systems which now offer more interactive learning environments; yet there is still a strong case for the effectiveness of intense, individualised face-to-face teaching and learning. The project outlined in this report originated as an attempt to integrate the professional needs of third-year Diploma of Teaching students at La Trobe U.C.N.V., Bendigo, with the curriculum needs of primary school children in an isolated rural setting. The Country Education Project, through Maureen Chiswell, a Project Officer, agreed to fund a pilot project where forty-nine Grade Five and Six primary school pupils from the Pyramid Hill area (Pyramid Hill Consolidated School and St. Patrick's School) were bussed ninety kilometres to the college for an intensive three-hour program once a week for five weeks. The program involved individualized instruction by third-year students in literacy skills related to independent study and research, and curriculum studies in Science, Computer Studies and Mathematics. This paper reports on the aims, program details, and evaluation of the literacy component of the project. Miscue analysis refers to a method for monitoring a child's oral reading of a set of text. An observational inventory is an interview schedule for noting a child's reading and writing interests. An interactive journal is a written dialogue between child and teacher, and top-level structure refers to contrasting ways text information can be organised, such as cause and effect or main idea then supporting ideas.

The program was funded for approximately \$2,000 to cover bus costs.

The aims for the project were developed collaboratively by college staff and students and the children's teachers. The major aims for each group were as follows:

College Staff:

1. To meet literacy needs of schools in the region.
2. To provide enrichment programs in literacy for participant children.
3. To provide a course which offers first-hand experience for students in decision-making in literacy programs.
4. To provide a course which offers first-hand experience for students in decision-making in literacy programs.
5. To participate as advisers in the program.

College Students:

1. To develop student skills in assessing reading and writing behaviours and devising and implementing individualized approaches to literacy.

2. To develop student skills in processes involving interacting with individual children.
3. To develop appropriate record-keeping skills in literacy learning.
4. To generate helpful knowledge of individual children's literacy programs for their classroom teachers.
5. To gain deeper understanding of theory and practice in literacy learning.

Children:

1. To develop children's literacy skills in the areas of reading and writing.
2. To develop positive attitudes towards this curriculum area and strengthen their self-image as learners.

Classroom Teachers:

1. To extend the children's literacy skills.
2. To extend skill development in the areas of research of appropriate texts, and methods of recording and reporting.
3. To develop a detailed current profile of individual students' literacy attainment levels.
4. To increase teacher knowledge of current trends in literacy development.

The Literacy Program at College

Week One

A college student was allocated to each child. Students conducted a miscue analysis and observational inventory of each child's reading interests using the guidelines proposed by Weaver (1988), Kemp (1987) and Builder (1991). An interactive journal between student and child was started and continued throughout the program.

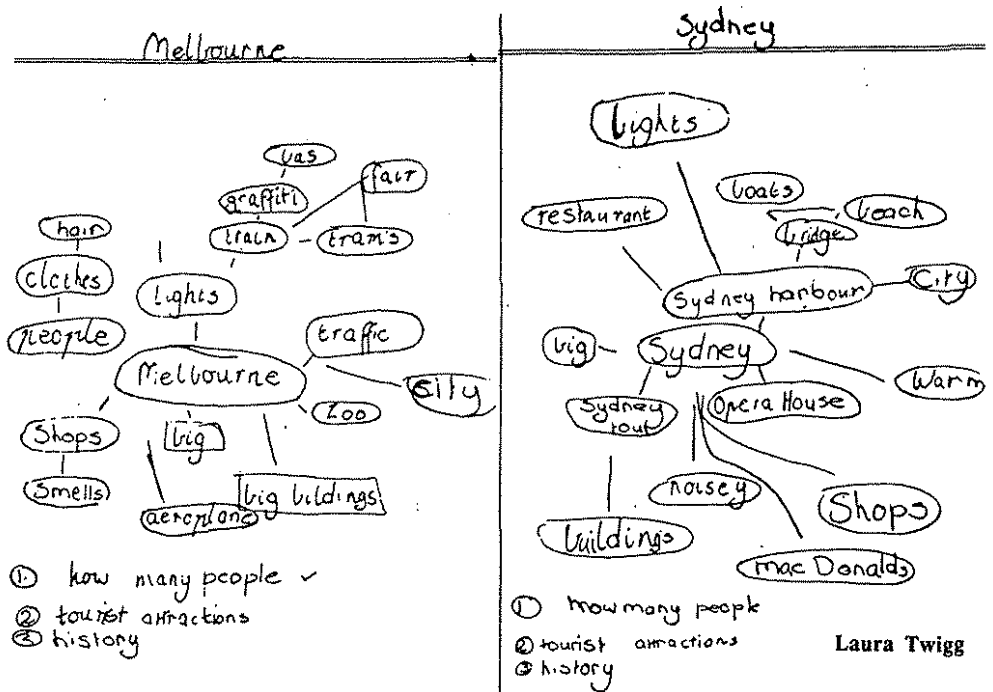
Week Two

Children were introduced to top-level structures in factual texts as ways of organizing information in a report (Bartlett, *et al*, 1988). A reading/writing task was completed on the theme of Arbor Week. Students responded to the children's journals while they were involved in an independent writing task.

Week Three

Having been introduced to various structures in factual texts, the children were asked to write a report using the main idea/supporting ideas or compare/contrast frameworks. Research topics to be studied included Countries (a classroom theme at Pyramid Hill), Health, Animals, The Body or Transport. Children were instructed to list four areas of interest within the broad theme (four countries for example) and then talk through each topic with their tutor exploring background knowledge. A topic was selected on the basis of knowledge or appeal. The children then created a graphic overview of current understandings assisted by further tutor prompts. This formed the basis of new focusing and refinement of the topic as did a consideration of reader needs (a small

group of children from their class) in terms of what readers might like to learn. Overviews were written as in the following example:



The children were asked to frame who, what, when, why and how questions. It was explained that a report should present new and interesting information. Using a grid to record sources and appropriate pages, the children practised skim reading to locate information and clarify the topic further, as in the following example:

Reference Grid.

Topic: Gold	Victoria 1834-1860	Perners All		
Sub-topics				
Ballarat	p 38	p 118		
Bendigo	p 38-39			
Castlemaine	p 38			

Topic: Gold in Bendigo	Victoria 1838-1860	Miners 411	People in Australia - the English	Bendigo, The Golden Age 1840-1860	How gold was discovered in Australia
Sub-topics					
How gold was found	p. 33-34		p. 26	p. 8	p. 16
Where gold was found	p. 33	p. 105		Map p. 20	
How the miners lived		p. 45			

Brad Carmody

The children were asked to use at least one book from the college library, but grids could also be used to take notes on books at the school, the regional library or home. Children were to note aspects of the topic which required further college resources. Journal writing continued.

Week Four

Original brainstorming notes were expanded in the light of the initial research. The children explored ways to put their writing in their own words, using paraphrasing, headings and subheadings. While the children took notes, the students responded to their journals. Students also explained to the children the importance of selection and ordering of material to link the writer's own knowledge with the book information. At school the children started to write drafts of their reports.

Week Five

The students assisted the children to edit and proofread their drafts, focusing on meeting reader needs, effective structure and layout, the selection of a title. Spelling, punctuation and grammar were also checked. The children read their reports to small groups and received feedback on their presentations.

The Children's Evaluation of the Program

Children's responses to the program were gathered through independent written feedback and student/pupil interviews. Responses focused on positive aspects of the program and improvements or recommendations for the future.

Positive aspects included children's perceptions of areas of literacy and of themselves as literacy learners. Key questions were:

What did you learn to do better?

What did you learn that you could use again on your own?

Improvements or recommendations centred on management issues and changes to the content of the program.

1. What Children Learnt to do Better

Discussion involved various areas of language including reading, writing and research skills - with one child mentioning that he learnt to 'speak clearly'.

Improvement in reading centred mainly on oral reading skills (included for the purpose of miscue analysis) with one child summing up beautifully:

'I learnt to read aloud and have a go, then self-correct myself when it was needed.'

Research skills noted included finding main ideas in paragraphs, selecting information and taking notes. Children also mentioned the grid as a useful technique for browsing for resources and scanning for information. The most important thing was that children felt that they 'learnt a lot about research by actually doing it'. Taking notes, writing a rough copy and setting out information for a final report were considered useful writing skills acquired.

Generally, comments were very favourable both in terms of their understandings of literacy areas as well as their attitudes towards tasks and perceptions of themselves as learners.

2. What Children Learnt They Could Use Again

Children thought that semantic networks as an aid to reading and understanding the 'author's message' was a useful technique. They also thought that the procedures used in selecting topics, searching for resources, collecting and collating ideas were worthwhile although they needed more time to master these. Very few children expressed opinions that they had not learnt useful things to use again.

Children felt that they gained confidence as learners in the one-to-one situation. They were not competing with others for the teacher's time. They didn't feel silly or nervous when asking or answering questions. Basically, "You could get help fast for something that you really needed without having to wait!"

Children's recommendations for the future were few - naturally, given such favourable comments. However, improvements included 'more time', with many suggesting that two hours be spent with 'their' teacher. Many had built close relationships with their teachers and suggested that at least one reciprocal visit to the school be made during the program.

An interesting suggestion noted was to alter the arrangement to include general instructions to a small group, or pairs, followed by individualized tasks. Quite a few children said they would have liked to see what others were doing with their reports and to hear what they had learnt. They had learnt about 'Egypt', 'France', 'Dinosaurs', 'Eagles' and even 'Photosynthesis' and this was worth sharing with others.

Student Teacher Evaluation of the Program.

Student teacher perceptions were assessed through written evaluations, assessment of their literacy profiles (a work requirement worth 30% of their total language education mark) and through informal interviews. Almost all student teachers found the project worthwhile for a variety of reasons:

1. '(The project) develops our ability as teachers to record and analyse the primary age children's reading and writing skills.'
2. 'It gave me the chance to try some of the methods we discussed in class.'
3. '(The project) gave us practice in diagnosing problems in children's developing literacy.'
4. 'I have developed many skills in one-to-one teaching that I will be able to use in the future.'

The student teachers found the Kemp Observational Record F (a friendly interview about the child's attitude to reading and writing) a useful 'ice-breaker' in the first lesson.

Most student teachers enjoyed the opportunity to use the two types of miscue analysis. However, some students questioned the use of a miscue analysis in the first lesson, when establishing rapport was important. It was felt that the activity made children nervous, as they were required to read aloud whilst being formally observed and recorded by the student teachers. Many suggested that the miscue analysis be taken during the second and subsequent lessons.

The teaching of research techniques to be used in developing a project was also considered successful especially when the children were given opportunities to work on their projects in between visits to the college. Lack of time to complete the project, lack of resources on chosen topics, and children forgetting to bring projects were identified as problems. Children forgetting to either write in or bring journals was also a problem for some student teachers. Others found the dialogue journal a useful activity for observing children's unaided writing and establishing friendships. Some student teachers have continued contact with children, mainly through letter writing.

The major criticism of the project from the student teachers was the length of the project. Many student teachers declared feelings of frustration and disappointment that activities were not fully explored due to time constraints, exacerbated by a public holiday and student absences. All student teachers recommended that the project be extended, possibly to eight to ten weeks:

'If the project was over a longer period of time, it may have benefitted us more. There were a few too many interruptions such as the long weekend. I don't believe that five weeks for one hour a week is long enough time to achieve our aims.'

Despite this prevalent criticism, the literacy profiles of the children submitted by student teachers were generally of a high standard. The profiles indicated that a great deal of learning had occurred as student teachers identified strengths and weaknesses of children, planned an individualized program and became competent users of various teaching and assessment strategies studied at college.

Classroom Teachers' Evaluation of the Program

Classroom teachers indicated their assessment of the project through detailed written reports. The benefits listed include the opportunity for each child to relate to another adult on a one-to-one basis and the improvement in children's study skills.

'I notice a considerable improvement in the development of literacy skills and observed students (children) applying the top-level structuring and author's plan for work within the classroom. Their ability to read or scan text to locate key words, draw concept maps and record their findings has increased. Even some of the slower workers have now

gained the strategies to apply in their research work. They are more efficient, and therefore produce a greater volume of quality work.'

From a personal viewpoint, one teacher reported:

'From my observation of the work the students were understanding, I have gained a greater understanding of strategies children can use to research, record and report information. I have applied these strategies within the classroom and have found them very effective.'

Teachers also indicated that the project 'ended abruptly' and recommended that this worthwhile project be extended.

Parental Evaluation of the Program

Parents' responses were gathered through face-to-face interaction both before and after the program, and through written questionnaires. The information gathering process attempted to assess the strengths and positive gains of the program as well as determine the areas that needed modification for future programs.

Parent reactions are summarized under their perception of learning gains (i.e. cognitive outcomes), cultural enhancement and interpersonal development.

1. Parents were highly supportive of the program in terms of learning outcomes. There was a 100% response to the invitation for their children to take part. There was a general perception that the children learnt a considerable amount organizing projects and thematic units. In particular parents commented on the value of the opportunity to work on a one-to-one basis with a student teacher.
2. There was an enthusiastic response to a cultural enhancement outcome of the program. Parents felt that children gained from being able to work in a different learning environment. Most noted that children looked forward to the visits to the university college and being able to meet new people involved in education at a different level.
3. A particular noteworthy response was the appreciation of the strong rapport established between children and their tutors (the Third-year students). Some parents commented on the positive and enthusiastic learning outcomes of the program in terms of the effective relationship established, which have continued through exchanges of letters.

In general parents felt that the program needed to be at least ten weeks duration to enable the positive gains to be consolidated. Some felt that their children were only just beginning to settle down to the routine of a different learning environment when the program came to a close. Some also felt that there needed to be a better co-ordination between the staff at the school and the lecturers at the college during the planning phase in order to maximise benefits. On the whole, however, parents were very happy with the overall program and its benefits for their children.

Findings

Most participants considered the program too brief to consolidate all the skills developed in the five weeks, yet the following key indicators suggest some substantial gains for students, children and staff:

1. College students were able to modify research procedures to adjust to individual needs, and there were lively exchanges in the dialogue journals. Students recognised the necessity of structural indicators in literacy learning and their learning logs demonstrated sound reflections on theoretical and practical issues. They were able to create a sound database of individual reports on reading, writing, research skills, miscue analysis as well as a miscue graph, which was given to the children's teachers.
2. The children in most cases believed they had learnt a range of effective research skills which could be applied to new tasks, a view supported by their teachers' observations and classroom activities back at school.
3. College staff have been invited to participate in a follow-up in-service program at the school to consolidate the literacy gains of the project. The staff consider that the enthusiasm of participant teachers, students and children indicates that the pilot program has met the perceived needs and expectations of each group. The project has generated valuable data on effective individualized intensive instruction on independent reading, report-writing and research skills.

Concluding Discussion

It is clear that there have been many positive learning outcomes from this pilot project. Initial aims have been met, especially in the areas of increased skills for students and participant children. The students have gained practical knowledge in how to adjust their teaching to meet individual literacy needs, and the children have developed greater confidence and skills in working on independent projects. The use of overviews and grids were effective strategies that enabled the children to organise and focus information. However, teachers, parents and College staff have perceived a strong need for the program to be extended to strengthen the children's improved skills in reading and writing and to enable transfer of these skills to new tasks.

Any future program of this kind would need to be extended to at least eight weeks to consolidate gains for participants. These gains would be further enhanced by College staff, and where practicable, College students, conducting follow-up programs in the schools to build on the skills developed. This could take the form of in-service days or placement of some students in the participant schools during a subsequent teaching practice round. The success of this pilot project suggests that other small rural schools a similar distance from the College could benefit from involvement of a program of this type. Any extended version of this literacy program would be improved by the inclusion of photocopies of texts used for miscue analysis, summary sheets showing types of errors, examples of students' writing, and the use of the BRAT Reading Chart.

References:

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