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Feature

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A professional development journey and its link to student success

When junior literacy achievement results weren't looking too good, Titahi Bay School decided to do something about it. School principal KERRY DELANEY reflects on their learning journey.

At the start of 2010 the teachers in the junior syndicate at Titahi Bay School began a learning journey.

In 2008 and 2009, we found that our new entrant children were not achieving the literacy results we expected or wanted.

As a team we thought about [reading educator researcher] Marie Clay's comment that if children are apparently unable to learn, we should assume that we have not found the right way to teach them.

We spent a lot of time in our team meetings discussing what is effective practice and sharing ideas and strategies. However, this still didn't have the impact we wanted.

In term 3, 2009, we invited literacy facilitator Joy Allcock to help us examine these issues. We looked at our children's results, at their writing books, and at our planning and expectations. We analysed in detail what might be happening and where the gaps might be. As a result of our discussion, we decided that we needed to know more about our teachers' knowledge of literacy acquisition.

We also began a self-review, using our student assessment results. We decided to critique our teaching programmes to ask ourselves what we were teaching and why. We wanted to know why we were using particular resources and programmes and how effective they were.

Getting the ball rolling

The starting point for our professional development (PLD) in 2010 was to use the climate of trust and collegiality we had established during 2009 to push ourselves out of our comfort zones. We needed to find the gaps in our knowledge and skills, and through a supportive but challenging process of PLD, bring about a shift in our knowledge and teaching practice.



We had buy-in from all teachers and we had a no shame-no blame focus for finding out what we knew and didn't know.

All the teachers completed a literacy questionnaire put together by Joy, and our results varied from 29 per cent to 79 per cent.

Some of us found it hard to count the correct number of sounds in words and we discovered that research by Carreker et al in 2010 has shown that this is a common difficulty for many teachers.

We decided that if learning to blend and segment sounds in words was critical for our students' success, we had to be able to do this accurately ourselves.

The key areas of need that the literacy questionnaire identified became a focus of discussion and learning at our team meetings. We helped each other learn the things we needed to understand and do.

We decided to focus on writing in 2010, and we used the Literacy Learning Progressions (Ministry of Education, 2010) to highlight the critical areas for teaching writing in the first three years of school.

Joy ran a PLD day with us at the start of 2010, and in term 2, she modelled some lessons with students across our junior school.

These lessons were recorded, and each teacher took the videos home to view. The key learning points were discussed at our team meetings. We then invited Joy back to observe and give feedback as each teacher ran a lesson. These lessons were also recorded and we watched each other teaching and gave each other feedback.

There has been a buzz of excitement in the staffroom and in our team meetings as we've shared ideas and experiences.

We noticed shifts in our students' writing skills and strategies right from the start – the new entrants in particular were really getting into it.

Although the expectations for writing in the Literacy Learning Progressions vary across the years, we decided to begin by assessing the expectations outlined in 'after one year at school' to ensure all students in the junior school were achieving the basics.

We focused our assessments on two specific areas from the Literacy Learning Progressions because we felt these were absolutely essential for writing:

Students will "recognise and write most sounds of English in at least one appropriate way",

Students will "apply sound-letter relationships in order to write words they want to use", "use their developing phonemic awareness to aurally segment words into syllables ... and one-syllable words into individual phonemes".

2010 results

We used the Sound to Letter and the Pseudoword Spelling assessments from Switch on to Spelling by Joy Allcock.

We decided that if students achieved between 35 and 42 out of 42 in the Sound to Letter test, they met the Literacy Learning Progressions' expectation of being able to write most of the sounds of English in at least one appropriate way.

We were shocked to discover that about 60 per cent of our Year 2 and 3 students were unable to write at least 35 sounds of English.

This became a focus of our daily instruction – teaching to the gaps that the assessment had identified.

The effects of this explicit instruction were soon evident. Our Year 2 and 3 students quickly learned to write most of the sounds of English, but more importantly, so did our Year 1 students.

In fact, our Year 1 students achieved far better results after one year at school than those achieved by our Year 2 and 3 students at the start of 2010.

Sound to Letter Test – percentage of students achieving 35+ out of 42 (students who completed both tests)

	Term 1 2010	Term 4 2010
Year 1	4.9%	73%
Year 2	37%	82%
Year 3	40.54%	97%

The number of students achieving a score of less than 20/42 also dropped dramatically from term 1 to term 4.

Only 13.2 per cent of Year 1 students scored less than 20 by the end of 2010. Forty-six point three per cent of Year 2 students achieved less than 20 at the start of 2010, but this dropped to 10.52 per cent by the end of the year.

Of the Year 3 students, 29.72 per cent achieved below 20 at the start of 2010, and this dropped to 5 per cent by the end of the year.

The Pseudoword Spelling test measures students’ ability to record the sounds in words they do not yet know how to spell.

Once again, our Year 1 students’ results show what is possible to achieve in a short space of time through explicit teaching.

Pseudoword Spelling Test – average out of 90 by Year level (students who completed both tests)

Year level	Term 1*, 2010 Average / 90	Term 4, 2010 Average / 90	Effect Size shift (Greater than .4 is significant)
Year 1 *	40.18	66.65	1.48
Year 2	51.24	70.80	1.31
Year 3	61.58	72.38	0.69

** Year 1 students were initially tested at the end of term 2 after at least one term at school.*

We redid the teacher questionnaire at a syndicate meeting at the start of term 4. As was the case when we first completed this, no warning was given.

Each teacher was given their own results, but everyone chose to share them with each other, such is the climate of trust we have developed together.

As someone said, it is not about the results but how far we have each moved. The professional learning we undertook in 2010 significantly increased our own knowledge, and we believe this was a key to our students’ progress.

2011 and 2012 results

We have continued to track the results of our students in the junior school and to fine-tune our assessment criteria and classroom instruction.

At the end of 2010, we raised our expectations across the year levels after discovering that our students were capable of more than we had thought possible.

The marking criteria for the Pseudoword test now means Year 1 students receive a point for every sound they record appropriately in each word, but Year 2 and 3 students must record each sound correctly to receive a point (i.e. spell long vowels correctly, use a 'ck' correctly, choose the correct spelling for sounds in different positions in words, and so forth).

The cohorts of students varied from year to year as children left the school and new children arrived.

Our new entrant intake in 2012 was almost double that of previous years, but the results achieved between 2011 and 2012 are consistent.

In 2011 and 2012, we also had new teachers in the junior school who had to up-skill themselves as they went along.

Sound to Letter Test – percentage of students achieving 35+ out of 42 (students who completed both tests)

	2010		2011		2012	
	End of Term One	End of Year	Beginning of Year	End of Year	Beginning of Year	End of Year
Year 1	4.9%	73%	0%	61%	11.9%	62%
Year 2	37%	82%	48%	96%	66%	91.4%
Year 3	40.5%	97%	91.4%	98.1%	86%	93%

Pseudoword Spelling Test – average out of 90 by Year level (students who completed both tests)

	2010		2011		2012	
	End of Term One	End of Year	Beginning of Year	End of Year	Beginning of Year	End of Year
Year 1	40.18	66.65	16.84	64.84	38.33	67.15
Year 2	51.24	70.80	62.22	76.20	64.65	74.17
Year 3	61.58	72.38	68.59	78.78	71.17	76.91

longitudinal study in 2007 by Carreker et al examined the effects of Language Enrichment (LE) instruction (explicit instruction that emphasised phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, sound-symbol correspondences, decoding strategies, common letter and orthographic spelling patterns, morphology, vocabulary development, oral listening skills, and writing skills) on future reading success.

They found that students who had been engaged in LE instruction were advantaged for reading growth from third to fifth grades over students who did not have this kind of instruction.

Titahi Bay School introduced this kind of instruction in 2010. The results achieved by the Year 3 and 4 students in 2012 (who were Year 1 and 2 students in 2010) have far exceeded results achieved at the school before.

Percentage of students achieving at or above National Standards in 2012

	Writing	Reading
Year 3 (Year 1, 2010)*	79%	91%
Year 4 (Year 2, 2010)*	85%	89%
Year 5 (Year 3, 2010)*	62%	71%
Year 6	49%	60%

* Students who received explicit LE instruction



Looking back

In 2010 we introduced specific assessments that highlighted our own and our students' learning needs, and we provided explicit instruction that catered to these needs.

From 2010 on, our Year 1 students have consistently achieved higher results in these assessments than the 2010 Year 2 and 3 cohorts who had not been taught this way.

Our change in teaching practice has resulted in significantly higher results in reading and writing at Year 3 and 4 for the students who received this instruction in their first two years at school.

The Carreker et al study also showed that students who have already fallen behind by Year 3 could not catch up with their peers, even if this type of instruction is introduced at Year 3 or above. What we do in the first two years is critical to our

students' future success.

Our assessment results over the past three years have shown us what is possible to achieve through increasing our own understanding of the skills and knowledge students need, careful assessment and evaluation, and explicit teaching to address needs.

We discovered that students can achieve much more than we thought possible in their first year at school.

If our students can achieve such great results after only a year at school, they will be capable of much more in the future.