Turning a vision into reality

Using literacy to lift a community’s future prospects

The West Coast of New Zealand’s South Island has a vibrant personality, a wild history and a need to build a viable economic future.

When Development West Coast identified literacy as key for future economic growth, it asked The University of Auckland to help improve literacy levels in primary schools on the Coast. This was part of the Trust’s vision to become a wealthy, growing, sustainable and vibrant region.

Their goal was very clear – to raise literacy in early childhood (before the age of 5) and to improve reading and writing in the first year at school (age 5), at their first reading milestone (age 6), and at years 5-8 (ages 8-12).

“Because the communities on the Coast are spread far and wide, we had to customize a solution that would meet their unique needs. This solution needed to be in collaboration with teachers because we knew that a large percent of the variability in literacy achievement is linked to what teachers do,” says Dr Mei Kuin Lai, Associate Director at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre at The University of Auckland.

Over the past two years, the Woolf Fisher team and Development West Coast have worked with 33 primary schools and early childhood centres across the Coast.

“When we began, the baseline research showed that reading and writing levels for Coast children were around the national average. Now, two years on we have 41% of our students reading at high or very high levels. This is 18% more than you would expect nationally.” says Dr Lai.

So, what did this collaborative team do to deliver such a result?

“The challenge was to raise achievement from already high levels. We helped teachers identify students’ strengths and weaknesses and adapt their teaching accordingly. We encouraged teachers to work with us and each other in professional learning communities so that we could learn from each other. We used a purpose-built, web-based platform for teachers and educators to cover the large geographic region. The literacy programme also has one other major feature – it is designed to be sustainable across time and to be effective for different teachers and students.”

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The need to strengthen both responsiveness and outcomes for New Zealand’s diverse student population.

Dr Mei Kuin Lai

Dr Lai is Associate Director at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre at The University of Auckland. The Centre’s primary objective is to promote research-based educational interventions with children/students, teachers, communities and colleagues with a particular emphasis on Maori and Pacific Island children’s educational achievement. Dr Lai specialises in practitioner research using problem-based methodology and the sustainability of interventions. She has published extensively and has presented at both national and international conferences.

The challenges

• Lifting literacy levels from already high baseline levels. Doing so for an entire geographic area to benefit the whole community and being able to quantify the results
• The need for collaboration across the breadth of the community
• Entering into partnerships and relationships that would not add to schools’ existing burdens

Delivery

• Bypassing off-the-shelf solutions in favour of developing a professional learning community using a collaborative problem-solving approach
• A three-phase programme of quantitative and qualitative methods, including data collection, classroom observation and school cluster structures
• Development of a sustainable model

Benefits

• Significantly improved literacy in both reading and writing
• Improved access and equity in the delivery of education opportunities
• Programmes that target literacy at key transition points in a child’s education pathway

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