Tackling the tail of literacy

New Zealand students typically perform very well in reading, but there is a wide variation in performance and underachievement of particular groups. This tail of achievement is one of the largest in the OECD and is a pattern that has remained stable over a number of years. And, writing performance lags behind that of reading.

The Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP) was designed to achieve the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s strategic goals of raising student achievement and reducing disparity by focusing on quality teaching of reading and writing.

Learning Media Limited, the holder of the contract, commissioned The University of Auckland to research and provide evidence to inform, in an ongoing way, the literacy professional development in a project, already delivered to nearly 300 schools in three cohorts over 2004-2007.

“Teaching is the greatest system influence so teachers must have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and skills and to see schools as a place to both teach and learn,” says Judy Parr, Associate Professor in Arts, Languages and Literacies at the University’s Faculty of Education.

The project focused on five evidence-informed outcomes – student achievement, teacher content knowledge, transfer of understanding of literacy pedagogy to practice, effectively led professional learning communities and effective facilitation.

“We chose the evidence-informed approach to lever change, employing ongoing monitoring, feedback and adjustment based on evidence, with efforts to change practice implemented with support,” says Judy Parr.

While the outcomes were to be judged ultimately by student achievement progress, the use of the principles of inquiry at multiple levels of the project required substantive changes in how teachers, leaders, facilitators and policy makers learn.

“Ongoing professional learning is needed because ever-changing demographics and knowledge bases require teachers to access current evidence about how best to meet student learning needs.”

Judy Parr says identifying what teachers know and need to know in terms of meeting their students’ literacy learning needs and how best they might acquire this knowledge is key to future education decision making at both policy and practice levels.

“We’ve identified factors that enable schools to promote sustainable change beyond the implementation phase. We can offer tools that help teachers to find out about their students’ learning. We know that even simple actions like asking students about their learning, provides evidence that teachers can use immediately to adjust their practice,” says Judy Parr.

Together with the results of an Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis on teacher learning and development, also conducted by the University, the research findings from this project will be added to the Ministry of Education’s framework to guide policy and practice for teacher learning and development.
The need to raise student achievement and reducing disparity by focusing on quality teaching.

Associate Professor Judy Parr

Judy Parr joined the School of Education at The University of Auckland in 1990 after a successful teaching career at both school and tertiary sector level in Australia and New Zealand. Her research and teaching interests lie in developmental or educational psychology and particularly concern literacy with an emphasis on writing and the interface between literacy and technology. Recent research projects include an evaluation of the FarNet Digital Opportunities Project; effective practice in use of readymade literacy materials in classrooms; and assessment tools for teaching and learning in writing (asTTle). Her current research centres on literacy teaching and learning and building the capacity of teachers and schools to evaluate and adjust their practice.

The challenges

- The need to enhance the content and pedagogical content knowledge of educators at different levels of the system in order to promote enhanced practice that improves student achievement in literacy
- Changing to a culture where evidence is routinely used to establish need and inform learning at multiple levels
- Understanding the complexities of sustaining improvements

Delivery

- School-based, job-embedded model of professional development involving expert facilitators working with individual schools
- Literacy leaders at schools to provide the interface to the school leadership team; build capacity of both to lead change

Benefits

- Measurable success in raising student achievement in writing and reading
- Literacy leaders in schools progressively upskilled to become a resource and leader in an ongoing professional learning community
- Results over a two-year period that exceed averages for similar projects across the world

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