Language, learning and literacy in the early years

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Summary

Language, Learning and Literacy (L3) is an effective research-based literacy program from New South Wales. It aims at complementing the daily literacy program, without withdrawal, and increasing opportunities for students with diverse learning needs to achieve typical outcomes. L3 supports the development of informed, systematic, explicit instruction based on data to target reading and writing. It aims to reduce the number of year 1 students needing intensive and resource-demanding intervention programs such as Reading Recovery.

Teachers undertake professional learning under a qualified trainer to develop literacy learning plans and targeted teaching that reflects individual student learning needs, and is based on ongoing data collection. They learn techniques for planning and delivering instruction to small groups and to the whole class. Trainers support teachers' developing pedagogies by giving feedback and reflecting collaboratively, using regular classroom observations.

My teaching is much more refined, reflective and explicit as a result. (Teacher)

Target student group

Kindergarten (foundation) students, year 1 and 2 students and classroom teachers were the target group for metropolitan, regional and rural schools participating in this program. Schools could also choose to focus on kindergarten or Stage 1 (years 1 and 2) as part of this program. (Use of 'kindergarten' in this report refers to foundation.)

Schools were encouraged to participate where they were identified as enrolling students from communities with low socio-economic status (low SES).

Method

The NSW Best Start Kindergarten Assessment on entry to school data illustrated that, while the vast majority of children were off to a good start in reading, writing and counting, a significant number of students in particular demographic groups recorded the lowest possible level (level 0) on every aspect of literacy assessed.

The L3 program recognised that the quality of children's transition into literacy is a major predictor of their later academic achievement and – by quickly and efficiently addressing

initial disparities in language, reading and writing – the need for targeted programs such as Reading Recovery can be significantly reduced.

L3 centres on quality professional learning, and extended in-class support for teachers by highly qualified trainers.

Teachers participate in 12 half-day professional learning sessions, facilitated by a qualified trainer. They also participate in four half-day collegial visits involving classroom observation and discussion with a trainer and their peers.

The program is implemented in the classroom over a year. Teachers learn research-based strategies related to early language, learning and literacy acquisition. They build on and develop these strategies – and further techniques – for the explicit and systematic teaching and learning of literacy in guided, modelled and independent teaching and learning.

Knowledge and skills about planning for individualised literacy learning aligned to the NSW Literacy Continuum, English syllabus and NSW Quality Teaching model are developed through L3. Every five weeks (mid-term and end of term), the teachers gather a range of data from in-class observation, discussion and literacy artefacts for analysis. They use the data to refine teaching practice and inform the next steps in learning.

Qualified trainers support the teachers in-class through lesson observation, peer reflection, shared analysis, and monitoring of student performance and student learning plans.

> As a trainer, I was very impressed with the high level of talk among the participants in my training groups. Initially it was [at a] very low level, as they did not have the understanding or the theory that underpin the L3 program. By the end of the training sessions, it was evident that most of the participants had a thorough knowledge of the rationales for each of the L3 components. (Trainer)

Goals for student success in text reading, writing vocabulary and hearing and recording sounds are set by teachers – with the support of trainers – every five weeks.

Overall program goals for text reading and writing vocabulary are set for schools and teachers participating in L3.

The overall L3 program goals for text reading are scored as the highest level of continuous text a student is able to read as a result of instruction.

The program goals are:

- 50 per cent of all students reading at Level 9 or higher (ie well beyond minimum end-of-year expectations for kindergarten)
- 20 per cent only of all students reading at Level 5 or less (ie at or below minimum end-of-year expectations for kindergarten).

Writing vocabulary is scored as the number of high-frequency words a student can write independently in ten minutes.

The program goals are:

- 50 per cent of all students writing 24 words or more (ie well beyond minimum end-of-year expectations for kindergarten)
- 20 per cent only of all students writing 5 words or more (ie at or below minimum end-of-year expectations for kindergarten)

A combination of school, state and federal government funding supports the L3 program.

In 2007 and 2009, L3 was funded as part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program. In 2012, schools committed teacher relief to attend training. Schools may also need to budget for additional resources to support implementing L3 in the classroom, such as quality literacy texts. State funding currently covers the cost of trainers and training/operational expenses, including materials.

Results

The L3 program has been implemented in a large number of schools since 2007. In 2010, L3 teachers in 106 schools successfully implemented literacy programs using L3 strategies for 288 kindergarten students. In 2011, 333 schools participated in this program. In 2012, 456 schools took part, as the program was extended to years 1 and 2.
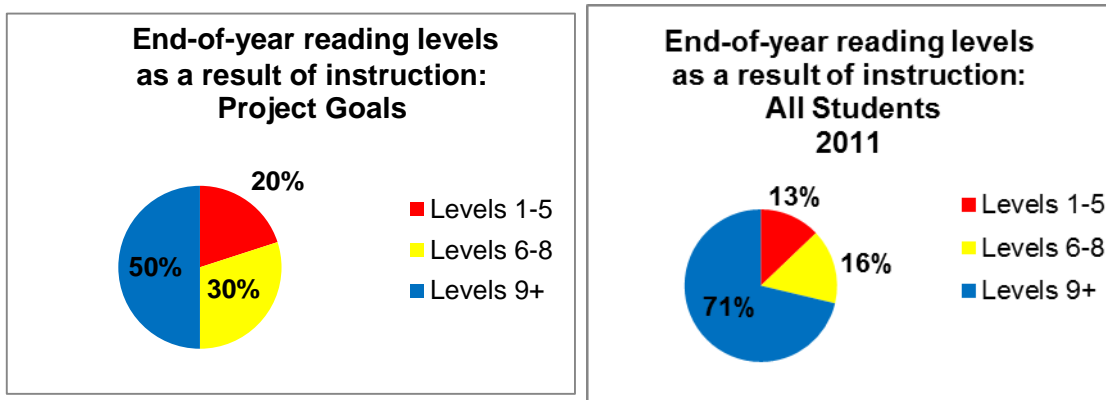
General conclusions about the effects and success of the L3 program include:

- schools and teachers having a greater common understanding of early literacy acquisition
- teachers consistently using data to inform effective teaching practice, and to cater for the individual needs of each student
- networks of schools continuing professional dialogue
- regional trainers' collegiality supporting ongoing implementation and learning.

Students' improvement as a result of the program was measured using end-of-year data gathered from the previous year's cohort of students at each school, to enable a comparison of progress over a school year. The NSW Literacy continuum is used to track this progress.

The overall L3 program goals for reading were achieved, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

End-of-year reading levels as a result of instruction: Project Goals

20%
50%
30%
- Levels 1-5
- Levels 6-8
- Levels 9+

End-of-year reading levels as a result of instruction: All Students 2011

13%
16%
71%
- Levels 1-5
- Levels 6-8
- Levels 9+

Figure 1: Project goals for end-of-year reading levels
DETAILED DESCRIPTION FOR FIGURE 1
A pie chart shows the project goals for end of year reading levels as a result of instruction are 20% at reading levels 1 to 5, 30% at reading levels 6 to 8, and 50% at reading levels 9+.

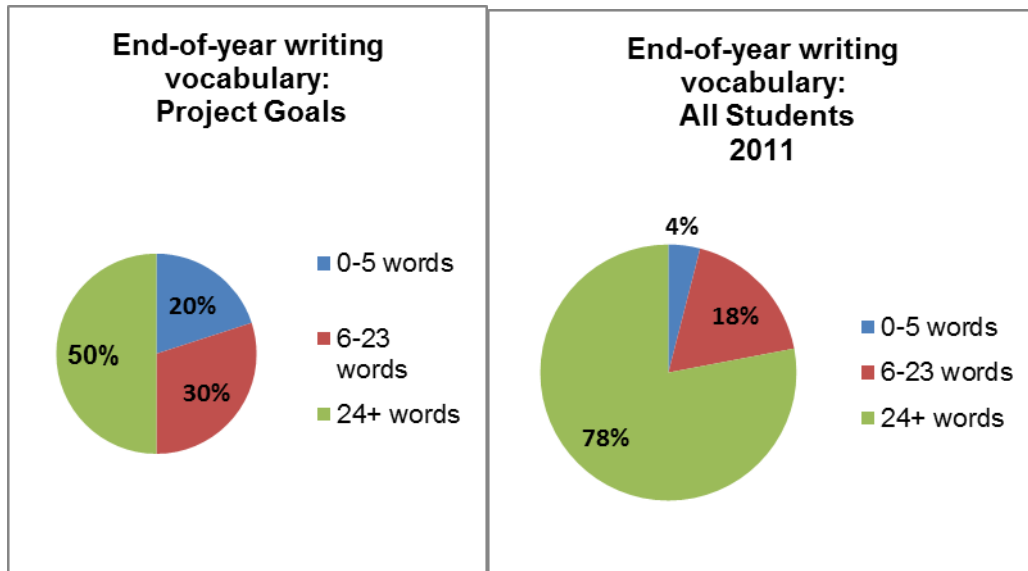**Figure 2: End-of-year reading levels after L3 program**
DETAILED DESCRIPTION FOR FIGURE 2
A pie chart shows the end of year reading levels achieved for all students as a result of instruction are 13% at reading levels 1 to 5, 16% at reading levels 6 to 8, and 71% at reading levels 9+.

The overall L3 program goals for writing vocabulary were achieved, surpassing expectations, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3: Project goals for end-of-year writing vocabulary
DETAILED DESCRIPTION FOR FIGURE 3
A pie chart shows the project goals for end of year writing vocabulary levels as a result of instruction are 20% at 0 to 5 words, 30% at 6 to 23 words, and 50% at 24+ words.

Figure 4: End-of-year writing vocabulary after L3
DETAILED DESCRIPTION FOR FIGURE 3
A pie chart shows the project goals for end of year writing vocabulary levels achieved for all students as a result of instruction are 4% at 0 to 5 words, 18% at 6 to 23 words, and 78% at 24+ words.

A survey conducted with trainers at the end of semester 1 and semester 2 indicated that, over the year, they had developed a more confident view of their own expertise.

A whole-of-school team approach that included parent and community was identified as a critical element for the success of the L3 program. Schools with active and direct support from the school leadership team experienced greater gains.

While the focus of this program was on the early years of schooling, teachers worked in stage teams with specialised trainers and were able to share their expertise.

Schools found that setting and revisiting students' literacy learning goals on a regular basis resulted in significant shifts in literacy learning, including a real reduction in the number of students requiring (and severity of need for) more intensive and resource-demanding intervention programs.

Teachers participated in evaluations of the professional learning support. It was evident that the model of face-to-face professional learning and implementation support made it possible to achieve higher reading and writing levels among students in all school settings.

Western NSW: a case study

The western NSW region was new to L3 in 2011. The region nominated eight Literacy and Numeracy Leaders to train 80 teachers in 27 schools. The program reached 1,418 students.

Trainers submitted end-of-year text reading levels in 2010 as a comparative basis for measuring growth in their own teaching at the end of 2011. The data supplied indicated statistically significant improvements in students' text reading levels between 2010 and 2011 in all eight schools involved.

Next steps

Teachers identified that the ongoing training over a year – coupled with in-class support – was critical to develop and refine their understanding of literacy acquisition, and build their knowledge of early literacy practice to better meet the needs of all students.

Ongoing implementation support is being offered in the second year of training for teachers.

Trainers' feedback indicated that a significant way to strengthen the L3 program is to focus on building strong relationships with school leadership teams. Regular meetings to communicate essential information, problem-solve and advocate for active support helps teams focus on their goals, and promotes consistency of approach using a clear description of each school's literacy program: the values, beliefs and theoretical underpinnings that led to the instructional practices and assessment choices.

Lessons learned

Adequate resourcing to support students' learning in kindergarten and their subsequent needs in year 1 will be a challenge for schools and regions implementing the L3 program.

A further challenge for the ongoing success of the L3 program will be continuing the momentum of change with large groups of ongoing L3 teachers, and maintaining the integrity of implementation with new L3 teachers and new student cohorts.

Schools need to acknowledge that the training and subsequent implementation of the program may require the team to revisit their beliefs, understandings and expectations of student literacy learning in their community, as well as how they measure, monitor and analyse student growth in literacy.

Research base

L3 was informed by a trial project initially led by Dr Gwynneth Phillips from Auckland University. The program utilised research on New Zealand's First Chance program, as reported in *Picking up the Pace: Effective literacy intervention for accelerated progress over the transition into decile 1 schools*.

This program concurs with current research identifying that the quality of children's transition into literacy is a major predictor of their later academic achievement. Evidence indicates that a significant number of children on entry to school cannot quickly or efficiently process all the linguistic information needed to interact appropriately with teachers, peers and others (Barrett & Hammond 2008; Catts & Kamhi 2005).

Evidence has been presented that low-SES background has been identified as a significant risk factor in terms of children's' development of language and social proficiency (Boetsch, Green & Pennington 1996; Snow & Powell 2008). However, there is also a growing belief that appropriate early language and learning experiences can act as a protective factor that promotes the cognitive and social development of young children (Cashmore 2001; Elias, Hay, Homel & Frieberg 2006; Hawkins & Catalono 1992; Paul 2007).

The L3 program targets schools identified as low-SES areas. Teachers are guided to use the Best Start data, observations and artefacts as a starting point to determine what early language and learning experiences the student has had to support their early literacy development.

This program draws upon early literacy research including the work of Clay (2001), Phillip, McNaughton & MacDonald (2002, 2004) and Timperley et al. (2006) in developing the professional learning and coaching methodologies, strategies and techniques.

Further reading and links

Clay, M 2002, *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*, 2nd edn, Heinemann, Auckland.

Hay, I & Fielding-Barnsley, R 2009, 'Competencies that underpin children's transition into early literacy', *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, no. 2, June.

Phillips et al. 2002, 'Picking up the Pace: Effective literacy intervention for accelerated progress over the transition into decile 1 schools', *Education Counts*, Ministry of Education, New Zealand, www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/maori/english-medium-education/4971 .

Phillips et al. 2004, 'Managing the Mismatch: Enhancing Early Literacy Progress for Children with Diverse Language and Cultural Identities in Mainstream Urban Schools in New Zealand', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 96. no. 2, pp. 300–321.

Timperley, H et al. 2007, 'Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)', *Education Counts*, Ministry of Education, New Zealand.

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