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Characteristics of an effective literacy strategy

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This paper argues that new national literacy goals can be met only if schools pursue a whole-school, comprehensive strategy that attends to all aspects of the school relevant to ensuring high standards. A nine-element design for school improvement is presented and illustrated with reference to the Early Literacy Research Project and results for the first two years of this project.

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The literacy challenge

There are good reasons for the current national focus on improving literacy outcomes. The benefits to the individual and to society of high literacy standards are well documented. Moreover, literacy is the key to success across the curriculum. While the majority of students quickly become proficient readers and writers, a significant proportion fail to do so and become 'at risk' of experiencing ongoing failure at school, dead-end jobs and restricted opportunities in later life.

Just how many students fail to make satisfactory progress is not clear. The results of the National School English Literacy Survey (ACER 1997) indicated that around 30 per cent of students in Australian primary schools failed to reach draft minimum or 'benchmark' standards in reading and writing. While there was considerable controversy about whether the draft standards were appropriate, there was no denying the major finding of the survey, which was the identification of the existence of a 'learning gap' of at least five years of schooling between the top and bottom ten per cent of students in each of the Year 3 and Year 5 samples.

This was also a finding of the Victorian Quality Schools Project (VQSP), conducted over the period 1992-94 by the Centre for Applied Educational Research at The University of Melbourne. Both the national survey results and the VQSP results confirm that by as early as Year 3 the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' is already very wide, if not unbridgeable. By Year 10, students at the 10th percentile in reading had progressed no further than the level of students at the 50th percentile in Year 3 (Hill 1995). This learning gap is of serious concern in a society that values equity and a 'fair go' for all.

Within Australia, there is now a major push to overcome these problems. There is agreement by all ministers to a national goal, **that every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years** (recognising that a very small percentage of students suffer from severe educational disabilities). What this means for schools in receipt of public funds is that they will increasingly be accountable for the effective use of these funds in ensuring that all students meet the agreed standards, accepting always that there is a very small proportion of students (around two per cent) with cognitive impairments and other disabilities that are unlikely to do so, despite our best efforts.

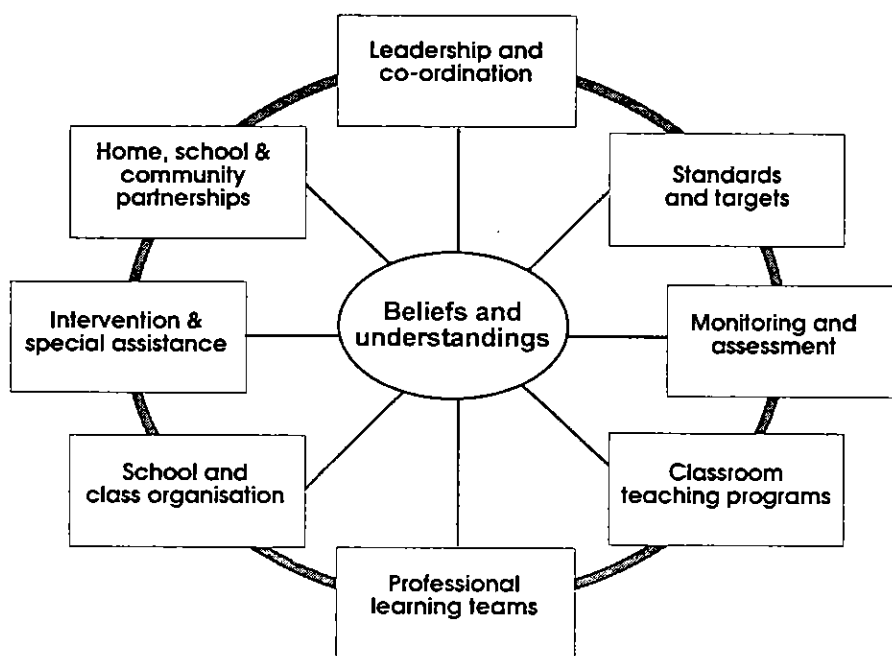
Setting national goals is commendable, but are they realistic and can they be achieved? Or are schools being saddled with impossible expectations and are they being 'set up' for inevitable failure? Can schools really be expected to solve what many would regard as essentially social and economic problems within our society rather than educational problems?

There have been many reform efforts in the past that have attempted to improve significantly literacy standards but the track record of these efforts is not impressive (Sarason 1990). It has rarely been possible to improve student learning in a sustained way across more than a handful of schools at any one time. The research literature also shows that schools have a narrow 'window of opportunity' to make a difference. Very little evidence exists for the success of programs designed to correct reading problems beyond the second year of schooling (Kennedy, Birman, and Demaline, 1986). Students who fail to make progress in literacy during the first two years of school rarely catch up with their peers and are at risk of becoming low achievers who are alienated from school and who drop out of education at the earliest opportunity.

A design approach to improvement

Over the past two-and-a-half years, we have been engaged in a large-scale longitudinal study (the Early Literacy Research Project) to develop and implement a design for bringing about dramatic improvements in early literacy outcomes. As a result of this involvement we can assert that much can be done to narrow the learning gap and to ensure that (almost) all students achieve high literacy standards. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of what we see as the key characteristics of an effective early literacy strategy. (For a more extended treatment, see Hill and Crévola 1997.) These characteristics, or 'design elements' as we call them, are summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Design elements of a general model of school improvement



Design elements

Beliefs and understandings

The literature on school effectiveness has consistently drawn attention to high expectations as a characteristic of effective schools (Mortimore et al 1988; Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore 1994; Scheerens, 1992). Unless teachers believe they can make a difference and have a commitment to do so, the impact of the other elements is seriously diminished. Therefore, the starting point of the design is a belief in the capacity of all students to make progress, given sufficient time and support. Recent research in the field of cognitive science has confirmed that almost all students can engage in higher-order learning given the right conditions (see especially Odden 1995). This belief needs to be supported by teachers who have a clear understanding of how students learn, a strong theoretical base that enables them to articulate what they do and why, and a relentless determination to succeed.

At the commencement of the Early Literacy Research Project it was evident that in many of the trial schools there was a culture of low expectations and a tendency to make excuses for students, particularly with reference to their home backgrounds. These beliefs were challenged by collecting and analysing detailed observational data that demonstrated that the majority of students began school with sufficient knowledge of concepts about print and of letter knowledge to begin processing text.

Standards and targets

High expectations of student achievement need to be reflected in the standards that the school system establishes and in the targets that individual schools seek to achieve. Within the Australian context, there is a high level of agreement about what might be called 'content standards' for English. Content standards define the 'what' and 'when' of the curriculum: what is to be taught and in what order. This happened as a result of cooperation between States and Territories in the early 1990s in developing curriculum frameworks and profiles for each of eight Key Learning Areas.

In addition to 'content standards', it is important to have 'performance standards' and broad agreement as to what these might be. Performance standards attempt to define 'to what level' will students progress and 'by when'. Teachers working in the Early Literacy Research Project have adopted a set of targets derived from those of Clay and Tuck (1991) in their 'three waves of teaching'. They argue that with good teaching in the first year of schooling one can expect 80 per cent of students to have reading and writing under way. During the second year of schooling, with appropriate one-to-one intervention using Reading Recovery, one can expect to have a further 18 per cent under way. This leaves approximately two per cent for whom further referral and special support will be necessary during their third year of schooling. These targets have provided the impetus for the Early Literacy Research Project with

respect to setting appropriate expectations and have provided a benchmark for evaluating performance.

Monitoring and assessment

Regular monitoring and assessment to provide a detailed, systematic and ongoing profile of the progress of all students is an important element of the design summarised in Figure 1. Effective teachers monitor and assess students as part of their daily practice. For teachers to ensure that students are operating within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), they must match their teaching to the needs of each student. This implies the use of structured and diagnostic observations of students.

The focus within the Early Literacy Research Project has been on using assessment to guide decision making with respect to the identification of and intervention for 'at risk' students, to ensure that teaching is matched to the learning needs of students and to evaluate the effectiveness of the total program. Consistent with the principle that instruction should be based on a detailed observation of each child as a learner, all classroom teachers in the Early Literacy Research Project trial schools take running records of their children's reading on a regular basis as part of their ongoing classroom monitoring and assessment. The resulting information is used to establish dynamic learning groups within the classroom and to ensure that students are working on texts of an appropriate instructional level. In addition, detailed, systematic observation of each child is carried out at the beginning and end of each year, based on Clay's Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay 1993) and Record of Oral Language (Clay et al 1983).

Classroom teaching programs

Effective teaching is structured and focused on the learning needs of each student in the class. This constitutes the most difficult challenge faced by teachers, particularly given the wide range of abilities within the typical classroom. It requires teachers to have detailed understandings of how children learn and well-developed classroom routines, structures, organisation and management related to the teaching of groups. It also requires teachers to motivate and engage students while applying a range of classroom practices and strategies in response to the needs of students.

The Early Literacy Research Project has looked to the good first teaching practices operating in New Zealand classrooms as a basis for developing balanced and focused teaching programs (Department of Education, NZ 1985). In the Early Literacy Research Project, teachers combine the following elements within their daily literacy programs:

- Oral language
- Modelled writing
- Reading to children
- Language experience (writing)
- Language experience (reading)

- Shared writing
- Shared reading
- Interactive writing
- Guided reading
- Guided writing
- Independent reading
- Independent writing

In each of the trial schools the classroom literacy program consists of a reading and a writing workshop conducted within a two-hour teaching block. Each session begins and ends with a teacher-directed 'whole class' focus. The main part of each workshop consists of activities that have a 'small-group' focus. Volunteers are used where possible to assist the students to remain on task and to free the teacher for small group teaching.

Professional learning teams

Arguably the most important element in any design aimed at improved teaching and learning in schools is the provision of effective, ongoing and practical professional learning opportunities for teachers. This implies opportunities that extend well beyond traditional models of professional development and in-service training. Effective professional learning involves intensive, sustained, theoretically-based yet practically-situated learning, with opportunities to observe good practice, to be involved in coaching and mentoring processes and to take time for reflection (Fullan 1991, 1993; Hargreaves and Fullan 1991).

Before the commencement of the 1996 school year, all teachers and coordinators in the Early Literacy Research Project trial schools were brought together in school learning teams for initial introductory sessions and for training in the use of the various measures used to assess students. During the year, class teachers and support personnel in the trial schools were provided with four professional development days. These days were devoted to developing learning teams, and consolidating the teachers' understanding and practical application of how students acquire literacy.

A vital component of the professional learning program was a full-day visit to each of the trial schools by the university-based professional development coordinator. These visits were critical in making a direct connection between understandings gained during professional development sessions and the actual working knowledge (classroom practice) of the teachers involved. They also provided opportunity for the coordinator and the principal to raise leadership issues pertaining to their particular school. These visits have continued to grow in importance as the leadership teams within the schools grapple with ongoing implementation issues. The 'outsider' role of the professional development coordinator has taken on a mentoring role for both the leadership and coordination team at the school level as well as for the teaching team.

School and class organisation

In order to maximise engaged learning time and to support focused teaching (i.e., teaching focused on the learning needs of all students), it is necessary to ensure that sufficient time is allocated and that this time is free from external interruptions and internal disruptions. This raises a range of practical issues relating to class composition and approaches to within-class and between-class ability groupings.

For Early Literacy Research Project schools, issues of class organisation have loomed large. Many of the trial schools operate composite or multi-grade classes to accommodate uneven numbers of students in different year levels. Others have, for philosophical reasons and as a matter of choice, opted for multi-age groupings of students. Reviews of research into multi-grade and multi-age grouping practices (Kulik and Kulik 1992; Veenman 1995, 1997; Mason and Burns 1997) indicate that there are neither negative nor positive effects associated with these forms of class organisation. On the other hand, positive effects are associated with those forms of class organisation that facilitate teaching focused to the learning needs of students. Within the Early Literacy Research Project, within-class ability grouping has been used with teachers forming four or five dynamic learning groups and using a task management board to organise group rotations.

Intervention and additional assistance

Even with the best classroom teaching, a significant proportion of students fail to make satisfactory progress. For such students, early intervention is essential to enable them to catch up quickly to their peers. In the context of early literacy, Wasik and Slavin (1993) have found conclusive evidence to support the efficacy of various one-to-one tutoring programs, of which the most impressive evidence was for Reading Recovery (Pinnell et al 1991). Although relatively costly, Dyer (1992) has estimated substantial net cost savings of one-to-one tutoring. There is also a need for specialist assistance for students who after intensive one-to-one intervention continue to experience difficulties. This assistance might take the form of referral to specialists or placement in special settings. More generally, it will take the form of individual learning plans devised in consultation with the school principal, the classroom teacher, specialists and parents or care-givers.

As a precondition for selection into the Early Literacy Research Project, trial schools were required to commit to the implementation or maintenance of the Reading Recovery one-to-one tutoring program for at least three years. Reading Recovery has thus been a key element of the language program for those Year 1 students in the trial schools making the least progress. Regrettably, resource constraints have meant that the number of Reading Recovery teachers available within the trial schools has fallen short of that required to cater for the targeted number of 'at risk' Year 1 students. For students who are unable to get access to a Reading Recovery program, or for whom Reading Recovery is not the

answer, individual learning plans are prepared and a home/school support group established to monitor the progress of these 'at risk' students.

Home-school-community partnerships

There is a strong body of research to highlight the importance of partnerships that link the home, the school and the community. Schools need to establish programs that address issues such as school attendance, parental involvement in student learning, student welfare needs including access to community services, and so on.

Successfully connecting with parents provides schools with one of their greatest challenges. For many schools, the non-English-speaking backgrounds of families have generated a communication gap. The role of parent helpers has taken on a new perspective and it has been necessary to establish new information and training sessions. The lack of parents available to help during school hours has also meant going into the wider community to forge new links with volunteers able to act as classroom helpers. Research from the United States indicates that there are no 'quick fixes' in establishing home-school-community partnerships: it is truly a relentless process and a long term goal for every school.

Leadership and coordination

Strong educational leadership has consistently been identified as a key characteristic of effective schools (Edmonds 1979; Rutter et al 1979). This has typically been taken to involve such things as:

- establishing priorities, goals and a vision for the future
- developing a positive ethos or culture that values learning and holds high expectations for all students
- securing, managing and allocating resources to support agreed priorities
- building up the commitment and capacity of staff.

The current wave of school reform, with its emphasis on teaching and learning, implies a renewed focus on classroom teaching and on instructional leadership. In larger schools, the principal may have the capacity to delegate much of the work associated with instructional leadership to senior staff members. In smaller schools, a hands-on role is unavoidable. In all cases, however, the principal has major responsibilities in ensuring that the necessary leadership is being exercised in an effective manner.

Within the Early Literacy Research Project, the critical role of principals in ensuring the success of the program is recognised in the form of regular meetings with the project team to discuss progress, share concerns and participate in shaping the ongoing direction of the project. Visits to schools by the university-based professional development coordinator have ensured that the principals have had first-hand access to advice and support at the individual school level.

Principals have been key players at every stage of implementation, even though they have been able to delegate much of the work associated with the project to a coordinator. As part of the initial conditions of entry to the project, a project coordinator was appointed in each of the trial schools. This is a 0.6 to 1.0 position, depending on the total enrolment of students in the first three years of schooling, funded in part by the school and in part by the Department of Education. The role of the coordinator has proved crucial to success within the Early Literacy Research Project schools in ensuring the right mix of pressure and support. Their role has been to:

- assist in the development of classroom materials
- provide direction, support and assistance to classroom teachers
- develop, implement and coordinate the program elements within the school in consultation with the school principal
- coordinate data collection
- provide in-school professional development for teachers
- disseminate information to the school community.

Evidence of effectiveness

Incorporating the above general design elements into a specific improvement program implies a massive investment of time and other resources. It is therefore important that there be multi-site evaluations of the effectiveness of particular designs based on the general design elements, using a matched control group of schools. A description of the Early Literacy Research Project and the results of an initial evaluation of the first year of its implementation are given in Crévola and Hill (1998).

Table 1 indicates what has become the most critical information for teachers and schools in the Early Literacy Research Project—namely performance against overall standards and targets. As noted earlier, within the project, an overall target was set for 80 per cent of students to be under way in reading by the end of the Preparatory Year (first year of schooling) and for 98 per cent to be under way by the end of Year 1 (second year of schooling). This target was operationalised in terms of the Text Level of students established by taking a Running Record on a set of 28 unseen graded texts. For the Preparatory Year, a Standard of a level 1 text was adopted, but the target was for all students to be at or above level 5. For Year 1, the Standard of level 15 was adopted (being the minimum level for discontinuation of students within Reading Recovery) and a target of level 20.

Table 1 shows the end-of-year results for 1996 and 1997 for both reference and trial schools. Given that both schools began the year with almost identical levels of student performance, it can be seen that by the end of the first year of implementation (1996) the trial schools had made significant gains. By the end of the second year (1997), the reference schools had improved considerably, but were still lagging behind the trial schools. This reflects the fact that they had been given detailed feedback on the performance of their students, had

Table 1. Percentage of students meeting standard and target levels of performance in ELRP reference and trial schools

	1996		1997	
	Reference	Trial	Reference	Trial
Year P				
Standard (Level 1)	49	72	61	75
Target (Level 5)	24	38	34	46
Year 1				
Level 5	70	87	79	91
Standard (Level 15)	35	46	49	57
Target (Level 20)	29	33	44	44

become concerned about the lack of progress of so many of their students and had begun to implement elements of the programs in place in the trial schools. In particular, during 1997 the Department's Keys to Life Early Literacy Program (Department of Education, Victoria 1997) became available and the reference schools became involved in professional development activities associated with this program. In other words, they were no longer functioning as a strict 'control' group of schools but were being proactive in seeking to emulate the performance of the trial schools. This was deliberately fostered through regular briefings of the reference schools so that they were aware of the details of and the rationale behind the program in the trial schools.

The gains made during 1997 by the trial schools appear less spectacular than those achieved in 1996 as these schools consolidated their initial gains and focused on addressing the needs of their 'hard-to-shift' students with more acute learning difficulties and struggled to find the resources to provide one-to-one tutoring for all of these students. For example, in the trial schools in 1997, 33 per cent of Year 1 students were identified at the beginning of the year as requiring access to Reading Recovery. By the end of 1997, 12 per cent had not been able to access this program due to inadequate coverage within trial schools. This lack of full implementation was clearly a significant factor in explaining why the trial schools were unable to achieve 98 per cent of students performing at the Year 1 Standard.

Can national goals be met?

The experience of Early Literacy Research Project schools indicates that substantial gains can be made but that there remain significant challenges in getting all students up to an acceptable standard of performance in literacy. A concerted effort over several years will be necessary and considerable support and encouragement will be needed. Recently, the Victorian government

announced significant additional funding to assist all State primary schools to implement its Keys to Life program, which is based on the characteristics or design elements summarised above, especially the appointment of a literacy coordinator and implementation of Reading Recovery. The approach that has been adopted to making available the extra funds to schools reflects one of the first attempts by an education system to make a specific link between additional resources and improved literacy outcomes. The funding will be provided on the condition that schools submit plans that commit them in an ongoing way to meeting challenging targets and to implementing approaches that have a proven track record. Both the targets and the nominated approaches have been the focus of extensive trials through the Early Literacy Research Project. A well-developed structure of support for schools in implementing the nominated approaches is available through the Department's Keys to Life program (Department of Education, Victoria 1997).

The goal of success for all in early literacy is worth aspiring to nationally. The task is quite daunting but already there is sufficient knowledge on which to base a sound strategy for realising such a goal.

End Note

This paper draws substantially on an earlier paper: Hill, PW & Crévola, A. (1998) Developing and testing a whole-school, design approach to improvement in early literacy, presented at the 11th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Manchester, United Kingdom, 4-7 January, 1998 as part of a Symposium on 'Sustained Improvement in Early Literacy Outcomes for Students in Disadvantaged Schools'.

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