

Editorial

This issue of *set* features case study articles on four South Auckland schools that have, in their different ways, taken up the challenge of significantly raising the literacy achievement levels of their students. In October 1998, Wyatt Creech, then Minister of Education, announced that by 2005 every child turning nine would be able to “read, write and do maths for success”. For New Zealand schools in middle class communities, this goal presents little challenge. For schools in economically poor communities, whose students typically score well below age-related norms, it poses a considerable challenge.

The stories of these four schools are called “learning journeys”, because they show how the schools are using a combination of their own resources and external research and curriculum assistance to improve the assessing, teaching, and reporting of literacy.

The research reported in these articles was completed by the members of a graduate research course¹ at the University of Auckland School of Education, as a collaborative effort between the students and the schools involved. The goal of the research course was to teach students more about how to collaborate with practitioners in order to understand and improve aspects of educational practice. Most of these students hold senior positions in Auckland schools or tertiary settings, and were able to offer their research and curriculum skills to the schools with which they collaborated. The school cases were selected and the research overseen by nominated representatives of the Mangere and Otara Principals’ Associations. The research was funded by the Ministry of Education through the Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO) initiative under the national school support policy.

There are no silver bullets to be found in these case studies. One of the things these schools have learned is that additional programmes and extra resources do not guarantee improved student achievement, because each school and each teacher has to make those programmes work in their own particular workplaces. The concept of a “learning journey” conveys this long-term commitment to the creation of some of the conditions needed for sustained improvement.

Sustainability of improvement is a buzz word in much school improvement work, both in New Zealand and overseas. Improvement is sustained when those responsible for the relevant tasks learn how to create the conditions required for continuous improvement in their own settings. But the only way to learn what these conditions are is to keep gathering and learning from high quality information about what is happening to students. In this way, parents and teachers can work together to monitor progress towards valued

achievement goals, and check their own and others’ assumptions about how to teach.

Checking assumptions against a range of relevant data is a powerful way of reflecting about practice. Both the researchers and teachers involved in these studies have learned that it is nearly impossible to tell what is working without quality information about the achievement of students in a programme. Some of the teachers in these cases thought that they knew “what worked”, and were surprised by what the data showed. These surprises generated discussion, and strengthened the schools’ commitment to asking rigorous questions about how they know what they think they know about their students’ achievement and the effectiveness of their programmes.

The articles show some of the detail and complexity of data-based curriculum review. The Southern Cross story is one of three years’ effort to establish a consistent, school-wide approach to standardised assessment. The Nga Iwi story is similar, in that it is one of a persistent and patient approach to change, which goes well beyond the formulation of vision or strategic planning.

As the stories show, there are considerable measurement challenges involved in the collection and interpretation of aggregated achievement data; but there are also attitudinal challenges. New Zealand primary schools have strong traditions of individual assessment. Until quite recently, they have given far less emphasis to using collated data on student achievement to make programme and resource decisions. Part of the learning journey in some schools is about how to involve more teachers and parents in constructive discussions of achievement data, including setting targets, making local and national comparisons, and targeting resources effectively. Several of these articles convey the challenges involved in engaging teachers in these questions.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all that these schools have accepted is to ask how they themselves can make more of a difference to the achievement of their students. There is less focus on the limits of home background, or on the inappropriateness of national benchmarks or tests, and more focus on how to involve parents in constructive and honest discussion about the literacy challenges which the school is facing.²

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- 1 The course was co-ordinated by Viviane Robinson with Mei Kuin Lai, Judy Parr and Helen Timperley as members of the teaching team.
- 2 See V.M.J. Robinson, Reducing differential educational attainment: Have we really tried? *Improving Schools*, 3 (1), 2000, pp.40-44.