

**Submission to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of
Literacy**

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**Note: The parts of this submission containing Basic Skills Test
results have been removed.**

Introduction

For over 10 years I have worked as a self-employed Literacy Consultant in schools locally, nationally and overseas. My work in schools is by invitation.

By way of a short introduction, the following briefly summarises my work.

I taught in the NSW school system for 15 years during which time I was an assistant principal in a demonstration school. I also acted as a Literacy Consultant for the NSW Department of Education for two years.

I have worked on several national government education projects, designed and implemented professional development courses and regularly work in primary schools. The work in primary classrooms is focussed on assisting teachers to meet the specific needs of children within the context they are working and to measurably improve teaching and learning in the area of literacy.

I regularly present at local, national and international conferences and have written several books for teachers. I was awarded an Australian Research Grant to complete a Masters (Hons) related to teacher learning and school culture which was completed in 2003.

My work is varied across many schools and systems. I work in classrooms with teachers to support them to be effective teachers of literacy.

I have numerous examples of outstanding results in schools due to the fact that I help teachers respond to individual children's needs in the culture they are working in. No two schools are the same so approaches differ enormously.

I have chosen to tell the story of my experiences in one particular school, one of the poorest schools in this state, since there has been some comment that while the PISA results show excellent results in Australian schools we still have a large group on the bottom end of the spectrum. No 'programs' were used in this school. The Successful Behaviours program referred to in this submission was written especially for this school. The results reported in this report are a result of a balanced approach to teaching reading using the English K-6 syllabus as a basis. There was no emphasis on teaching a particular aspect of reading and there was no emphasis on particular programs.

When I began my work in this school I fully expected the literacy skills of these children to be almost irredeemable, so great was their level of disadvantage. But their skills weren't irredeemable. This is what happened...

Achieving Success-One School's Story

Background

In this submission I will describe the factors that contributed to the success in improving student learning, and attitudes to learning in a small inner city school. Davis and Thomas (1989) argue,

There is no question that family and community factors, particularly socio-economic status (SES), do indeed affect school achievement. None the less...there is over whelming evidence that school structure, school climate, leadership, and teaching practices make a profound difference in student achievement and attitudes towards school (Davis and Thomas, 1989:4).

Our Lady of Mount Carmel is a small systemic Catholic school in Waterloo. The school was established in 1859. The enrolment had decreased to 128 students at the time I began working at the school. This enrolment trend was even more evident in the four neighbouring DET schools, which combined to form one inner city primary school from the beginning of 2003.

The Premier of NSW, Mr Bob Carr, described Waterloo-Redfern as:

...a severely disadvantaged community.....This is an area of densely populated housing estates. Approximately 95 percent of public housing residents are on some form of government benefit, 35 per cent have a disability or a medical problem, and 60 per cent have an annual income of \$10,000 or less. The picture is of a community suffering low employment and low income and high level of disadvantage (Carr: 2001).

At the time OLMC had 42 Aboriginal students, the highest number in any one Catholic school in Sydney. The majority of other students were from NESB families-Vietnamese, Filipino, and Chinese. The staffing formula gradually changed resulting in 11 full time teachers, including a full time special education teacher, 0.8 ESL and 0.5 Reading Recovery. The IESIP (Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives program) funding provided a full time education assistant and some time for the assistant principal to work with those Aboriginal students needing extra support.

The school faced difficulty in getting permanent and casual staff and often had staff not fully qualified for the positions they held due to lack of applications for positions advertised. Despite this the staff was cohesive, hardworking and open to change.

Setting Goals

Literacy standards were decreasing. In 1999 there was a change in student population with an increase in Aboriginal students and an increase in students living in low socio economic circumstances. Those families financially able to move from the area did so, leaving on the whole, the most disadvantaged families in the school. Not only were literacy standards poor, so too were attitudes to learning. As this occurred serious behaviour problems escalated.

There were a number of new staff and while these teachers were enthusiastic they lacked teaching experience and most had little or no experience working with children exhibiting a range of learning and behaviour difficulties.

An aspect of the school's mission statement expresses the belief: 'that student learning is enhanced when there is mutual respect and co-operation among all members of the school community.' It became a goal that this belief be evident in the school. With this goal in mind, along with the particular needs of the increased Aboriginal population, the principal proposed to set up a curriculum which, while focussed on developing literacy skills, would support alternative thinking strategies and the development of emotional concepts and social understandings. The principal was operating from a belief system and a personal vision, however her actions are well supported by the research of Freiberg (1999) who argues:

Affective outcomes are not only important in their own right, but are also thought to influence cognitive outcomes positively (Freiberg, 1999:31).

The Program

In 2001, teacher support in the area of literacy was carefully planned to respond to these needs. Funding under the Commonwealth 'Literacy Support Program' (previously DSP funding) was used to continue support of my role as literacy consultant on a limited basis. The Basic Skills Test results were carefully analysed and this information, in conjunction with the ongoing teacher assessment, informed the planning of the support to take place.

The program had 2 parts:

1. A whole school approach to literacy.
2. A whole school social skills program.

Part 1:A Whole School Approach to Literacy

Through executive and consultancy support the aim of the literacy program was to support teachers to implement a two hour uninterrupted block of literacy time each day to enable them to best implement the NSW English Syllabus. The teachers were supported in balancing key strategies for talking and listening, reading and writing and also balancing teaching time and practice time. Guided Reading, based on analysis of regular running records, was a key feature of the approach taken to reading. Whole class shared reading sessions reinforced small group teaching. The aims were simple:

- to provide a literacy program to meet the needs of individual students based on accurate ongoing assessment,
- to assist every student to recognise that being able to write and read is a desirable goal,
- to provide a classroom environment which supported all students to be learners,
- to empower each teacher to make decisions in his or her classroom which benefit learners.

We recognised that implementing any of the well-known phonics programs would not work in achieving all the goals we had set. Therefore, the focus of the consultancy support was on in-class ‘demonstration’ lessons supported by follow up discussion based on observations of the lesson, the content of the syllabus relating to the lesson and any other issues that arose in the literacy block implementation. In addition teachers were taught to administer, and more importantly analyse running records.

Through the teacher discussions, observations of the principal and ongoing assessment we were able to fine-tune the literacy block in each classroom to meet the needs of each group. In all cases there was a balance of reading, writing and talking and listening but the emphasis changed in various classrooms depending on the needs identified through assessment.

An emphasis of our approach was for all teachers to develop an understanding of the reading process and teaching reading in an explicit but meaningful way. We knew that these children had to see reading as useful and enjoyable so an emphasis on meaning was the key. In the area of reading we relied heavily on small group reading instruction in the form of Guided Reading. The teachers were ‘trained’ to do regular running records and to analyse them carefully. As a consequence the small group lessons were very focused on the reading processes indicated

through the analysis of the running records. The approach in the lessons was related to each child's use of visual (phonics and letter knowledge), semantic (meaning) and syntactic (grammar) processes. Growth in reading was directly related to building on what each child knew and extending that knowledge in a meaningful context. While we did not adopt any programs there was a balanced integration of phonics and letter sound activities where assessment indicated they were required. Not only were the children learning to read there was evidence they were reading for pleasure with an increase in borrowing from the school library.

A variety of approaches were used as part of the program to enhance the professional growth of the teachers with special emphasis on 'breaking open' the richness of the NSW English syllabus. These included;

- in class demonstrations,
- one to one discussions, and goal setting,
- stage planning meetings,
- professional reading with time to share,
- staff meetings to support in-class work and to encourage a K-6 approach,
- an increase in the number of parent (carer)/student/teacher meetings from twice a year to four times a year,
- a focus on assessment and the introduction of a software program designed to track student progress.

As a result there was a growth in professional discussion and collaboration.

Part 2: The Social Skills Program

It became evident that these children were not engaged in learning. The behaviour was such that learning was not occurring in literacy or any other area of the curriculum.

'Successful Behaviours,' a social skills program, was written by the literacy consultant to meet the specific needs of the students at OLMC and to provide a whole school approach to this recognised problem. The program was designed to contribute to the continued development of OLMC as a learning community through the development of effective behaviours and literacy skills.

Many of the children brought to the school unacceptable problem solving strategies – resorting to severe bullying, physical fighting and temper/tantrum displays. It was essential that a program be

devised that would teach children alternative ways to solve conflict – ways that they did not see practised in the communities from which they came each day and ways that resulted in ‘win/win’ solutions. Street fighting, domestic violence and youth gangs were common at the time. For the children to break out of such a lifestyle they needed to be explicitly taught behaviours including respect for authority and the respect for the space and rights of others. The program aimed to teach students how to work cooperatively, play peacefully and interact with adults in a friendly, respectful way. All of this learning was done in a context of literacy learning calling on some critical literacy approaches.

The aims of the program were:

- to assist students in the development of the skills for both independent and collaborative learning;
- to assist teachers to develop a consistent whole school approach to teaching and learning as well as behaviour management through use of common language and structures;
- to explicitly teach our Aboriginal students the skills to assist them to remain at school and to succeed;
- to have a lasting, albeit limited, effect on the wider community of Waterloo-Redfern.

Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) argue:

For many pupils establishing relationships of respect and care is a necessary foundation for intellectual as well as social development (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998:32).

They go on to say,

To make a real difference in the learning and lives of disadvantaged pupils especially, the purpose of love and care cannot be regarded as a soft option, or be pushed to the periphery of the system. Effective love and care is tough stuff. It involves schools, teachers and parents dramatically reshaping the heart of what they do (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998:40).

In 2002 Successful Behaviours was revised following a review in 2001. The positive results from Term 1 trailing in 2001 appeared to dissipate as the year progressed. It was decided to rewrite the program to ensure the strategies and processes were maintained throughout the entire school year.

Identifying success factors

1. A consistent whole school approach to teaching literacy.
2. The vision of the principal.

Her beliefs were articulated and evident in the day to day running of the school. They included:

Children and parents will be treated with respect at all times.

Children will be treated as individuals.

There will be justice for all.

Aboriginal students can succeed academically.

All staff (including support and special projects) will be non judgemental.

The benefits of involvement of parents/caregivers in the school and in adult learning programs.

3. Resources to affect change.

Despite the financial difficulties resources were made available to support the teachers to make change. These included people resources, practical classroom resources and time. Funding came from various sources and creativity was the key.

4. Functioning as part of community. A variety of actions were in place to involve the community, which promised success to the goals of the project. These included the work of the retired Sister of Mercy in the community and parent programs (funded by the South Sydney Council and Randwick TAFE). These opportunities to be part of school life all worked together to begin to increase contact and further relationships in the community.

The following teacher comments give an insight into the change that took place. In response to the question, *What do you see as the main changes at OLMC in the last 3 years?*, the teachers commented;

Successful Behaviours changed the learning environment. The teachers have gone back to the syllabus and back to teaching the basics. We are more knowledgeable of the syllabus now. I am now a confident teacher of literacy.

Teacher A: 5 years experience teaching, 3 at OLMC

Teaching and learning is more consistent now due to Successful Behaviours. Our teaching is more focussed I have more support from my peers. I am now a confident or even very confident teacher of literacy.

Teacher B: 9 years experience teaching, 3 at OLMC

Now teaching is more explicit and this has been supported by the documents provided with the in school literacy support. As a staff we now talk a common language. There is more of a focus on students and teaching to particular needs. Successful Behaviours has contributed to this. I am now a very confident teacher of literacy.

Teacher C: 10 years experience teaching, 5 at OLMC

Our success was related to interplay of a number of components but most importantly we responded to the needs of the students rather than imposing a 'quick fix'.

Hargeaves and Fullan (1998) refer in their work to three pillars of learning. The first pillar involves the need to reshape learning experiences so that more pupils are engaged (1998:50). It was this concept that directed a change in approach and led to having a focus on learning skills as well as on literacy. 'The second pillar of learning is the realisation that it is impossible to accomplish the deep purposes of pupil learning unless teachers are continuous learners themselves. For children to become better learners, teachers must learn how to become better learners too not as a one shot solution to a particular crisis, but as an ongoing professional obligation. Teachers have the right to high-quality professional learning experiences and opportunities. They also have the responsibility to be on the look-out for ways to teach and reach their pupils more effectively...Time invested in teacher's learning, if integrated with the development of a collaborative culture, is time that ultimately pays off for pupils' learning' (1998:52). Hence resources were set aside to provide this professional development on site in order to ensure it was both 'on time learning' and context specific. 'The third pillar of learning is that which takes place between schools and their communities. If schools are good learning organisations, they constantly search for ideas, input and information about how to improve their practice and get better results over time' (1998:53). The third pillar was responded to through increase in parent/caregiver/teacher interviews, the assistant principal providing time for parent involvement in changing some student behaviour and working with parents/caregivers.

Results

Part 1: The Whole School Approach to Literacy

There was evidence through observation and teacher programs of a more balanced approach to the teaching of literacy due to continued, stable consultancy support and school organisation. The improvements noted through observation and classroom based assessment were supported by a notable improvement in Basic Skills Test results.

Group	School BST 2000	School BST 2001
All students		
Boys		
Girls		
A&TSI		
NESBT		
ESB		

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for Year 3 2000 & 2001

While unable to publish the actual results (privacy) the improvement is supported by the statistics. In 2000 all categories were well below the state average and in 2001 all categories were above the state average. This was not so in Year 5 however the improvement from 3 to 5 (value added) was again well above the state average.

1999	2001	Difference
		+13.9
		+ 9.8
		+ 10.7
		+ 6.4
		+ 8.7
		+ 5.2
		+ 3.0
		+ 3.3
		+ 5.8
		+ 7.4

Table 2: Literacy Progress of Individual Year 5 Students (names withheld)

Only 10 students remained at the school. Gains from Year 3 were considerable and above the state average. The increase continued in 2002. In 2003 a new principal was appointed, but staff remained the same and the steady increase continued, I no longer work at the school so am unsure of 2004 results.

Part 2: The Social Skills Program: Overall, the aims of the program were achieved. At the same time it must be acknowledged that the positive results were 'fragile' so the project was seen as ongoing. As the year continued 'maintenance' of the most effective activities and processes was the key. It is believed that as the students continue to be involved in the activities and immersed

in the language, the positive benefits will continue and be even more visible. The students will become more familiar with the processes and activities and as they do it is anticipated they will become more confident, responsible members of the community. As this occurs we predict the 'fragility' of the results we see now will give way to a strong culture of 'living and learning together' (School Motto). Parent response was positive as they noticed some of the 'Successful Behaviours' language being used by their children at home.

Teachers were supported in implementing 'Successful Behaviours' throughout Term 1 through executive and limited consultancy support. Positive feedback began early in the term as staff and students enjoyed using the activities and processes, and improvements in the social skills of the children were noticed. Most teachers commented that the program was supportive and easy to implement although time consuming. In order to compensate in some ways for the time required to get the program in place, the material was integrated with English and PDHPE outcomes.

As many of the Kindergarten students begin school without some basic social skills (evident in children of the same age in other schools) it was also essential that the program begin early in Kindergarten ensuring expected learning and social behaviours be set from 'day one'.

Anecdotal evidence in the form of observations made by visitors to the school, executive and staff continue to support the positive feedback.

The strength of the program rests in the use of consistent, positive language across the school. The teachers worked from 'shared meaning' that proved to be very powerful. The students heard the same language from all the teachers they encountered throughout the school day.

Several comments from the teachers suggested that the program was successful because it was written with the children from OLMC in mind and from a position of understanding the particular context of the school.

Program sustainability

The success of the intervention was measured by a noticeable improvement in the students' engagement in class due to the processes learned through 'Successful Behaviours'. The initiatives had far reaching effects including:

1. students' self esteem was enhanced,

2. literacy levels continued to improve,
3. attitude to learning became more positive,
4. a steady decrease in truancy was noted,
5. teacher learning continued through professional development approaches,
6. visible parent support increased markedly. At the end of Term One, 2002 Parent/student/teacher interviews 90% of parents/carers attended. This is a huge improvement from the 20% who attended in 1999.

To ensure that the literacy program and 'Successful Behaviours' continued to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes several steps were taken.

1. A school literacy policy and detailed literacy plan were developed collaboratively with staff.
2. The school's strategic plan included the literacy initiative and the annual plan was developed from this.
3. The school's computer based assessment and reporting program contained detailed literacy syllabus outcomes.
4. The 'Successful Behaviours' Program became part of the school policy documentation.

Conclusions

Davis and Thomas (1989) describe the main characteristics of effective schools that have emerged from the research and which have become classic.

1. Strong instructional leadership.
2. High expectations for student achievement.
3. An emphasis on basic skills.
4. Continuous monitoring of student progress.
5. Clear and well understood school goals (Davis and Thomas, 1989:12).

In essence Our Lady of Mount Carmel is an example of those characteristics in action. In addition, solutions were devised for a particular school in a particular community with unique needs.

Pogrow (2001) argues:

Why would anyone think that a one-size-fits all schoolwide reform model could work effectively for such a complex process as teaching-especially in schools dealing with an increasingly diverse student body? True leadership occurs when a school or district gets its own act together instead of looking for an outside saviour to take control of its basic professional functions and provide a quick fix. A quick fix does not exist.

...The best approach for schools and districts to develop their own internal expertise and leadership for evaluating curriculum and instruction, with some outside help on focused, technical, and specialized needs (Pogrow, 2001:83).

In conclusion, Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) offer some thoughts that might well describe the driving force behind the teaching community of this small, inner city school,

More than anything else, more than expectations, passionate engagement or standards, teaching is about hope. Every child is one teacher's hope for the future. The bigger the child's problem, the greater the teacher's hope. Hope matters most for those children who least seem to warrant it. The best definition of hope is 'unwarranted optimism.' There is no advantage to being hopeful when the conditions warrant it. Hope's real value is when the conditions are not hopeful. Hope should never disappear (Fullan and Hargreaves 1998: 61).

End piece

In 2002 this school was the proud recipient of a National Literacy award.

Why tell this story?

The students at this school, during the years described in this submission, did not achieve success because of a particular approach to teaching reading or by buying a program. The learning was extensive and measurable because these inexperienced teachers working under the worst possible conditions taught to each student's individual needs guided by an excellent principal.

There is no existing program that could have achieved this. The success is about teachers teaching exactly what these children needed to learn and finding a way to do so. These children already thought learning was pointless and in all my experience in schools I can guarantee that if we had implemented a phonics program, no matter how clever or grand, it would have made no difference at all (that was in fact what was happening when I arrived).

These children had a range of problems in their approaches to learning and equally so their needs in learning to read were individual and those individual needs had to be met through intelligent action.

They were!

Teaching children to read is difficult. It would be much easier for us all if there were one simple way to teach every child to read. Sadly this simply is not so. In over 30 years working in classrooms what I know for sure is that every child is different. Every child deserves the very best teaching every day they are at school. Sadly there are times when that does not happen. However, that will not be overcome by a one-size fits all approach to teaching anything, let alone reading! The implication from this 'story' for policy makers is one of resources for the continual professional growth of teachers and leaders-not providing 'programs'.

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