

Addressing Literacy in Secondary Schools: Introduction

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doi: 10.2167/le796.0

This special issue of *Language and Education*¹ reports on an independent three-year research evaluation of a major professional development initiative to promote cross-curricular, whole school literacy policies – also known in the wider literature as ‘school language policies’ – in secondary schools in New Zealand. The findings from this evaluation, we believe, have significant implications for other national contexts.

The professional development initiative in question – the Secondary Schools’ Literacy Initiative (SSLI) – was funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Education between 2003–2005 and involved a group of 60 pilot secondary schools, 20 each year. The broad features of the SSLI were:

- targeted support for a **regional literacy facilitator (RF)** to promote and support a literacy focus within and across a cluster of nominated secondary schools;
- structural support within schools in the form of a **literacy leader (LL)** to provide leadership, direction, mentoring and cohesion around the literacy focus;
- ongoing **professional development support for teachers** as they engaged with new ideas and practices designed to enable them to embed literacy in their daily teaching;
- an expectation that schools that participate in the programme be open to the possibilities of changing their **structures, cultures and pedagogies** in ways that enhance students’ literacy;
- a hope that once the initiative became established in schools there would be a **modicum of sustainability** as externally provided support was withdrawn and as teachers and schools came to experience the benefits of improved literacy levels among students, and
- a **quantitative assessment aspect** in which teachers were assisted with ways of gathering meaningful data and analysing it in diagnostic ways that informed their literacy teaching.

For each of the three years of the SSLI, our research team at the University of Waikato undertook detailed case studies of four schools each year – schools that had been selected on the basis of a set of relevant criteria from a wider reconnaissance of the 20 secondary schools involved each year. A number of schools were also followed up for the three years of the project. There were a number of research questions that informed the activities of the research team. Some of these were questions that could reasonably be foreshadowed at the beginning, others were ones that could only be gleaned as a consequence of immersion in the world of schools and teachers involved in the project, and these were added to the research as it proceeded. They included (and not in any particular order) the following:

- How do secondary teachers interpret and make sense of literacy in the context of their teaching?
- By what means do teachers reinvent themselves around a re-working of their existing roles in order to take on a literacy focus in their teaching?
- How do teachers envisage a literacy focus will assist them in their teaching?
- When a secondary school pursues a school-wide literacy focus, are students aware of this?
- How do students experience or make sense of this change in orientation?
- What happens to the traditional ‘silos of knowledge’ inherent in the department/faculty structure of secondary schools, when a literacy focus is adopted?
- How do teachers experience professional renewal and pedagogical rejuvenation within such an initiative? What are the obstacles and impediments and what strategies are adopted to try and surmount them, and with what success?
- How do secondary schools experience the process of working with an external agency in the form of a regional facilitator? What benefits and difficulties are experienced?
- How do teachers ‘survive’, ‘adapt’, ‘resist’ or ‘succeed’ within the changed dynamics that accompany and are necessary for a whole school focus on literacy?
- How are social justice agendas advanced or impeded through a literacy focus?
- Does a literacy focus and the activities that accompany it reflect in enhanced student engagement in learning, and is this evident in assessments of students’ literacy learning?
- When provided with the space that accompanies an initiative of this kind (assuming it is not interpreted as yet another version of the further ‘crowding’ of teachers lives – see Crump, 2005), how do teachers craft viable and sustainable school-based forms of professional development and learning?
- What kinds of leadership practices are necessary in secondary schools (or emerge as a consequence) in literacy focussed ventures of this kind?
- What kind of ‘communities of practice’ are created in order to sustain initiatives with a literacy focus across the secondary school curriculum?
- What happens when external support to schools in the form of the external facilitator is withdrawn?

- What is it about the culture of the secondary school that makes it institutionally so resilient to change? Are the kinds of changes being pursued in initiatives of this kind ephemeral, feasible, impossible, or sustainable?

This special issue addresses these questions from a range of perspectives and contexts. The first paper, by Stephen May and Noeline Wright, sets the theoretical context—exploring previous academic discussions of school language policies and highlighting key areas of concern as well as opportunity with respect to school implementation of such policies, before turning to the particular challenges that such policies face in a secondary school context.

John Smyth and David Whitehead then discuss the methodological dimensions of the secondary literacy research evaluation that is the focus of this special issue, arguing that these methodological dimensions are an example of the type of contextualised and critical research that might be usefully applied in exploring literacy across the curriculum in other national contexts. A particular concern addressed in the paper is the need to develop a contextualised, rich description of literacy practices in schools, while also addressing a wider policy climate, which is often preoccupied with issues of literacy achievement, and particularly often-entrenched differential achievement for students across class and ethnicity lines.

Stephen May explores a key finding of the SSLI research evaluation—that the implementation of literacy across the curriculum requires secondary schools to undergo extensive and complex processes of school change, involving altering teachers' thinking, attitudes and behaviours in relation to literacy and pedagogy, and establishing and maintaining organisational processes that support teachers' change processes and their impact on student learning. Such changes take time, May argues, not least because they often run counter to traditional organisational and pedagogical approaches in secondary schools. The paper thus examines the medium to long term implications of school change processes for secondary schools undertaking a cross-curricular literacy focus. In doing so, it identifies three key phases that secondary schools may undergo in order to achieve and sustain effective literacy practices over time and suggests that these phases, and their characteristics, may well have wider applicability.

John Smyth examines the implications for teachers of establishing a relational, cultural and contextual view of literacy in secondary schools. Focussing on the theoretical construct of teacher identity, Smyth discusses the ways teachers worked and what happened to the culture of their schools when the SSLI intervention enabled them to develop some agency as educational professionals, providing them with some 'social space' in respect of their literacy practices. Smyth concludes that while the teachers were involved to varying degrees in embracing changes, the development of cross-curricular literacy policies in secondary schools represents a move in the direction of a more socially just pedagogy.

Noeline Wright examines the particular challenges attendant upon successfully establishing literacy 'communities of practice' in secondary schools. These challenges stem from an unbalanced relationship between learning mainly content (what) and learning processes (how and why) through content in secondary school classrooms. As Wright argues, if teachers' work is centred on equipping students with the learning and thinking tools that allow them to navigate, make

sense of, and critically examine subject content, then literacy as a pedagogical focus can be seen as supporting that shift. However, shifting secondary teachers to a focus on learning and thinking processes can be difficult, because it implicates their pedagogical values, practices and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). The paper explores how these various challenges can be addressed and, if possible, overcome.

David Whitehead concludes this special issue with a discussion of the various assessment practices evident among the secondary schools examined in the SSLI. These tended to be predominantly summative, standardised literacy assessments, employed largely on the basis of historical precedent, and not used subsequently by the schools to inform teaching and learning practices. Whitehead argues that such standardised assessments could thus be usefully complemented by ecologically valid assessments – measures that allow teachers to test like they teach. This might better reflect the use of the literacy and thinking tools used in secondary school language policies as a means of helping students better understand the literacies, epistemologies and content of their subjects.

In exploring the key issues attendant upon the SSLI, and the wider issues raised by implementing school language policies in secondary schools, we were, as a research team, often reminded of the seminal work of the late David Corson in this area. David argued consistently, eloquently and passionately for the importance of implementing critical, cross-curricular and whole-school language policies. It was only through the successful application of such policies, he suggested, that the emancipatory intentions of critical educational theory could be meaningfully realised in the actual practice of schools (Corson, 1990, 1999, 2000a; see also May, 2002).

Another key aspect of David's work that gained increasing resonance as our research progressed was the degree to which language and literacy-specific issues in schools had specific implications for, and a wider impact upon school organisation and change. David again was a pioneering voice in initially making links between these two disciplinary areas. He argued that the preponderance of technicist and monocultural accounts of school change, still prevalent today (see Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), was attributable to an inability in such accounts to take issues of language, culture and diversity seriously (see Corson, 1986, 1996a, 1996b, 2000b). Our work reiterates the significance of this view.

David Corson, of course, was a founding editor of this journal, as well as working in New Zealand for a number of years in the 1980s, before eventually relocating to OISE. As such, we can think of no more significant testimony to David's pioneering and innovative work in these areas than to dedicate this special guest issue of *Language and Education* to reporting upon a New Zealand project with international implications, which amounts to a practical pursuit and analysis of the key principles of school language policies that he long espoused.

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Note

1. Our thanks to Trevor McDonald for his commentary and feedback on earlier versions of the various contributions to this special issue.

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