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Literacy Lessons for Logan Learners: A Smart Education Partnerships Project

Report

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A research project in south east Queensland is testing a model of school improvement that focuses on literacy innovation in the middle years of schooling. The Literacy Lessons for Logan Learners (LL4LL) Project is addressing the needs of some of Queensland's most challenged schools, by improving teachers' capacity to help students from diverse cultural, linguistic and/or socio-economic backgrounds.

The early successes of the project are very encouraging. Participating students have made impressive gains in their scores on [NAPLAN](#) and Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH) assessments, and there have been simultaneous gains in terms of building teacher capacity and establishing professional learning communities. The project is also developing a process for school improvement that can inform policies and processes in many Australian schools that serve socially disadvantaged communities.

The project commenced at the beginning of last year. It was initiated in response to detailed analysis of student performance data in the 2008 NAPLAN tests across Queensland's south east, which confirmed a significant and widening gap between schools in low and high SES areas. LL4LL is a partnership between Griffith University, Queensland's Department of Education and Training's South East Region, and two clusters of schools. Cluster One schools joined the project in 2009, while Cluster Two schools joined the project in 2010. Both clusters are located within the municipality of Logan. The project is funded by an Australian Research Council ([ARC](#)) Linkage Grant entitled Smart Education Partnerships.

The LL4LL Process

The LL4LL project's contribution to quality outcomes in continuous improvement for students is based on two principles: firstly, instruction needs to be differentiated to meet the diverse needs of students; and secondly, teachers are one of the most powerful influences on student achievement.

Based on these principles the LL4LL Project has built and tested the LL4LL Process, which is a continual cycle of professional learning and innovation aimed at developing an elite, adaptive teaching force in each school site and across the Logan corridor. The LL4LL Process evolves and is refined over a three year period. Within this period there are phases of activity that contribute to achieving the overall goals of enhanced teacher capacity and improved student outcomes.

During the first phase of the LL4LL Process, University staff known as School-based Researchers are assigned to individual schools, where they provide staff with in-depth specialist knowledge about how to collect, analyse and use student achievement data to plan instruction. Data is gathered by TORCH testing three times in each school year. The information allows

teachers, schools and school-based researchers to better understand where students are and what they need to learn. In this way the data provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective practice by monitoring each student's progress over time, including the highly sensitive transition to high school. In the course of numerous discussions, teachers and researchers collaboratively identify challenges and celebrate successes.

After each round of data collection, teachers meet individually with School-based Researchers to discuss data and patterns in student achievement within their classes. Teachers also meet together in year-level teams and as a whole middle years' team, to reflect on data and on literacy instruction. These professional learning activities are designed to develop each teacher's capacity as well as developing a team approach to solving problems in each school site.

The next phase of the LL4LL Process focuses on working with teachers to develop innovations in teaching. The project provides extensive professional learning opportunities to assist teachers' in differentiating classroom instruction and meeting the needs of students with a wide range of learning needs. Professional learning takes place in a range of forms, including observation and feedback on teaching, school-based year level workshops and cluster-wide learning institutes. Professional learning is developed and delivered by the university-regional office team as well as international experts.

LL4LL professional learning activities also extend leadership teams, which cover school principals, deputies and Lead Literacy Teachers (LLTs) – the key staff member at each school who coordinates the partnership activities among the school, the DET regional office team and the university team. Members of the leadership teams work with the project leaders to develop their skills in leading in a climate of change. They also learn to work more closely with other school leaders in their cluster, developing a leadership network and supporting each other as they attempt to ensure continuous high-level learning for students across the middle years.

In the final phase, schools and teachers put in place instructional innovations in literacy instruction they have designed with the partners. In this way, student achievement data and teacher professional learning are linked. Teachers innovate on instruction and as they do so they monitor the impact of the changes they have introduced. TORCH data is collected again and teachers reflect upon movements in student performance, review students' current learning needs and then undertake any other professional learning on instructional innovations that may be required to continue to move students forward.

The whole LL4LL process is one of multilayered professional learning for reflective practice. TORCH data is used to gather information to guide teacher reflection three times each year for three years. Each time TORCH data is gathered, an inquiry and refinement dialogue is opened. The outcome of this, within and across schools, is a collective focus on continual improvement.

Outcomes to date

After one year of the project, there has been a significant improvement in the reading comprehension of middle years' students at LL4LL Cluster One schools. Results of TORCH tests at all six Cluster One schools indicate that their students' reading comprehension has developed above the nationally expected rate, and in 50% of LL4LL classes this improvement is close to 1.5 to 3 times the national benchmark.

Recently released NAPLAN data confirms the TORCH findings. NAPLAN data for the reading strand in 2010 shows that LL4LL schools are improving at a rate that is 1.5 to 4.5 times the gain recorded for regional, state and national cohorts. Longitudinal data used to track the same students over a two year period show similarly large gains in reading scores. Year Five students in the LL4LL Cluster One schools gathered an average of six months additional reading gain from Year Three to Year Five. Year Seven students gained around an additional ten month gain in reading scores from Year Five to Year Seven. These are very promising results for a 15 month intervention period.

Data gathered from classroom observations, teacher interviews and surveys indicate that the project has been powerful in helping teachers reach high levels of pedagogical content knowledge in literacy. The project provides the support for teachers to act as 'adaptive experts' and active problem-solvers within their school communities. Through continual learning and reflective practice conversation, they are equipped with a strategic and flexible teaching

repertoire that enables them to meet individual needs of their present and future students.

Participating schools have established and maintained school-based professional learning communities focused on close examination of patterns in student achievement data and on developing associated innovations in teaching and learning. Data shows there have been discernible improvements in the culture of these schools. Teacher and leadership reflections on the inquiry process show increased engagement in collaborative initiatives among teachers and administration teams within and across school sites. This includes more sharing of ideas, more collaborative professional learning and more collective focus on the achievement of all children in the school. A major shift has been to engage with the idea that assessment and instruction are best approached as a rigorous inquiry process.

The LL4LL project's model of the schooling improvement process merges international expertise and local knowledge to focus upon reading comprehension in the middle years' classes of schools in low socio-economic areas. The long-term goal of the partners is to develop a model that is innovative, inclusive, transferable and sustainable.

The project is intended to run over three years, in a process that becomes increasingly meaningful, refined and self-directed, as each school and each cluster is engaged in a highly contextualised, sustainable process of school change to ensure success for all middle years' students.

The LL4LL project team were the winners of the 2009 Regional Showcase Award for excellence in Middle Schooling, and finalists in [The Queensland State Showcase Award for Excellence in the Middle Phase of Learning](#).

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