

Middle Years Literacy Research Project – Report Summary

INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results and outcomes of the *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* and the *Middle Years Numeracy Research Project*. The projects were undertaken within the three-phase major project, *Successful Interventions: A Secondary Literacy and Numeracy Initiative*, conducted by the Victorian Department of Education and Training in partnership with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria. This research represents the third and final phase. The prior phases consisted of:

An environmental scan which aimed to identify the type and range of literacy intervention programs currently in place in secondary schools

Successful Interventions Literacy Research Project: the evaluation of forty-four literacy intervention strategies and broader school literacy initiatives.

The *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* focused on literacy education in mainstream classroom practice in Years 5-9 and was designed to improve literacy outcomes for all students in the middle years, particularly those experiencing difficulties. The *Middle Years Numeracy Research Project* focused on improving numeracy skills in students in the middle years and providing advice on the development of a coordinated and strategic plan for improving the teaching and learning of numeracy in Years 5-9.

MIDDLE YEARS LITERACY RESEARCH PROJECT

CONTEXT AND PURPOSES OF STUDY

This report provides information and recommendations on the implementation of effective literacy education in the middle years. *The Middle Years Literacy Research Project* represents the third and final phase of *Successful Interventions: A Secondary Literacy and Numeracy Initiative*, conducted by the Victorian Department of Education and Training in partnership with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing awareness of the specific learning needs of students in the middle years of schooling, generated as a result of significant research activity both in Australia and overseas. The literacy demands and learning expectations of the curriculum in the middle years pose particular challenges and opportunities for students as they move from Year 5 to Year 9 and negotiate the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

While learners are themselves dealing with a number of complexities as they progress from late childhood to early adolescence, so too the curriculum becomes increasingly specialized, as do the language and literacies associated with the ways meaning and knowledge are constructed or represented in the different learning areas. (Christie 1998). In addition, the nature of literacy is changing such that what constitutes literate practice for adolescents at the edge of the 21st century encompasses a broader repertoire of knowledge, skills and capabilities than at any earlier time in history. Terms such as ‘multiliteracies’ (New London Group 1996) and ‘technoliteracies’

(Lankshear & Snyder with Green 2000) signal the plurality of knowledge and practices required in the 'new world of literacy' (Cope & Kalantzis 2000).

The specific aims of the project were to:

- Identify ways to maximise the effectiveness of literacy education in mainstream classroom practice
- Develop and trial approaches and strategies considered appropriate for middle year's students
- Analyse the middle years structures, organisational factors and teaching and learning practices which enable effective literacy education
- Evaluate the suitability of DART as a literacy assessment instrument
- Investigate the impact of professional development activities undertaken by staff
- Make appropriate recommendations about effective literacy practice in the middle years

The project brief was to provide information and recommendations to educational systems or sectors in Victoria, which could in turn form a basis for advice to schools on the implementation of effective literacy education in the middle years. This advice was to be embedded in the context of the General Design for a Whole-school Approach to Effective Schooling (Hill & Crévola 1997).

DATA COLLECTION

Quantitative Data

The *Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers* or *DART* (Forster et al. 1994) was selected to provide measures of students' literacy development in this project. *DART* was considered the most appropriate instrument for a pre and post assessment. It provided quantitative data on background variables and growth in literacy across a whole school year for a cohort of students in each school involved in the project. The following information was generated about student progress through the *DART*:

- An indication of each student's CSF level for Reading and Writing
- Identification of individual student shifts between CSF levels
- Analysis of individual student progress in the reading and writing strands in CSF levels for Reading and Writing between March and November 2000.

The strengths and the shortcomings of the *DART* as a tool for assessing literacy development in the middle years of schooling were highlighted through its trialing in the case study schools. Most schools saw it as highly valuable and this was reflected in their commitment to continuing its use in the future.

Qualitative Data

As a qualitative study, the research was designed to identify, trial and analyse best practice in literacy education. Information was gained from a variety of strategies. These included:

- School profiles including background data detailing school characteristics
- Audit and review of existing practice against the *General Design for a Whole-School Approach to Effective Schooling* (Hill & Crevola 1997)
- School research plan outlining details of research
- Observations and anecdotal comments on the implementation of the various strategies
- Anecdotal records of student progress and attitudes
- Interviews with students, classroom teachers, leadership team and principal.

Schools were provided with a range of proformas to assist with the collection of data, including research planning documents, teacher reflection sheets and journal entries. They were also provided with a range of other strategies for collecting information on students' literacy achievements and development over time. These included guidelines for a pre and post *read and retell* activity and student interviews/surveys on reading and writing attitudes and practices.

The range of qualitative data provided insights from a range of key perspectives. It also reflected attitudinal changes in students' approaches to literacy that would not have been evident in the achievement data.

MAIN FINDINGS

Whole school policies and practices:

The whole school policies and practices that supported effective literacy education in the middle years included:

- raising the profile and status of literacy in the school
- recognising the vital role played by effective leadership, support and coordination
- providing opportunities for staff to discuss literacy in general but also literacy in relation to their particular key learning area and their specific context
- understanding the need to make structural, organisational and curriculum changes in order to successfully implement significant changes to literacy pedagogy
- developing a long-term plan for the implementation of improved literacy education
- allowing time to plan, implement and evaluate outcomes
- being involved in quality professional development which involves teams of teachers and which provides opportunities to understand and work through issues in relation to the specific context of the school and its community
- establishing ongoing support structures for teachers within the school, especially for teachers from key learning areas other than English – and the role of the literacy coordinator in achieving this
- involving middle years students in the decisions and the discussions related to the curriculum restructure and the impact of changing the way literacy is approached
- promoting continuity of literacy education across the primary to secondary transition and bringing primary and secondary schooling cultures into closer alignment.

Classroom practices and strategies in all key learning areas

Mainstream classroom practices and policies that effectively supported students' literacy learning included:

- enabling authentic purposes or 'world connected' learning which combines learning-rich tasks with opportunities for 'targeted teaching' of specific literacy knowledge, skills and capabilities in response to student needs and interests
- developing literacy-focused teaching within an overall learning context that promotes choice, flexibility and independent learning

- creating structured opportunities for metacognition, reflection, and self-assessment of literacy and learning development within the curriculum
- having a common language for talking about literacy development and a unified approach to literacy teaching and learning in curriculum areas
- providing scaffolding for students to assist them in their literacy development across all key learning areas
- using learning technologies for engaging student motivation and interest and for developing new literacies
- using developmental literacy assessment instruments linked to the mainstream curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to emphasise the links between the Middle Years Reform Program and reform in literacy, and also to draw on key documents already guiding middle years policy and practice in Victoria, the recommendations from the research were designed both to reflect and build on the strategic intentions outlined in *The Middle Years: A Guide for Strategic Action in Years 5–9* (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1999, p 35)

Each of these strategic intentions was given a literacy focus and then framed as a recommendation for improving literacy education in all schools in Victoria.

1. Developing teacher knowledge about literacy and learning; explicit teaching of literacy by all teachers in all key learning areas; teacher knowledge and control of a broad repertoire of literacies, including curriculum and technology literacies
2. Establishing collaborative partnerships between primary and secondary schools to improve communication about students' literacy development, promote continuity and provide educational environments that meet the diverse literacy needs of students in the middle years
3. Creating new models of provision in structures and approaches to maximise opportunities for literacy learning and development including the organisation of teams of teachers to facilitate planning and coordination of programs and to build closer relationships between students and teams of teachers.
4. Transforming school and classroom cultures, which emphasise teaching explicitly about text and language, using shared models to guide literacy teaching and learning, and ensuring that classroom learning environments foster active, constructivist learning; meaningful and authentic purposes; metacognition; reflection; and self-assessment
5. Promoting involvement of the wider community in literacy education through developing and implementing closer links with outside agencies in order to enrich students' literacy and learning as well as engagement
6. Implementing strategic elements designed to improve literacy and learning outcomes for middle years students through a multi-pronged approach targeting change using the General Design for a Whole-School Approach to School Improvement as a framework for improving educational provision.

These recommendations provide a framework for improving literacy education in schools. A detailed explanation of each of these recommendations is available in the Executive Summary of the report, *Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years: Major*

Report on the Middle Years Literacy Research Project, which is available on www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research is needed in relation to:

- Ways of providing teachers with data and analyses, information and expertise to identify and intervene with ‘at risk’ students
- The development of programs engaging students with the challenges of new technologies, skills and practices
- Developing whole school models for literacy education, including assessment and reporting issues
- The significance of the role of literacy coordinator
- Ways of acknowledging literacy is a focal point in all key learning areas
- Identifying effective literacy teaching and learning practices in classrooms
- The significance of providing interesting and multiple texts in all key learning areas.

MIDDLE YEARS LITERACY RESEARCH PROJECT

The *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* was part of the Commonwealth Secondary School Literacy and Numeracy Initiative to establish cross-sectoral projects focused on improving the development of literacy and numeracy of low-achieving students. It was undertaken by the Department of Education and Training, in partnership with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria by Deakin University, Faculty of Education, Consultancy and Development Unit.

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SCHOOLS

Donvale Christian College, Forest Hill Secondary College, Gilmore College for Girls, Murtoa Secondary College, Murtoa Lutheran School, North Geelong Secondary College, Parade College, Parkmore Primary School, St Aloysius North Melbourne, Thomastown Secondary College, Wooranna Park Primary School, Xavier: Kostka Hall

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