Schools that are ‘high-performing’, with successful outcomes for all students, have in common an approach to literacy that features minimum variation across classrooms. A ‘whole school approach’ to literacy is well placed to:

- enable all students to succeed, including those who struggle with literacy,
- promote literacy as a general capability across the curriculum.

There is no single definition of a whole school approach, but most descriptions share key features:

- collective and collaborative action by a whole school community,
- cohesive response to diverse learning needs,
- culture of ongoing improvement.

Whole school approach in the 2018 Tasmanian Literacy and Numeracy Framework:

- The leadership team leads the development of whole school improvement planning using inquiry cycles.
- The Good Teaching Literacy and Numeracy guides form the basis of practice.
- All teachers are responsible for the literacy and numeracy growth of students within English and Mathematics and across the curriculum.
- Literacy and numeracy are prioritised in school planning.
- Teachers understand and use agreed models and practices to support literacy and numeracy learning.

This fact sheet is based on our research in Tasmania. It outlines three common characteristics considered useful by school staff and points to four key aspects of whole school approaches to literacy that enable positive literacy achievements.

In our research, three characteristics were commonly regarded as helpful for fostering a whole school approach:

- **Structures**: a scheduled and regular literacy block in the school timetable and/or the whole-part-whole workshop structure to teach literacy (and other learning areas) across the school.
- **Shared resources**: school-based collections of literacy resources that were collaboratively developed, easily accessible, used for induction for new staff, and kept current to reflect the school’s data, new department resources, and new research.
- **School culture**: collaborative and collegial school cultures, built on teamwork and trust.

“We had a look at what was already in place and what people have been doing here for a while. We had a look at our literacy data and … worked out which areas needed a bit more targeting and then we aligned best practice with our pedagogical approach, the Good Teaching Guides, and the Australian Curriculum, so they’re all aligned.”
Implementing any change on an organisation-wide scale entails first securing buy-in by all stakeholders. In the case of schools, this includes members of the whole school community. It is crucial that teaching staff want to engage with the process. This includes:

- **Shifting mindsets**: school leaders building trust and providing support to enable staff to change “the mindset from ‘this is what I do’ to ‘this is what we do’”.
- **Facilitating ‘bottom up’ change**: school leaders supporting teaching staff to drive change and encouraging shared ownership.

“We really learned from [one] experience that you can’t have one captain leave and the ship sink. It’s got to be a whole school approach. Everybody’s got to be on board.”

Once buy-in has been achieved, school leaders can more easily move towards promoting consistency, which can support improved outcomes for students. This has two key aspects:

- **Consistent practice**: at a general level based on shared understandings of literacy; specifically using the same structures (see above); and consistency in framing explicit learning intentions and success criteria, and in assessment practices. This requires staff to agree which literacy practices are ‘non-negotiable’.
- **Consistency in language**: using the same terminology and meta-language about literacy, to reflect shared understandings across the school.

“Part of that process has been curriculum mapping. We’ve been looking at pulling out the curriculum and saying “okay, what have we done? What are our tight bits and what are our non-negotiables there?” … Now it’s more methodical and structured. So we’re finding that consistency has been great for children moving between classes”.

In addition:

- **Flexibility** is also important: consistency does not mean everything is mandated or scripted. There is flexibility for teachers to adapt agreed practices to their own skills, style, and students.

“It’s around consistency, not conformity, because you’ve got to allow for innovation. Otherwise, you don’t have passionate and motivated teachers.”
Collective responsibility is essential for implementing a whole school approach to literacy. This means:

- The success and achievement of all students is the focus for all staff.

  “Everybody in the school owns the success of our students, so that collective responsibility is really built-in to our whole school approach and we have high expectations about that”.

- Ensuring that “all educators see themselves as teachers of literacy” (p.18).

  “Because it is a whole school responsibility, it is basically every single subject area’s responsibility to teach language ... That’s the gateway to one’s engagement or understanding of subject matter”.

Implementation of a whole school approach is a slow, complex, and ongoing process of incremental organisational change in which ongoing effort and optimism are key.

- Integral to this work is the understanding that a whole school approach to literacy is a means to an end—the end being better literacy outcomes for all students—and not an end in itself.

- It requires a long-term commitment to achieve deep and lasting cultural change through ongoing collaborative professional learning. It is “always a work in progress” because “there’s always more to improve on ... always more to do”.

- It requires system support: a whole of Department approach to support the whole school approach.

  “It takes a long time for change to occur. You can’t do it in 12 months [or] 2 years. You have to embed it in the philosophy of the teacher, and the pedagogy of the teacher”.

- Once a critical mass of staff members has tipped the balance in favour of change, the school community tends to move into a phase of consolidating for sustainability.

- Even in those schools where a whole school approach was well on the way to being ‘second nature’, the leadership team was aware of the need to continually revisit and review practice.

  “We’re refining and as staff are turning over, we’re finding a need to revisit regularly around what our tight practices are here, so that they are consistent from each class moving through”.

REFERENCES

1 Australian Government. (2016). *Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes*.


   http://ecite.utas.edu.au/135644


For information about the review, other factsheets and five detailed reports, see: https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects

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