

Shifting the Focus:

Achievement Information for Professional Learning

*A Summary of the Sustainability of Professional
Development in Literacy: Parts 1 and 2*

The full report is available at
www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/pdinliteracy

Comment [MoE1]: I think it is important for any reader of this document to know at the outset that in 2004 Toko School had 90% of the children reading at or above their chronological age. In 2005 we had 92% of children reading at or above their chronological age! We are a high performing school that want to look even further and more critically at our teaching of reading practice!

Research led by Dr Helen Timperley, University of Auckland

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Some Definitions

The research uses a number of key phrases, which are defined below.

Professional learning community

A professional learning community is one in which teachers update their professional knowledge and skills within the context of an organised, school-wide system for improving teaching practices. In addition, teachers' efforts, individually and collectively, are focused on the goal of improving student learning and achievement and making the school as a whole become a high-performing organisation.

Professional autonomy

Professional autonomy is part of the traditional view of professionalism, in which individual teachers are responsible for deciding which teaching methods to use within their classroom.

Traditional view of professionalism

The traditional view of professionalism encompasses three features: a specialised knowledge base, a strong service ethic with a commitment to meeting the needs of students, and the capacity to self-regulate or act autonomously.

Deprivatisation of practice

Deprivatisation of practice refers to teachers working in collaboration with their colleagues rather than in isolation in their classrooms. They share student achievement information and discuss what teaching methods to use to improve student achievement. Deprivatisation of practice means teachers have less professional autonomy.

Service ethic

In the context of teaching, having a service ethic means that teachers, as professionals, are committed to serving the needs of their students.

The "new professionalism"

The research suggests a new definition for professionalism in teaching that emphasises schools as professional learning communities. While it retains some traditional aspects of professionalism, such as a specialised knowledge base, professional autonomy is replaced by a more collaborative approach where teachers discuss student achievement information, observe one another teaching, and modify their teaching methods in the light of achievement information.

Making achievement the touchstone

Student achievement is the criterion against which all teaching decisions are made and measured.

Evidence-based enquiry

Teachers reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching by measuring it against student achievement information and change their teaching methods according to what the achievement information shows is, or is not, working.

Overview

As professionals, teachers must continually update, deepen, and refine their knowledge and skills through professional development.

The goal of professional development should be to raise student achievement. To be judged effective, therefore, professional development must result in ongoing benefits as measured by improvements in student achievement. However, there is a growing body of research that shows that much professional development does not lead to long-term changes in teaching that improve student achievement.

Research by Dr Helen Timperley of the University of Auckland presents a new approach based on her evaluation of the long-term effectiveness of a professional development programme for teaching five- and six-year-olds to read.

She suggests that the focus for professional development should shift from using external courses and workshops to developing strong professional learning communities within schools, where professional learning is built into teachers' everyday working responsibilities. In particular, schools, as professional learning communities, need to analyse how particular teaching methods impact on student learning.

Dr Timperley's research raises issues about and identifies principles for professional learning that are relevant to all schools and teachers.

Comment [MoE2]: I wonder whether the literacy development we are entering into in 2006 has the exact same idea... This was for year 1 and 2 children... I imagine there is good relevance to Year 7 and 8 but this is something to question and follow up.

Key Messages

The research found that the following messages are important:

- The schools that are most successful in sustaining high levels of achievement are those whose teachers base their teaching methods on student achievement information.
- Professional development needs to focus on raising teachers' expectations of student achievement.
- Student achievement must be the criterion or touchstone for measuring the effectiveness of teaching methods.
- The concept of "being professional" changes when student achievement is the touchstone. For example, professional autonomy may hinder rather than support the goal of improving student achievement.
- Professional development programmes need to be integrated into teachers' everyday working responsibilities rather than be isolated, one-off programmes held off-site.
- Teachers must have ongoing support if professional development is to have a long-term, positive effect on student learning.
- The schools that are most successful in raising student achievement are those that create strong professional learning communities.

How the Research Was Done

The Context

The research was part of a much larger project, Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otago (SEMO), which was aimed at raising achievement significantly for students in these two communities.

The research looked at how seven schools in Mangere and Otago continued to use the methods learned in a professional development course on more effective ways of teaching new entrant and year 1 students to read. Earlier research showed that the methods covered in the professional development programme led to improvements in students' reading levels in the low-decile schools.

Although the research was conducted in low-decile schools, its findings with respect to professional learning are relevant to all schools.

The Aim

The aim of the research was to find out:

- whether, as a result of the professional development, teachers had changed their expectations of what students from low-decile schools could achieve;
- whether the positive effects on student achievement continued in the eighteen months after the professional development programme took place, that is, the long-term effectiveness of the professional development;
- which factors were most associated with ongoing success in those schools that had the highest levels of student achievement;
- the implications of these factors for the support that schools need to give their teachers after professional development has finished.

The Professional Development Course

The professional development course used in this research was developed and delivered by Gwenneth Phillips of the Child Literacy Foundation. It was part of the Early Childhood Primary Link (ECPL) aspect of SEMO.

The course catered for teachers of five- and six-year-olds and their literacy leaders. It was intensive and ongoing, involving ten half-day sessions over two school terms. Much of the time in the professional development sessions was spent discussing and addressing teacher concerns about literacy, how to teach it, and alternative practices.

More information on the ECPL literacy project and Gwenneth Phillips's professional development course is available in Picking up the Pace: A Summary (Ministry of Education, 2002) or in the full report of the research, Picking up the Pace, which is available on the Internet at <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/pickingupthepace>

Comment [MoE3]: We are getting 2 days a term across the 5 teachers! So clearly the level of professional development is less! Is there need for additional funding right here right now while Lesley is available.. or another 'expert'?

What the Research Involved

The research analysed the reading achievement of six-year-olds in three consecutive years.

- The scores in the first year provided the baseline data and were taken before teachers had participated in the professional development.
- The data in the second year were for children who turned six either while their teacher participated in the professional development or in the following six months.
- The data in the third year were for children turning six in that year.

In particular, the research looked at text reading (using running records) and word recognition (using the BURT word list¹), the two scores in which, historically, the children in low-decile schools have achieved well below the expected levels for six-year-olds.²

School factors

As well as checking whether the professional development programme resulted in ongoing improvements in reading achievement, the research also looked at a range of school-related factors to identify which were linked most closely with ongoing improvements in student achievement.

The factors analysed included:

- the processes used by individual schools to teach reading;
- decile ranking, students' skills on entry to school, class size, and staff turnover;
- teachers' professional attitudes and values.

All these processes and factors were studied over eighteen months. The information was obtained from interviews with teachers and literacy leaders and from observations of meetings and classroom teaching.

The Results

The research found that the achievement gains in reading for six-year-olds in all the schools continued into the third year. However, the achievement of two schools – schools F and G – stood out, with their students achieving at the expected reading level for six-year-olds. The students at the other schools, although showing improved achievement, did not achieve the same high levels as schools F and G.

Successful schools focus on achievement information

The factor that made the most difference for the success of schools F and G was the way the schools focused on using student achievement information. These schools constantly monitored the children's progress using running records, and teachers used the results to adjust their classroom teaching to ensure that each child's reading improved.

The research found that contextual factors (such as students' skills on starting school) were not significant in identifying the high-achieving schools.

Neither were the traditional values of professionalism among the factors that made the difference in the two most successful schools. Instead, the research concluded that one traditional value, professional autonomy, may, in fact, be a hindrance to high achievement.

Teachers raise their expectations

The research also found that, as a result of the professional development, the teachers had raised their expectations of what the children could achieve. In addition, teachers had maintained those expectations eighteen months after the training was completed.

Comment [MoE4]: So two of seven schools with an intensive PD program continued to make a significant difference. Achieving at the reading level for 6 year olds...

¹ eading comprehension, which is closely linked to understandings of reading achievement, was not included in this analysis.

² efer to expected text levels identified in Picking up the Pace, page 112: "In general, average progress 6.0-year-olds are expected to be at levels 9–14 (see Reading Recovery, 1993) or Blue to Orange on the Ready to Read colour wheel"

The Implications

Teachers Can Make a Difference

One of the impediments to raising the achievement levels of students has been the low expectations teachers and school leaders have for their students. This is because teachers feel that a wide range of external factors, such as poverty or children speaking English as their second language, mean that, no matter what a teacher or school does, the external disadvantages cannot be overcome.

However, as the earlier report, *Picking up the Pace*, showed, teachers and schools can make a difference to student achievement, regardless of the external circumstances of their students. This follow-up research found that teachers had changed their expectations of how well children could achieve. It also found that those expectations were maintained over the year following the professional development because the teachers came to realise that what they did had a direct impact on what children learned and accepted they could make a difference.

As a result of their changed expectations, teachers altered their teaching methods. For example, teachers started children reading from the first day at school rather than waiting until they thought the children were ready to learn.

The Importance of Student Achievement Information

The two schools (schools F and G) that were most successful in maintaining student achievement at the expected levels for six-year-olds emphasised the importance of using individual student achievement information to modify their teaching methods and improve student achievement.

Information-based discussion

The teachers in schools F and G met regularly with their literacy leaders to discuss the achievement of their students. They spent most of their meeting time discussing problems and solutions that arose from the achievement information. They concentrated on how individual teachers could help specific children whose achievement was not progressing at the expected rate.

Teachers talked about their students in specific detail, using the achievement information.

Modifying teaching methods

In schools F and G, staff discussions were followed up with classroom observations by senior teachers, who helped teachers put new strategies into practice.

The teachers constantly looked at their teaching methods, focusing on how effective their methods were with low-achieving students and how they might change them to improve student results.

Changing teacher attitudes

In one school (school E), there was little progress in the second year in improving student achievement. However, student achievement improved dramatically in the third year, which coincided with the point at which the teachers began to critically analyse achievement information and discuss its meaning for teaching practice.

These changes in attitude from the second to the third year are reflected in the following comments from teachers in school E. In the second year, the first teacher questioned whether running records were the best way to assess the children, saying they were basically used to ensure that records were kept so that the Education Review Office could check which level the children in the class were at. The second teacher emphasised the importance of children's happiness and confidence but not their levels of achievement.

In the third year, these same two teachers were highly focused on the children's achievement information and how they could use the information to adjust their teaching methods.

Year 3 (after using achievement information)**Teacher 1:**

I am looking at this level and am forever comparing it with my graph and seeing how I am supposed to get this lot to level fifteen when they turn six and is there anything else that I can do. (page 92)

Teacher 2:

I look back and see how that child had started and what I have done to make [that child] move up. So with teaching and planning for the other children that are not very successful, I'm trying to do the same thing to see if it works. (pages 92 and 93)

Focus and urgency

The quality of the discussion on student achievement in the syndicate meetings was also different. In the most successful schools (schools F and G), there was a focus and urgency attached to solving problems and making improvements. Potentially emotive issues, such as teachers feeling they could be criticised for having children who were not achieving, were defused by being dealt with in a matter-of-fact way. The focus was on the children, their achievement, and the best way to “move the children on”.

For example, the literacy leader at school F began a meeting to discuss student progress by saying:

I will give you back your own data individually and then maybe if we could have a talk about some of the individual children and the problems that may be occurring. (page 83)

At school G, the meeting had been postponed for a week. The literacy leader began the meeting with a sense of urgency about the data analysis and teaching implications:

We had to postpone the meeting until today but I have made the graph available to some of you already ... instead of waiting until today because it would have meant we lost a few valuable days ... (page 84)

In contrast, opening statements at other schools were less urgent, and the discussions did not identify particular teachers or particular problems. For example, the school E literacy leader began the meeting:

OK, so what we thought we'd do for this meeting, just to remind ourselves, we're going to go through and just list how we start off [the reading lessons], what are the key things we say, what are the key things to look for, and see how far we get tonight. So who'd like to go?

The literacy leader at school B began the meeting like this:

What we're going to do today is ... just very quickly go through the latest bit of data – I've given you a copy but I know it's a paper war ... if you don't want it just give it back to me ...

Using evidence-based enquiry to raise student achievement

The two most successful schools, schools F and G, displayed the following characteristics.

- Teachers based their teaching on discussion and analysis of class-specific achievement information.
- The pervading question was always “How can we do this better to raise student achievement?”
- The effectiveness of teachers' efforts was tested against student achievement information, and teaching was modified according to what the information showed did or did not work.

Do other factors make a difference?

The research also looked at a number of other variables, such as students' skills on starting school and teachers' attitudes, to see if they were associated with the differences in achievement between the schools.

The research found that these factors were not associated with the differences in achievement. In six of the seven schools, for example, the teachers valued the approach to literacy they had covered in the professional development programme and were motivated to implement the programme fully, yet only two of the six schools (schools F and G) had maintained high student achievement. This indicates that while it may be important to have positive attitudes, such attitudes on their own are not enough to make the difference to student learning.

Factors that make a difference to student achievement

The schools that were making a difference to their students' achievement displayed the following characteristics.

- Meetings were held regularly (up to twice a term) and focused on what teachers were doing with individual children who were not progressing at the expected rate.
- The meetings had urgency – there was not a day to waste in teaching the children to read.
- Senior teachers observed teachers in their classrooms and provided support in finding new strategies to teach children who were not learning at the required pace.
- Achievement information for every child was available, and teachers discussed children's achievement in detail.
- Teachers were prepared to change their teaching methods when the achievement information showed that a teaching method was not working.

Since this research was completed, the five schools with lower achievement levels have adopted the professional learning approach of schools F and G. Every five weeks, they look at achievement information and talk about the children they want to target and the teaching approach they will adopt with these students. The achievement levels in all these schools have improved impressively.

Effective Professional Development

The research found that the traditional measure of effectiveness of professional development – teacher satisfaction with a course – is inadequate. While most of the teachers and literacy leaders in the study were satisfied with the professional development and were highly motivated to implement it, this did not necessarily raise student achievement.

The research also concluded that it is not sufficient to measure professional development by participation, especially as performance appraisal systems now require teachers to participate in professional development.

The main measure of the effectiveness of professional development is the extent to which it results in improved student learning and achievement.

Effective professional development relates to teachers' everyday working responsibilities and takes place within the school rather than consisting of one-off or ad hoc programmes that are not closely integrated into teachers' professional practice.

Effective professional development – professional development that improves student achievement – takes place within a strong professional learning community.

Creating a strong professional learning community

A professional learning community is one in which teachers update their professional knowledge and skills within the context of an organised school-wide system for improving teaching practices. Teachers' efforts, both individually and collectively, are focused on the goal of improving student learning and achievement.

The research literature identifies a strong professional learning community as one that displays the following characteristics:

- Teachers have shared norms and values (for example, that children can and should be at the expected levels of achievement for their age).
- There is a clear focus on student learning.
- Teachers talk about and reflect upon their professional practice in relation to how effectively it promotes student learning.
- Practice is "deprivatised" in the sense that all teachers share and discuss the progress of their students, based on the achievement information.
- Teachers collaborate with each other.

The two most successful schools in the research, schools F and G, had all the characteristics of a strong professional community (see table 1).

Table 1: Developing strong professional learning communities

Characteristic	Description
Shared norms and values and collectively agreed professional beliefs	All teachers share the belief that all students can learn successfully.
Clear focus on student learning	Raising student achievement is the key goal of the professional community.
Reflective dialogue	Teachers reflect on their professional practice with colleagues and evaluate its consequences for student learning.
An emphasis on "deprivatisation" of practice	Teachers interact with and get feedback from colleagues and team leaders in order to reflect on and improve practice.
Collaboration	Teachers observe and react to one another's teaching, curriculum, and assessment practice and engage in joint planning and curriculum development.

Comment [MoE5]: This is an area that Richard needs to develop with the staff and the Literacy leader. Clearer identified 'checkpoints' at set times... We do report and discuss, but I am beginning to believe it needs more structure. The reporting in 2006 at the end of each term, for Year 1 to 4, is a good step in the right direction.. This will be repeated at the end of each term and is the responsibility of unit holders within the junior school.

Developing internal systems for reviewing achievement

Shifting the focus of professionalism on to creating school-based professional learning communities means that school leaders must develop an internal system for reviewing the effectiveness of the school's teaching in terms of student learning. To do this, schools must:

- identify clear progress indicators for student performance;
- collect and review information that monitors student achievement;
- exert strong peer pressure among staff to meet the goals;
- ensure that teachers base their teaching decisions on student achievement information;
- ensure that the internal review systems are school-wide, that is, the systems apply to and are used by all teachers throughout the school, and the principal or other senior leader manages and monitors the systems.

Making Achievement the Touchstone

The research concludes that raising and maintaining student achievement is the criterion – the touchstone – for judging the effectiveness of a professional development programme and assessing the best teaching methods to use. This means that schools display the following characteristics:

- Teaching methods are informed by how well each student is achieving. If the achievement information shows that a student is not progressing at the expected rate, the teacher reflects on the teaching methods used and changes them according to what the achievement information shows will work. This is done in collaboration with other teachers and with team leaders.
- Progress indicators are set because they are a tool for raising and maintaining student achievement, not because schools need to set targets to comply with the Education Standards Act 2001.
- Teachers are evidence-based enquirers, and principals encourage the development of a professional learning community in their schools. Schools ensure that they make the relevant achievement information available to teachers.
- School leaders address any barriers (such as negative attitudes or lack of skills) to developing a professional learning community in their schools. The leaders develop a high level of trust so that the teachers do not feel threatened by changes to their autonomy or fear that they will have poor student achievement results used against them.
- The effectiveness of professional development is measured by the extent to which it results in significant and lasting improvements in student achievement. Performance appraisal systems require teachers to participate in professional development. However, participation on its own is not enough to raise student achievement. Nor are teachers' feelings of satisfaction a sufficient basis for judging the effectiveness of a professional development programme.
- Schools become strong professional learning communities where professional learning is built into teachers' everyday working responsibilities rather than focusing on one-off workshops and courses held off-site.
- As a professional learning community, a school does not prefer one pedagogical style over others. The teachers use student achievement as the criterion – the touchstone – for deciding which particular teaching methods to use. All methods are tested for their effectiveness in improving student achievement. If one method is less effective, adjustments are made.

Comment [MoE6]: The Literacy development of 2006/07 is an important aspect to remove any 'barriers.' It has been taken up as it is

1. Available
2. A focus which the Principal saw as an important part of the schools continued improvement!

A New Approach to Professional Development

In summary, this research proposes a new approach to professional development that is based on the following principles:

- The goal of all professional development is **raising student achievement**.
- Professional development uses an **evidence-based enquiry model**, where student achievement is used to measure the success or failure of the professional development.
- Professional development is best if it is held **within a school (not off-site)**.
- Providers of professional development and school principals **provide ongoing support for teachers**. This is important if the professional development is to make a sustained difference to teaching practice and, therefore, student learning.
- **Professional development is relevant to the everyday teaching and learning needs of teachers and students.**

The New Professionalism

The evidence-based enquiry model involves a shift from the traditional view of what it means to be professional (for example, that teachers are autonomous within their classrooms) to a new definition.

The “new professionalism”:

- emphasises the need for schools to become strong professional learning communities;
- **requires teachers to collaborate, that is, to “open their doors” to other teachers for observation, discuss the progress of their students, discuss ways to improve student achievement, and accept direction from their leaders in changing their methods where the evidence shows they need to change in order to “move a student along”;**
- requires teachers to believe in their ability to make a difference to student learning and achievement.