

## Supporting Teachers' Literacy Work in Key Groups

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### Introduction

How can academics effectively support the work of teachers in the development of children's literacy in schools and encourage them in their efforts to improve their work? This is one of the questions we are investigating in connection with a pilot program for professional development of teachers, called Regional Key Groups, currently conducted by the NSW Department of School Education (DSE) in the North West Region. A small group of teachers and parents has been formed in each of the six participating schools in order to identify the issues which they believe require improvement and development over the next 12 months. Parent involvement is a specific focus of the professional development model. Three of the participating groups have chosen to investigate the development of Profile Reporting for Year 7 pupils; another group is focusing on the development of co-operative learning strategies; and two groups are investigating the literacy needs and development of pupils in Years 6 and 7. We have been invited to support the work of the teachers in the two literacy groups, one from a primary school and the other from a secondary.

### Gaining Access to Teachers

Linking up with the combined literacy group has involved considerable effort on our part to make contact with schools, to make our resources known to teachers, to establish our credibility, and to develop trust between ourselves as teacher educators and the teachers. The process has involved prior work in the schools, public relations work, networking, and a mentor from within the school.

The process of trust building began for Kathy Watson when she became involved with the high school as the Vice President of the Parents and Citizens Association. This role provided many opportunities to discuss with parents and teachers common issues of concern and to establish rapport with teachers. During this time the principal and teachers learned about her classroom teaching experience and background in literacy education and she had occasion to speak informally about literacy across the curriculum. Later, the principal remembered her contribution and recommended her as the literacy consultant and as keynote speaker for the opening conference organised by the DSE to launch the Key Group project. Subsequently, she also gave two in-services on literacy across the curriculum at meetings for all the teachers in the two schools engaged in the literacy project. These

inservices presented a comprehensive definition of literacy, concentrating on the functions and forms of language. Example comparisons of science and literacy processes were explained to promote integration of subject areas.

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These inservices provided the foundation for further analysis of literacy activities included in the Year 7 Science and Mathematics courses. Her speech at the conference, the inservices, and the principal's recommendation, gained through her involvement with the P and C Association, established her credibility with the group.

Izabel Soliman's preliminary work involved conducting research previously in the secondary school and thus being known by the principal and some of the teachers and parents. She also wrote two articles for the local paper on different occasions on the topic of parental involvement in education which some of the teachers may have read. In addition, she organised a presentation at the University by the visiting school and family researcher, Joyce Epstein, which was well publicised and which many teachers attended, including two members of the literacy Key Group. On this occasion the speaker also spoke of my teaching and research in this area. Kathy drew her attention to the conference at which she was to speak and which Izabel also attended. At this conference, both of us frequently mentioned our desire to assist teachers in their work. Subsequently, Kathy recommended Izabel to the literacy group teachers to whom she provided an inservice on the various ways they might involve parents in their group, ranging from supportive to decision making roles. Thus Izabel's credibility with the group was influenced by her previous work in the school, by her writing in the local paper, through her association with an overseas expert and a local colleague, the principal and some of the teachers, and by the provision of an inservice which was positively received by teachers.

#### The Selected Activities

Over two meetings held several weeks apart, with the five participating teachers and two parents who comprised the literacy group, plans were made to complete the following:

- \* to develop literacy profiles of students in Years 6 and 7 in each of the schools;
- \* to review literacy development across the curriculum;
- \* to conduct joint curriculum development in connection with visits by the primary pupils to the secondary school to attend some Year 7 science lessons;
- \* to develop teaching/ learning resources;
- \* to focus on literacy development in the context of science;
- \* to develop interactive science homework materials for Year 7 pupils;
- \* and to form autonomous parent reference groups which would discuss their expectations for pupils' literacy development in Years 6 and 7 which would be conveyed to teachers for their consideration.

These projects were chosen by the teachers after much discussion, examination of other projects, such as Talk To A Literacy Learner, and of curriculum materials, such as the Literacy and Learning Program: Science KLA Book. These materials are available in the Curriculum Library of the Faculty of Education where Kathy organised a meeting of the Key Group, as part of our deliberate strategy to strengthen links between the Faculty and the teachers while promoting easy access to curriculum materials. The projects selected by the teachers reflected their perceptions that the transition Years 6 and 7 are not easy for some students and that schools could do more to assist the process by focusing on the development of literacy skills.

So far the Key Group has held six meetings which we have attended. Progress to date in the project has included the decision by the secondary teachers to promote parental involvement through the design of "interactive" homework in the science area, after they had examined and discussed prototype materials developed by Joyce Epstein (1992) and her colleagues at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore Maryland. Our input has focused largely on this aspect of the group's work.

Interactive homework is designed by teachers to encourage pupils to talk to an adult at home about what they are learning at school and thus improve the family member's knowledge about the pupil's schoolwork. (See Appendix 1 for an example of interactive science homework designed by Epstein et al., 1992)

At the high school, interactive homework also became a means for increasing parents' awareness of literacy across the curriculum. The teachers designed the first interactive homework on energy use in the home, which was sent home with all the Year 7 pupils, with an explanatory sheet to parents describing the purpose of the project and their anticipated involvement. Pupils had two weeks to complete the homework and to return it to their classroom teachers along with

feedback from parents requested on the homework sheet. Seventy percent of the homework sheets have been returned and parents comments recorded. Another interactive homework on the topic of astronomy is on the drawing board.

We have also encouraged teachers to become involved in action research in the area of literacy and to submit an application for funding to the NSW Children's Literacy and Research Node which was offering Seed Grants to teachers. The group decided to apply and to base their application on their work on interactive homework which they intended to continue into 1995.

The process of completing the grant application has helped to focus the plans and goals of this group. Their commitment to the grant application also helped to focus their collaborative efforts to improve literacy across the curriculum. Recently they learned that their application was not successful, however, the principal of the school has decided to support their efforts as planned in their application.

The original plans have been maintained but the teachers are finding that achieving their goals to review literacy development across the curriculum, to conduct joint curriculum development and to focus on literacy development in the context of science has meant many hours of extra work. To review literacy practices, the primary teachers are compiling a list of competencies and outcomes for year six students which will be passed to the year seven teachers. This task is based on the K-6 Profiles so the teachers feel it is practical. The primary teachers have also invited two secondary teachers to visit their classrooms to observe how they teach English across the curriculum. This visit is offered to demonstrate what children are exposed to, and what is emphasised and practised in reading, writing, talking and listening in all subject areas.

The high school teachers have focussed on a joint curriculum program and inter school teacher exchanges. This has involved many volunteer hours of work by the high school science teacher who is extremely committed and energetic. A year six class was invited to visit the high school for a demonstration Science experience. This visit was very exciting for the year six students as it provided the opportunity to see a real science laboratory and engage in some simple electricity experiments.

The science teacher emphasised all language processes and new terminology was introduced orally with the directions as students were directed to work cooperatively to solve the electricity problem. The students enjoyed the challenge and eagerly chatted about possible solutions until they figured out their circuit task. They were then directed to record their discoveries on a journal complete with a diagram and parts of the experiment labelled with newly learned

terminology. This is a wonderful example which demonstrates how easily literacy processes can be incorporated with science processes.

## Our Goals

Our goals in this project relate to our work as teacher educators and to our desire to support the work of teachers. As teacher educators we are interested in developing our understanding of the following:

- \* teachers' understanding of literacy development and literacy teaching which underpin the materials they develop;
- \* the level of parental involvement that is sought by teachers and the level that appears to be acceptable and practical to them in their unique situation;
- \* how the concepts and practices we suggest fit in with the teachers' beliefs and practices and what determines whether or not new practices are seen to work.

In relation to supporting the work of teachers we are concerned with developing a collaborative team spirit and with encouraging teachers to reflect upon and to improve their practice.

## Reflections, Achievements and Challenges

### Level of Parental Involvement Sought and Considered Acceptable

While there are two regularly attending "parent" members who have volunteered to be on the Key Group neither of them may be characterised as a lay person since one is a teacher and the other is a teacher educator. In discussion they seldom take the perspective of a non-teaching parent. In recognition of this, the members of the Key Group have made some effort to attract non-teaching parents to attend the meetings. A non-teaching parent, who is the president of the secondary school council, has attended the last two meetings. Previously another parent of a pupil in the primary school attended two meetings but no one remembered to inform her of the time and place of the last meeting. Meetings were held between 4 and 5pm and the possibility of accommodating working parents by holding meetings after 5 or in the evenings was not raised as an issue for discussion. These omissions could indicate a weak commitment to parent involvement or their difficulties in organising collaborative teamwork with people outside the school. The teachers' choice of interactive homework as the strategy for obtaining increased parental involvement may have been made because it does not entail increased time spent by teachers in meeting with parents face to face but still provides parental feedback.

There has not yet been an energetic effort to develop the reference groups of parents, an idea which had been endorsed by the group as an appropriate way of obtaining access to parental views. The difficulties of organising a meeting of possibly interested parents was

stressed by one of the teaching parents who also perceived parents as lacking specialist knowledge and thus unable to make an appropriate response in the area of literacy. That such an attitude disempowers parents and undermines the notion of parent/teacher partnerships was not raised as an issue for discussion at this time. However, this was not a view strongly endorsed by all members of the group and there is a possibility that such a parent meeting may yet be organised through the strategy of a social occasion, such as a pot luck dinner which we suggested to the group. It remains to be seen how we might further encourage activities designed to obtain increased parental involvement as sensing some reluctance we have been cautious not to appear to be pushing too much.

We had hoped to be involved in the design of the first interactive homework, however, we only received a copy after it had already been sent home with the Year 7 pupils. We interpreted this sequence of events as indicating that our willingness to assist teachers in the project was not sufficiently appreciated by all the group members, that they were reluctant to contact us and that we would have to take greater initiative in communicating with them in relation to various tasks they were undertaking in the project. With that assumption Izabel provided the teachers, without being asked, with a page and a half of constructive criticism on the first interactive homework they designed, suggesting that this would assist them in evaluating pupil and parent feedback and in designing the second interactive homework they were planning to send. (See Appendix 2 for copy of letter sent to teachers.)

Kathy also took the initiative to check out how the teachers had dealt with the comments they had received from parents in the space provided on the homework sheet. (See Appendix 1 for format.) When she learned that the plan was to return the sheets to the classroom teachers without recording parents' comments she gently pointed out how much valuable feedback from parents would be lost and suggested a simple technique for recording and for coding comments. This was accepted by the teachers, however, their neglect to record it on their own initiative made us wonder about the strength of their commitment to involve parents.

At a subsequent meeting we learned that the plan for the second interactive homework exercise included astrology as well as astronomy. We were concerned that a goal of interactive homework may be lost, that is, that it should not just be a vehicle for joint parent/teacher activity but that it should be focused on the curriculum to enable

parents to become better informed about its content. We wanted to find a way of communicating our concerns to teachers without alienating them and therefore decided to do this by providing a checklist, without being asked, for designing the second interactive homework. The checklist focused on its content and design and on suggestions for collating feedback and for planning follow up (See Appendix 3 for checklist.) We have not yet seen a copy of the second homework exercise and have not been able to assess if and how the suggestions have been used.

We also decided to provide additional input, without being asked, in relation to giving feedback to parents on the first homework exercise.

We did this again with the assumption that teachers were too busy to meet with us outside of school time to plan the second assignment but that our input would encourage them in their work, and demonstrate our interest and willingness to help. We therefore drafted a letter that they could include in the school Newsletter which provided parents with a summary of their comments in relation to the first interactive

homework exercise. (See Appendix 4 for letter to parents.) We suggested that it was important to give parents feedback if the group wanted to continue obtaining their co-operation in the activity. We have yet to find out if this letter or a version of it has been included in the Newsletter.

#### Developing a Collaborative Team Spirit

Our concern was to develop a collaborative team spirit in working with teachers whereby we assume that the outcome of the collaboration of all those involved will be a superior product than might be achieved if the tasks were divided among the members of the group and completed individually without some deliberation by all members of the group. We also believe that collaboration may be nurtured by listening to and accepting each other's ideas, and developing the project mutually so that it will be appropriate for the particular school context.

We did not wish to be seen as directing or taking over the project, or as making teachers dependent on us, but as members of the team. We were, therefore, somewhat uncertain about how much input we should make if it wasn't requested. Nevertheless, we wished to inject our enthusiasm and interest into the project to encourage the teachers' work and to provide constructive criticism. Our efforts were constrained by the fact that some plans and decisions would be made by teachers in the schools between meetings, at times convenient to them but without us present. Sometimes we would not be informed of the results of such decisions. We did not think that this was done deliberately to exclude us, nevertheless, it seemed to indicate some difficulty in building a collaborative team spirit. We tried to

overcome this obstacle in our work with the group by persevering and supporting their work. It was after this episode that we decided to contribute unsolicited feedback on work completed to date in the form of the checklist for designing the homework.

We perceived our interactions with the group to be a delicate process of finding the right tone and of timing our contributions appropriately. The fact that two of us were engaged in the project proved to be fortuitous and enabled us to review and to provide each other with feedback on our performance at each meeting. Discussions after each meeting helped us review perceptions of the appropriateness of our behaviour and contributions, degree of tact and diplomacy, and respective interpretations of the significance of the events.

In addition to collaborating with the teachers and parents we soon perceived another focus point for our work with the group: that of encouraging co-operative and supportive behaviours among the Key Group members, and a stronger task orientation. This took the form of modelling attentive listening when one person was speaking rather than starting small sub-group competing discussions; encouraging elaboration of points made by individual members and reacting to their contributions; following an agenda when one had been formulated; and encouraging group members to relate their plans for activities to the goals of the project and come to decisions about a plan of action after discussion rather than postponing decision making.

The group has decided to continue with interactive homework linked with science and literacy in 1995 and has expressed an interest in action research and the collection of additional data on their work. This indicates to us that they feel a sense of ownership of the project and that we are probably on the right track in our approach. We have also received morale boosting comments from the Director of Education in

relation to the group's work at the recent year end conference held to report on each Key Group's activities. This was second meeting deliberately held at the University in order to symbolise the development of co-operation between the teacher educators and teachers.

On this occasion a teacher from our Key Group also gave a comprehensive and detailed report on the group's activities and indicated the groups' appreciation of our contributions. This has all helped to dispel some apprehension on our part that the project may mean more to us than the Key Group members.

Our involvement in this professional development program has evolved beyond merely providing resources in the area of literacy development and parent involvement. Our roles have expanded to support teachers' needs as we perceived these emerge during the course of this project. As our sense of trust and collaboration strengthens we believe that this group of teachers appreciates our support in helping them to

participate in classroom research and to achieve their goals. and we look forward to participating in the project during 1995.

## References

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