



***Paper prepared for***

***The Australian Association for Research in Education***

***Brisbane, December 2002***

**Towards a model of Collaboration and Empowerment in Middle Years  
Literacy Research**

Sarah Culican: Deakin University, Australia

Marie Emmitt: Deakin University, Australia

**Addresses for communication**

Deakin University

221 Burwood Highway

Burwood

Australia, 3125

Email : [sjculica@deakin.edu.au](mailto:sjculica@deakin.edu.au)

[memmitt@deakin.edu.au](mailto:memmitt@deakin.edu.au)

## **TOWARDS A MODEL OF COLLABORATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN MIDDLE YEARS LITERACY RESEARCH**

### **Introduction**

With the corporatisation of universities, funded research carried out by universities can raise a number of issues regarding research methodologies and ethics. Underlying these issues are deeper tensions emerging from incongruent ideologies, even conflicts of interest, regarding the role and identity of academic research within the context of the corporate marketplace. The pressure on faculties of education to be entrepreneurial in competitive tendering for educational research projects poses challenges for issues of ethics and ownership amidst the scenario of unrealistic timelines and inadequate budgets which often characterise these short-term research contracts. Written from the perspectives of the Project Leader and Project Officer, this paper discusses these issues in relation to the recent *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* carried out by Deakin University.

The project used a model of collaboration and empowerment which was in many ways incongruent with the prevailing understandings, objectives and imperatives of the tendering parties. As well as enacting sound principles and ethics in educational research, our aim in the project was to maximise involvement in and ownership of the research by participating case study schools. These goals were a challenge, given the constraints of the project brief and the ongoing control of the tendering group. In this paper we highlight the particular design of the study and ways the research team addressed issues of ethics, ownership and autonomy in this school-based educational research.

We commence this discussion by describing the project, the project brief, the research design and what we aimed to achieve through the research methods we used. We then discuss issues around reporting the research and the dissemination of the findings. As the focus of this paper is on the research design and issues we faced in the project, rather than on the research findings and recommendations, we have provided the website details for the full report (See References) and included the Executive Summary as an appendix (See Appendix 1).

### **The Middle Years Literacy Research Project**

It is within this context of applying for advertised research projects that the *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* was carried out by Deakin University as part of *Successful Interventions-a Literacy and Numeracy Research Initiative*. Funded through the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), the *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* represented the third and final phase of this joint research project involving collaboration between the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV), the Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria (DEET) and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV).

While the focus of earlier phases of the *Successful Interventions* research was on literacy intervention programs and strategies in secondary schools, the aim of this third phase was to investigate ways that middle years teachers - whether in the upper primary or junior secondary years, whether English Key Learning Area teachers or, indeed, any key learning area teachers - maximise their effectiveness as literacy educators in the mainstream classroom context.

The project brief was to provide information and recommendations to education 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 School Improvement* (Hill and Crévola 1997).

Over the past decade, there has been a growing awareness in Australia 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. Defined in Victoria as spanning Years 5 to 9, this stage of schooling has become a major focus in educational policy at national and state levels, thus making middle years literacy a political issue and one that attracts increased funding and resources.

The aim of the project team was to build on teachers' existing knowledge and expertise, and to embed effective literacy pedagogy in the broader context of effective teaching and learning. The team believed that the appropriate way to achieve the terms of the brief was to collect rich data over time about classroom practices and student learning, while at the same time creating an authorised space for ongoing teacher dialogue and professional learning. Immediately, we faced our first challenge. The time line to complete the project was much too short. This timeline became even shorter with delays caused by negotiations around the contract, and the need for endorsement from the tendering bodies with regard to selection of both case study schools and assessment tools.

A second challenge related to the fact that, while we wished to locate the research firmly within the qualitative paradigm, the tendering bodies wanted hard data in the form of numbers and statistics for political purposes. Obviously some compromises had to be made.

## **The Research Design**

The research was framed within the qualitative paradigm and was designed to identify, trial and analyse best practice in literacy education, using case studies of schools as the major source of data collection. The methodology involved a number of key elements including:

- working closely with 12 case study schools
- selecting and using a suitable assessment instrument
  
- conducting a literature review
  
- investigating Victorian research projects and strategies with specific relevance to this project.
  
- linking with international and national groups and individuals with relevant experience and expertise
  
- consulting with a wide range of groups including regional personnel, additional schools and networks and special needs groups.

## **Selection of Case Study Schools**

The twelve case study schools in the research were broadly representative of the three education sectors and of the range and diversity of school contexts and communities to be found in Victoria. The selection of case study schools, in consultation with system and sector authorities, was based on the need to be representative of the three educational sectors, as

well as the range and diversity of school contexts and communities in Victoria. Selection criteria needed to balance the following characteristics:

- government, Independent and Catholic sectors
- remote, regional and metropolitan locations
- primary, secondary and P-12 levels (with at least one case of a secondary with its associate primary school)
- high to low socio-economic status
- high to low cultural diversity
- small and large student numbers
- co-educational and single sex.

Given the relatively short time frame for the project (18 months) it was important to choose schools that were already considering literacy as a priority, were trying new approaches to literacy education, and/or were implementing or planning the implementation of middle years restructure and reform. A whole school commitment was also considered essential.

Each case study school was supported in developing a School Research Plan, which enabled it to pursue the particular goals and priorities most relevant to their context. These schools were involved in research at two levels:

- developing and trialing approaches and strategies based on their individual research focus, which was determined by their specific needs and the effective practices which were already in place or being planned
- trialing additional classroom practices which were suggested by the research to be most appropriate in addressing the overall learning needs of middle year's students and in particular the key elements of literacy education in the middle years.

### Key Principles and Processes Underpinning the Research in Case Study Schools

The research methodology used in working with the case study schools was designed both to reflect and enact sound principles in educational research in general and in literacy research in particular. The aim was to maximise involvement in and ownership of the research by the participating schools, and the likelihood of schools being able to sustain and continue to build on gains from the research beyond the completion of the project.

As part of this process, teachers and schools were seen as 'insiders' and as active 'co-constructors' of the research design. This involved not only participating in research activities but also in ongoing dialogue and critique of literature on school and classroom research. For example, teachers were actively engaged in professional reading and discussion of the potential challenges involved in classroom research and to assist in trouble-shooting or problem-solving processes (Knobel & Lankshear 1999, Donohue et al. 1996, Goswami & Stillman 1987). When designing the teacher research folio and accompanying journal,

teachers were encouraged to read and respond to articles on the journal as a research instrument (Janesick 1999).

The following specific elements were included in the design of the research:

- Engendering a sense of ownership and autonomy

Assisting school to build on what they had already achieved, by developing approaches, which, while based on a framework of researched best practice, were appropriate to the needs and context of their particular school and were enabling of their existing goals and practices.

- Assisting schools to audit and build on current practice in literacy

This involved mapping 'where schools were at' and identifying those factors already present, which were enabling of improved literacy practices, with particular reference to the Hill and Crevola (1997) design elements for effective schooling.

- Establishing structures and communication processes

This ensured that there was a school commitment to the work undertaken as part of the research and that it was well coordinated and supported at a school leadership level. It involved the nomination of a School Research Coordinator, as well as the inclusion of the principal or member of the leadership team in all correspondence and communication.

- Involving teachers as co-researchers

This involved the following: encouraging local ownership and autonomy in the selection of each school's research focus; selecting research instruments that place a value on teacher observation, reflection and teaching expertise; modelling ways for teachers to build on and extend valuable knowledge of students' literacy attitudes and practices; acknowledging the unique roles and opportunities of literacy educators; and broadening the repertoire of literacy knowledges, skills and strategies.

- Providing professional development

This ensured that teachers were informed, equipped and motivated to reflect on their current literacy teaching practices and to implement the changes necessary at a classroom and a broader school level. It involved bringing staff from all research schools together for joint activities as well as providing professional development to staff at the individual school level.

- Providing ongoing support for schools in implementing change

This was achieved through the allocation of a consultant drawn from the project team and linked to specific schools. This role involved consulting, supporting, enabling, facilitating, reflecting, evaluating and documenting the process and events taking place at the research site.

- Modelling effective practices

As far as possible, the strategies used to design the study and to gather and document data modelled effective practices for future use by teachers and schools.

### Collection of Data within the Case Study Schools

The information collected from the case study schools was gained through a variety of strategies. These included:

- collection and review of written information which detailed the various characteristics of each school and its population, and the literacy focus within each area of the school
- recording and documenting the various strategies associated with each school's research focus and the progress made with the implementation of these strategies, including the factors that facilitate and hinder effective implementation
- anecdotal records of student progress and attitudes in relation to the strategies being trialed
- student interviews with 3 students seen to be representative of the range in each school in order to gain more detailed information on their perceptions of their literacy abilities, their use of literacy practices both in school and outside school, the impact of the socio-economic backgrounds of students, and also the assumptions that are often made about students in regard to literacy, particularly those with ESL backgrounds
- interviews with a selection of classroom teachers to determine their perceptions of literacy and literacy education as well as the impact of the research being carried out in their school
- discussions with the school research co-ordinator and teacher researchers including the principal where possible at selected stages throughout the project
- ongoing monitoring, support and reporting by consultants
- provision of a range of professional development activities (approximately 25 hours per school), with processes in place to evaluate the impact of this professional development on the literacy practices being undertaken by schools.

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

### Analysing the Data

Observation of data and gathering of knowledge through the case studies was achieved through the research team, school consultants, teachers, and students involved. Analysis of the data took into account:

- the multiple realities and subjectivities of the different groups of participants involved in the research
- the ways different knowledges, values and beliefs impacted on approaches to literacy and learning

- the range of school and student factors that impacted on literacy and learning.

### Assessing Literacy Development

The assessment of literacy is a highly contested and political issue. However, the project brief required assessment of a cohort of students from across the twelve case study schools. This represented yet another significant challenge. Despite the fact that the diversity of projects in the twelve case study schools challenged the comprehensiveness of even the best literacy assessment instrument, the tendering bodies wanted quantitative data on student learning,

Therefore, in keeping with the principle of modelling best practice, and engaging teachers as active co-researchers, the project team decided to focus not only on the assessment and reporting of results but also on teacher evaluation of the assessment instrument itself. This evaluation asked them to consider its suitability as a tool for assessing literacy development and its potential in informing curriculum, teaching and learning and school professional development plans in literacy.

The instrument selected was the *Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers* or *DART* (Forster et al. 1994). The *DART* was selected for the following reasons:

- The *DART* is referenced against the National Statements and Profiles, which are the basis of the Victorian Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF).
- The *DART* was the assessment instrument used in the Successful Interventions Project, therefore enhancing the ability to successfully draw together the data from each project to provide a broader picture of best practice in literacy education across Victoria. The *DART* also became the instrument used in the Middle Years Research and Development project (MYRAD).
- The *DART* was the only assessment instrument readily available which had a structure and approach that addresses the full range of literacy skills including reading writing, speaking, listening and viewing
- The administration of the *DART* models effective practice in literacy teaching and shows the links between teaching and assessment.
- The moderation processes involved in *DART* provide teachers with a basis for developing shared understandings and a common language for describing literacy progress and achievement. This common language and understanding of literacy can be, in itself, an extremely valuable tool for teachers, enabling literacy dialogue across the curriculum, across all year levels and across sectors.
- The *DART* provides a developmental framework for focussing on the literacy outcomes that the students were achieving rather than focussing on what they could not do.

It was stressed that *DART* should not be considered as the sole or prime indicator of student progress and achievement in literacy, that the numbers of students assessed in each school was low, that the time between pre and post assessment was too short to reflect significant change and that the specific focus of some school research plans would not necessarily be reflected in the *DART* results. These factors influenced the extent to which the *DART* results were reported on and used in this research. However, the use of the *DART* was positive for teachers in that the test did enhance teachers' understanding of literacy assessment and importantly increased their knowledge of their students' competencies and needs.

## Reporting the Research

The project brief was to provide information to the tendering parties that could be used as the basis for the advice they were to develop on the policies, practices, resources and support required for system and school implementation of effective middle years literacy. This was another challenge. We believed that we had very important recommendations to make, but how to make them accessible to a wide audience? How to make them politically viable? How to ensure that they were not 'sidelined' in favour of the recommendations emerging from other more influential research at the time?

Therefore, in order to ensure that the advice could be most effectively developed and implemented, the report on the research (Deakin University 2001) was constructed to complement current directions for middle years of schooling and documents guiding middle years reform. One document in particular, *The Middle Years: A Guide for Strategic Action in Years 5-9* (DEET 1999) had been distributed to all government schools by the then Department of Education, Employment and Training in Victoria. To emphasise the links between *middle years reform* and *middle years literacy* reform, the six *Strategic Intentions* (used in the DEET document to guide schools in their planning) were given a literacy focus, and used as a framework for the recommendations of the report.

'Research Snapshots' were devised as a means of ensuring that the recommendations in the report maintained a practical focus. This also served to highlight the scope for implementing the recommendations in a variety of ways to suit the specific needs and contexts of individual schools. These 'Research Snapshots' were mainly drawn from the case study schools, but also from the literature review and information gathered from other sources. In addition, the report sought to link literacy education explicitly to the model for school improvement being promoted in schools in Victoria (Hill & Crévola 1997). This was achieved through the addition of a middle years literacy focus and essential literacy features matched to each of the design elements to highlight the way each element is enabling of best practice in literacy education.

## Dissemination of the Research Findings

A key concern of this and other research carried out through the tender process is the ownership of the intellectual property and outcomes of the research. Another challenge was that, throughout the project, any publication had to be approved by the tenderers. More problematic was that the report, once submitted, became the tenderers' property and responsibility. This meant that, in effect, the project team handed over jurisdiction of the research and, by corollary, any involvement in decision-making processes once the project was completed.

All the parties were positive about the report, but as yet no publication based on the advice submitted has been issued to education systems or schools. After considerable pressure, the full report was posted on the Department of Education's website. However, we are still waiting for an accessible document to go to all schools. To counteract this inaction, we have been speaking at workshops and conferences, and writing articles for teacher professional journals.

## Conclusion

As with all educational research in schools, there were challenges to address in this project. Undertaking research through the competitive tendering process, however, poses particular challenges that need to be addressed sensitively if the needs and expectations of the researchers and the tendering parties, let alone those of the participating teachers and

schools, are to be met. Another unforeseen challenge to this kind of research is working with departmental steering committees, which are often comprised of educational administrators or system bureaucrats with limited knowledge of research paradigms, methodologies and the fundamental principles governing ethical research. In addition, the timelines are often short, potentially compromising the usefulness of the results, while the budget never seems to cover the work required and fails to adequately acknowledge the intellectual capital that is brought to the project.

The findings and recommendations documented in the full report, *Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years: Major Report on the Middle Years Literacy Research Project* (Deakin University 2001), have been well received by the profession and are purported to be informing current directions in the strategic plans of the education systems or sectors, and initiatives in the Commonwealth-funded of the Quality Teacher Program. Besides learning much more about literacy in the middle years of schooling, we can inform our teaching and research with knowledge and insights into how best to work with schools in ways that are equitable, collaborative and empowering.

Overall, the project team was satisfied with the quality of the research and with the results achieved, though these were achieved despite considerable constraints. In the *Middle Years Literacy Research Project*, we were able to advance the knowledge and expertise of the teachers through a collaborative process that promoted ownership and autonomy. Project evaluations indicated that case study schools felt that they had been well supported and gained significantly from the research. Nevertheless, there are clearly lingering questions, which in turn highlight the tensions, constraints and 'uncertainty' of ethical research within short-term tendered research projects.

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## APPENDIX 1

### LITERACY AND LEARNING IN THE MIDDLE YEARS

#### Executive Summary

##### Literacy in the Middle Years of Schooling

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 challenge of engaging students in learning is equally important for effective literacy education for students in the middle years. If students are alienated rather than engaged in learning, then it is likely that they are similarly alienated in developing the literacy knowledge, skills and capabilities required for meaningful participation in academic, social and community life.

Schooling in the middle years challenges students to develop control of the literacy demands and learning expectations of increasingly sophisticated and specialised areas of knowledge represented in the curriculum. As knowledge becomes more specialised within these areas, so too the literacies associated with the ways this knowledge is constructed and represented becomes more complex.

##### Context for the Project

It is within this context of meeting the literacy and learning needs of students in early adolescence that the Middle Years Literacy Research Project was initiated. Through Commonwealth DETYA funding, the Consultancy and Development Unit (CDU) within the Faculty of Education at Deakin University has completed this project, under the management of the Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria (DEET) the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) and the Association of Independent Schools, Victoria (AISV).

This research represents the third phase of *Successful Interventions: A Secondary Literacy and Numeracy Initiative*. 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. (Victorian Association for the Teaching of English)
- *Successful Interventions*: the evaluation of forty-four literacy intervention programs and strategies and broader school literacy initiatives (Australian Council for Educational Research)

This final phase focuses on literacy education in mainstream classroom practice in Years 5 to 9. It aims to provide the educational sectors within Victoria with information and recommendations which will form the basis for advice to schools on the implementation of effective literacy education in the middle years.

## **Methodology**

This project was designed to identify, trial and analyse best practice in literacy education.

The methodology involved a number of key elements including:

- working closely with 12 case study schools
- the selection and use of suitable assessment instruments
- conducting a literature review
- investigating Victorian research projects and strategies with specific relevance to this project.
- linking with international and national groups and individuals with relevant experience and expertise
- consulting with a wide range of groups including regional personnel, additional schools and networks and special needs groups.

In the field of educational research, this research was a qualitative study which belongs in the interpretive research tradition.

## **Key Learnings from the Case Study Schools**

The research methodology used in working with the case study schools was designed to enact sound principles in educational research in general and in literacy research in particular. The aim was to maximise involvement in and ownership of the research by the participating schools, and to ensure that the work undertaken through the research could be sustained beyond the completion of the project. Key principles of the design are outlined below.

The case study schools highlighted a number of factors, which were seen as critical to the gains made through their involvement in the research. These factors are pertinent to the implementation of any framework for middle years literacy education in schools and can be grouped into two main categories: key learnings about literacy in the context of the whole school and key learnings about literacy in the context of the mainstream classroom.

### **Key learnings about literacy in the context of the whole school**

These included the importance of:

- raising the profile and status of literacy in the school
- recognising the vital role played by effective leadership, support and co-ordination
- 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.

### **Key learnings about literacy in the context of the mainstream classroom**

These included the importance of:

- 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.

### **The Assessment Instrument**

The project brief required assessment of a cohort of students from across the twelve case study schools. *The Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers (DART)* was selected as the most appropriate instrument for the pre assessment, conducted in March 2000 and the post assessment conducted in November 2000.

The research focussed not only on the results of the *DART* assessment but evaluated the structures, processes and content of the *DART*, and its suitability as a literacy assessment instrument.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

The key findings of the research, along with a series of recommendations, have been framed within the Strategic Intentions, identified in *The Middle Years: A Guide for Strategic Action in Years 5-9* as giving a 'future orientation' and 'a sense of unity and common purpose in middle school change'. These are:

- Securing the Curriculum Essentials
- Managing the Transitions
- Creating a New Model of Provision
- Transforming Teaching and Learning
- Creating Outward Looking Communities
- Tooling Up for Reform

The decision to use the strategic intentions was based on the importance of providing a link between middle years reform and middle years literacy reform. The recommendations are

supplemented in the body of the report with extensive supporting documentation, which includes the findings from the research and directions for policy and practice in education systems or sectors and schools. Broadly, however, the recommendations are as follows:

### **Recommendation 1**

That, with support from education systems or sectors, schools secure the curriculum essentials for effective middle years literacy education through:

- auditing students' literacy and learning needs and school literacy practices
- establishing shared understandings and a common language for talking about literacy
- emphasising a broad range of literacy capabilities, including literacies related to information and communication technologies
- teaching knowledge about language and curriculum literacies within each key learning area
- defining clear roles, responsibilities and expectations in the teaching of curriculum literacies
- assessing and reporting on curriculum literacies in each key learning area
- increasing structured opportunities for oral language as a bridge into reading and writing in each key learning area
- supporting sustained reading and writing in a variety of genres in curriculum areas
- providing quality support in literacy for underachieving or at risk learners in curriculum areas.

### **Recommendation 2**

That, with support from education systems or sectors, schools manage effective transition in middle years literacy education through:

- planning collaboratively for continuity of literacy education between associate schools
- developing common strategies and instruments for communicating school and student literacy information
- using common approaches and strategies, including consensus moderation, for assessing literacy progress and achievement.
- Recommendation 3

That, with support from education systems or sectors, schools create a new model of provision for effective middle years literacy education through:

- creating a middle years mindset and model for supporting literacy education
- establishing literacy-focused professional learning teams
- maximising potential for literacy education through school and class restructure

### **Recommendation 4**

That, with support from education systems or sectors, schools transform teaching and learning for effective middle years literacy education through

- planning for a diversity of literacy teaching and learning needs
- using a shared model or framework to inform planning for literacy and learning
- using core teaching practices and strategies to support literacy and learning in each key learning area
- using learning technologies to enhance literacy and learning
- planning for authentic purposes and autonomy in literacy and learning
- including metacognition, reflection and self-assessment in literacy and learning.

### **Recommendation 5**

That, with support from education systems or sectors, schools create outward looking learning communities that promote effective middle years literacy education through:

- communicating about literacy education between home and school
- valuing and building on literacy practices beyond school
- connecting school literacy and learning to the wider community
- pursuing productive partnerships to enrich literacy and learning.

### **Recommendation 6**

That education systems or sectors and schools tool up for reform in middle years literacy education through:

- raising the profile and status of literacy education
- providing ongoing quality professional development and support in literacy education
- securing leadership, co-ordination and succession planning in literacy education
- designing policies and structures to sustain reforms in literacy education
- developing school literacy plans informed by an understanding of change processes and a design for effective schooling.