**Influences on Local Curriculum Innovation in Times of Change: A Literacy Case Study**

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**Abstract:**  
Australian students’ performance on national and international literacy assessments has declined since 2000, while teachers in contemporary classrooms contend with conditions of increased complexity and uncertainty. In July 2017, the Australian Government commissioned a panel of experts to provide advice on how to improve Australian students’ achievement and school performance. The panel concluded that Australian schools must support every student to realise their full learning potential through an increased emphasis on personalised student learning and collaborative teacher practices. This paper outlines a case study of complexities and influences in what enabled and constrained a local curriculum innovation in literacy that sought to personalise learning and promote teacher collaboration in conditions of constant change and disruption. Named *Literacy Toolbox*, this initiative was developed by Year 7 and 8 literacy leaders at a Tasmanian secondary school to increase student agency and enhance teaching around a model of deprivatised or shared practice. The findings provide insight for education researchers and schools regarding the challenges and opportunities of attempts to enact personalised learning and co-teaching in the current context.

**Keywords**: Personalised learning; deprivatised practice; co-teaching; secondary education; school-university partnerships

**Introduction**

Contemporary conditions of teaching in late-modernity are characterised by complexity and uncertainty (Biesta and Osberg 2010). Education research finds that teachers are experiencing continually increasing workloads in a climate of constant change (Andrich 2009), leading to experiences of “change fatigue” for many teachers (Dilkes, Cunningham and Gray 2014 p. 45). At this time, Australian students’ performance on international assessments such as the *Programme for International Student Assessment* has declined (Thomson, De Bortoli and Underwood 2017), and performance on the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* has stagnated or declined in literacy over a decade of testing (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2017; Thomas 2018). One solution for these issues, as part of the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (Commonwealth of Australia 2018), is for Australian educators to personalise student learning whilst engaging in collaborative teaching practices. How schools might enact personalised approaches to learning, however, is difficult to determine, given the lack of research conducted in schools in which personalised learning has been explicitly attempted (Prain et al 2014).

This paper outlines one Tasmanian secondary school’s attempts to personalise student learning through a local curriculum innovation called *Literacy Toolbox* which brought together multiple classes in a flexible learning space for a weekly literacy lesson. Literacy Toolbox was delivered through a co-teaching model, providing opportunities for students to make choices about literacy activities. As informed by Friend and Cook (2010) and Mackey et al. (2017), we define co-teaching as two or more teachers taking a shared approach to teaching a student group, pooling resources and sharing responsibility for student learning. Drawing upon classroom observations and teacher reflections, we explore contextual influences that enabled and constrained the personalisation of student learning in this local curriculum innovation. We begin by outlining the background to this study and share our perspectives on literacy teaching in the contemporary Australian education research context.

**Background context**

This research forms part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) project: Improving regional low SES students’ learning and wellbeing. The project involves researchers from the University of Tasmania, Deakin University and La Trobe University working with nine primary and secondary schools on personalised learning initiatives that aim to improve learning and wellbeing for students.

The focus study for this paper was conducted in a Tasmanian regional secondary school, where two university researchers and two school literacy leaders collaborated over two school terms. In particular, this investigation focused on multi-week spelling units in Year 7 and 8, which were major components of Literacy Toolbox in Terms 2 and 3 of 2017.

***Current political******environment of literacy education***

Literacy education in Australian schools, as in many countries, has long been a site for contested accounts of what should be focused upon, and what teaching methods will enable or ensure effective learning (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Lo Bianco and Freebody 2001; Snyder 2008). Several factors over the last ten years have contributed to an intensification and narrowing of prescriptions for teacher practices. These include: (a) the comparative lack of success or gains in national and international testing of Australian students’ reading and writing (ACARA 2017; Thomson, De Bortoli and Underwood 2017); the growth in the use of big data to analyse ongoing learning outcomes (Prain and Tytler 2017); an increased focus on teacher accountability for student outcomes (Tuinamuana 2011); and a consequential growing orthodoxy around how to teach reading and writing (Department of Education, Tasmania 2016; Love, Macken-Horarik and Horarik 2015). As noted by Hayes, Hattam Comber, Kerkham, Lupton and Thomson (2017), this orthodoxy entails teachers adopting ‘evidence-based’ practices to address falling standards. In their recent study of literacy learning in low SES schools, these researchers observed that these practices often meant tightly scripted lessons with a narrow focus on sequential skill acquisition. While noting the failure of this approach, these researchers also observed teachers adopting less ritualized but more successful ways to promote literacy learning. These involved basing learning on students’ own interests and recent experiences, offering open-ended learning challenges, and dealing with topics students found personally significant. We strongly concur with this advocacy of the need to customise literacy learning to learners’ real interests, needs and local contexts.

***Personalised learning***

Personalised learning is understood as a practical way of increasing student perceptions of learning as personally engaging and meaningful. The aim of improving student motivation and learning through meaningful classroom experiences has been a focus of most definitions of this concept (Duckworth et al. 2009; Sebba et al. 2007). Key features of personalised learning include: student goal setting, student choice around what and how they study, the co-design of learning experiences, and the provision of meaningful and appropriately challenging learning experiences (Hargreaves 2005; Leadbetter 2005). While advocates of Explicit and Direct Instruction have argued that these approaches to literacy learning provide students with appropriately challenging and meaningful learning opportunities (e.g. Archer and Hughes 2010; Stockard 2010), often achieved through class streaming and differentiated, scaffolded and systematic teaching, the current study is framed as an inquiry-based model of personalised learning. We do not claim that attempts to personalise learning can only occur or succeed when students engage in inquiry-based lessons; just that this was the approach taken at the secondary school where the research occurred.

According to Prain and colleagues (2015), enacting personalised approaches requires schools to reconsider responsibilities, goals, constraints, learning needs, and roles of teachers and students in educational contexts, with the aim of “increasing student capacity to contribute to and co-design curricular content and methods with teachers” (p. 16). Rather than working in isolated classrooms, teachers can enact personalised approaches and learn from each other when they work in teams to cater for individual and group needs (Commonwealth of Australia 2018; Jensen 2014). Effective support for personalised learning requires teachers to have deep knowledge of their students, including their needs, capabilities and interests, as a starting point for planning and enacting this support (Prain et al 2018). Accordingly, we argue that teachers’ enhanced capacities to personalise learning can have positive benefits for students’ experiences of schooling.

One model supporting such approaches is known as professional learning communities (PLCs), which bring together teaching staff to develop collaborative work cultures and deprivatised practices (Thompson, Gregg and Niska 2004; Vescio, Ross and Adams 2008). Within PLCs, it is assumed that knowledge is situated in everyday teaching and learning experiences, which can be reflected upon most effectively with colleagues who work in similar contexts (Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley 2003). Active engagement by teachers in PLCs can increase professional knowledge and teacher capacity to enhance student learning (Vescio, Ross and Adams 2008), suggesting that PLCs can be beneficial for both teachers and students. Nevertheless, some challenges have been identified from research into PLCs which reveals some difficulties in the processes of teachers working together, particularly when collaborations go beyond sharing ideas to encompass shared lesson planning and discussing student outcomes (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer and Kyndt 2017). These include conflicting internal dynamics within some PLCs, tensions surrounding peer observation, and concerns that group decisions may take away teachers’ autonomy to plan their lessons individually (Jones et al. 2013; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer and Kyndt 2017).

Teaching staff at the particular secondary school for this study work in PLCs according to the grade levels and subjects they teach. The school’s literacy leaders oversee the focus and operation of each literacy PLC. As argued by Little (2003), teachers working in PLCs can improve the effectiveness of collaborative inquiries by seeking external perspectives from researchers and educational stakeholders. As such, the school welcomed the researchers’ involvement as a further method of evaluating their progress to personalise learning and deprivatise practice.

***Literacy Toolbox: An attempt to personalise learning and deprivatise practice***

The literacy leaders (Jeanette and Ann-Marie) designed Literacy Toolbox to build teachers’ adaptive capacity (Timperley 2011) to personalise student learning. The initiative emerged as an outcome of a major redevelopment of learning spaces and teaching culture at the school, from isolated practice in traditional classrooms, to collaborative planning, teaching and assessment in flexible learning spaces. Literacy Toolbox was underpinned by deprivatised practice, an approach which Fullan (2007) noted “changes culture and practice so that teachers observe other teachers, are observed by others, and participate in informed and telling debate on the quality and effectiveness of their instruction” (p. 36). While deprivatised teacher practice intends to promote collaborative planning, teaching and assessment for positive teacher and student growth, the increased visibility and critique of practice can be uncomfortable for teachers who are content with more traditional, isolated practice.

Literacy Toolbox involved the school’s literacy teachers co-designing learning experiences that developed student capacity for independent learning. Year 7 and 8 literacy teachers co-planned Literacy Toolbox content with literacy leaders in weekly PLC meetings, and lessons occurred in a double lesson every Friday. In these lessons, teachers combined three classes in flexible learning spaces approximately twice the size of regular classrooms. Students were afforded varying degrees of choice to engage in learning tasks around the space.

The literacy PLCs adopted Jensen and colleagues’ (2016) *inquiry model* to design Literacy Toolbox as an iterative and adaptive cycle of inquiry. To provide context, the five-part inquiry model (Jensen et al. 2016) positions teachers to: (1) *scan and assess* through the collection of evidence of student learning and needs; (2) *prioritise* where to focus energy to improve learning; (3) *develop and plan* learning outcomes and student progression; (4) *act* by building skills and collaborating with others; and (5) *review* the impact of initiatives on learning.

**Research methods and theoretical framework**

***Theoretical framework***

The theoretical lenses we have employed in this case study research are informed by an emergentist orientation (Biesta and Osberg 2010), in which knowledge is understood to emerge as we participate in the world. A social constructivist theoretical framework underpinned the research design, undertaken as a collaborative professional inquiry into personalising learning (Jensen et al. 2016). We took inspiration from provocations offered by Hunter and colleagues (2018) to share sustained thinking with our teaching partners in the research, asking: “what can we see and sense here? What was intended? What emerged? What is the insight? What matters?” (n.p.). We argue that emergentist approaches to research partnerships are valuable in an age of uncertainty in education (Opfer and Pedder 2011) with continuous change and disruption (Slee 2014).

***Methods***

The data collected for this paper were based on two five-week spelling units, which were the focus of Literacy Toolbox in Terms 2 and 3 of 2017. We tracked the development of the local innovation by conducting a comparison of the cases (i.e., in this context the cases were the two spelling units). This study outlines contextual influences that enabled and constrained teacher attempts to personalise learning about spelling over two terms. To investigate the contextual influences on the development and implementation of the local innovation, this paper draws on classroom observations conducted by the researchers, and written reflections by the literacy leaders. We initially intended to collect data through conducting interviews with the teachers during the school year, however this was not possible due to the teachers’ full timetables. Conducting observations of practice and providing feedback through the literacy leaders was a pragmatic approach to data collection which the school was able to accommodate. We sought to understand how the second iteration of Literacy Toolbox was improved as a result of reflections on the first unit through the collaborations between the literacy leaders and university researchers over the two school terms. We aimed to implement an approach suggested by Opfer and Pedder (2011) of exploring “the nature of process emergence over time through feedback and interactions between internal and external systems” (p. 396).

The researchers conducted classroom observations at the beginning and end of each spelling unit, employing naturalistic observations (Fawcett and Watson 2016) to structure notes on what was seen and heard by the sequence of time. Naturalistic observations allowed the researchers to convey all-round pictures of the classroom experiences (Fawcett and Watson 2016). At the end of each observation, the researchers engaged in critical reflective conversations with Jeanette, which she then fed back to the literacy teaching teams. This allowed the researchers to contribute to the evaluation of the approaches used to personalise learning and promote deprivatised practices.

The literacy leaders also wrote reflective statements in response to the following questions posed by the researchers after the second spelling unit was taught:

1. Who was involved in the planning of the two spelling units and why were the units planned in these ways?
2. What have been the benefits/challenges of: (1) your attempts to personalise student learning about spelling; (2) your attempts to increase collaborative teacher practice; and (3) the school-university research partnership?

The teachers wrote roughly a paragraph in response to each sub-question, and Damon and Sherridan read the responses to note key themes and intensities in the data (Clarke 2005). As such, the thematic analysis proceeded inductively from the data, forming the basis of the findings. Damon and Sherridan wrote the analysis of findings, sharing this with Jeanette and Ann-Marie to provide further clarification and enhance the analysis. We structured the findings according to influences that enabled and constrained successful personalisation, using themes developed through the analysis.

***Addressing limitations of the study***

We took steps to overcome limitations in the research design and enhance the trustworthiness of the data. As explained by Fawcett and Watson (2016), the use of naturalistic observations can produce masses of unstructured data making it difficult to compare observations. To address such limitations, two researchers were present in the classroom for each observation, followed by sharing and discussion sessions where notes were compared and clarified. The literacy leaders participated in subsequent critical reflective conversations and co-authored this paper, providing opportunities to check the trustworthiness of the account of the partnership. As this study was conducted at one school in one setting, the results are not intended to be generalised to other Australian school contexts.

***Research ethics***

Ethics approval for the research was obtained through the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education, Tasmania. Within the school, ethics approval was negotiated with teaching staff, involving ongoing conversations with the teaching team. For example, during a session of reporting data analysis to Year 7 teachers, the researchers asked about the teachers’ comfort with having observations conducted in their classes. This opened a conversation about concerns some teachers might have who were on short-term contracts, and who may have felt the researchers were judging their practice through the research. Conversations between the researchers and teachers considered the ways in which the classroom observations could be supportive and nourishing rather than surveillance practice. This was an area in which tensions were occasionally evident and these were negotiated through conversations between teachers, researchers, and literacy leaders. These tensions are explored further in the following sections.

**Results**

The research findings are presented under the following headings: teacher planning, teacher roles, teacher affordance of student choice, and teacher uncertainty.

***Teacher planning in the first spelling unit***

Before teaching the first spelling unit, the literacy leaders met to discuss the unit and plan various spelling tasks. In line with the school’s cycle of inquiry approach (Jensen et al. 2016), the leaders scanned and assessed student spelling data, including recent single word spelling test results. In a reflective conversation, Ann-Marie explained how the leaders focused the first spelling unit on words containing the *ough* spelling pattern (e.g. tough and enough), because most of the students struggled with words containing this pattern on tests. The literacy leaders planned four spelling tasks, which students completed over the five-week unit. The Year 7 and 8 literacy teachers had little input in the planning of the first spelling unit.

***Teacher roles in the first spelling unit***

With a focus on Year 8, the five lessons in the first unit began the same way, with the combined group sitting on the floor while Ann-Marie introduced the tasks and/or reminded them about the ongoing process. Ann-Marie usually took this opportunity to mention specific spelling strategies or ideas that students and teachers might consider during the lessons. This allowed her to respond to issues arising during lessons, despite the pre-planning of activities before the unit began. During Ann-Marie’s introductions, the teachers sat on chairs around the space’s proximity, listening with the students.

Lessons then shifted into a second phase, when teachers would each take up a position at one of the large tables located around the learning space. Each workstation had a different spelling task for teachers to guide students through during the lesson. Printed instructions were provided at each activity, allowing the teachers to facilitate student learning in small groups rather than delivering teacher-led instruction about spelling. Teachers provided feedback to students at point of need and managed behaviour, ensuring students remained on task. This was sometimes problematic in the first unit due to issues around uncertainty and disruption, as we explain in Section 1.4.4.

Lessons concluded with teachers asking students to pack up spelling tasks and rearrange furniture, and a classroom wall/divider in the centre of the space was closed to form two classrooms for subsequent lessons. Only during weekly Literacy Toolbox sessions would teachers open the divider to create a larger learning space for the combined class group.

***Teacher affordance of student choice in the first spelling unit***

In the initial unit, teachers offered students limited experiences of shared control over some decisions in the classes. For example, students could work through the four spelling tasks with their choice of peers, and in their preferred order.

While the teachers afforded students these limited choices, all students were required to focus on words with the *ough* spelling pattern during the unit, regardless of their prior ability to do so. Students had little choice over the amount of time to spend on each task, as they completed one task per lesson.

***Teacher uncertainty in the first spelling unit***

The first unit was characterised by uncertainty and disruption in relation to technology and staffing. For example, one task required students to use laptops to provide the meanings of unfamiliar *ough* words. During the observed lesson, the laptops would not connect to the Internet, leading the teacher and students to discuss the unreliability of Internet coverage, which was an ongoing issue at the school. To remedy this, students were encouraged to use mobile phones to access the Internet; however, the issues with technology led to ongoing disruptions in Literacy Toolbox lessons.

In the first lesson of the unit, Ann-Marie was the only regular teacher in the room with the combined group, as two relief teachers and a teacher aide assisted her. In the second observed lesson at the end of the first unit, two regular classroom teachers joined the literacy leader, but there were not enough teachers to facilitate the four groups, leading Ann-Marie to constantly move between two groups. When she was not present at one task with a lower level of challenge, the researchers observed that the students would chat and disengage from learning for extended periods of time, yet they still appeared to achieve the task goals by the lesson’s conclusion. Without a teacher present, students in this group received little feedback, and did not appear deeply engaged in learning. During the lesson, Ann-Marie commented: “last week there was a teacher with this group, and I didn’t need to come over once”. When she explained that any uncompleted work would be homework, this persuaded the students to achieve the task goals.

***Teacher planning in the second spelling unit***

In contrast to the first spelling unit, the literacy leaders and teachers collaboratively planned and implemented the second unit as an iterative cycle from the first. In her written reflection, Jeanette explained how the PLCs made decisions about what to include in the unit:

We wanted activities that would be flexible to allow for students’ individual word lists and needs. We used evidence-based sources as much as possible – not just making them up, or finding them on the internet. The aim was to give all the teachers opportunities to construct some of these resources.

The involvement of classroom teachers in planning content for the second unit made for a more collaborative, inclusive process when compared with the planning of the first unit according to the literacy leaders. A key focus in planning the second unit was promoting more developed student independence and problem-solving capacity when spelling challenging words. In her reflective statements, Jeanette wrote:

We went with this approach after backward mapping what we wanted the students to do independently: to self-select from a range of strategies to improve their spelling and strengthen their understanding of language. There are no fixed rules or magic wands for spelling; it’s complicated so there’s a need for flexible thinkers.

Rather than planning another set of four tasks, the teachers in the PLCs drew on a variety of resources (e.g. Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston 2016; Topfer and Arendt 2010) to plan 13 tasks. One example required students to write spelling words on miniature whiteboards, with tricky letter patterns coloured differently in each word. Other examples involved using their words in compound and complex sentences, and choosing two words from their lists as the focus for a poem or short story. A number of the tasks were multistage and/or clearly connected, and arranged at tables throughout the space.

***Teacher roles in the second spelling unit***

Lessons in the second unit began as they had in the first, with Ann-Marie reminding the group about responsibilities, and taking opportunities to focus student attention on different concepts as the unit progressed. The researchers observed that in the second unit teacher roles were altered to cater for the increased variety of spelling tasks. Instead of being stationed at one of the four large tables, teachers freely walked around the space and assisted students as required.

In addition to taking on more flexible roles in the second unit, teachers acted as checkpoints for students to progress through the spelling tasks. During the observed lessons, as students completed tasks, they checked their work with teachers before moving onto new tasks. This provided important opportunities for teachers to provide individualised feedback.

***Teacher affordance of student choice in the second spelling unit***

A key design principle of the second unit was promoting increased student choice regarding what, when, where, and with whom they learnt. This was a feature of Ann-Marie’s introductions each week, with students asked to make choices that would best serve their learning. To begin the unit, the students created personalised spelling lists by completing a pre-test, identifying a problematic spelling pattern in words spelt incorrectly, and constructing lists of around 10-15 words by googling words containing their problematic spelling pattern. During the observation of the first lesson of the second unit, one student who had known how to spell *ough* words before the first unit began was asked by the researchers whether the new tasks were more meaningful for her. She commented, “I’ve already learnt a few new words and we’ve only had one lesson on this. It’s better to focus on spelling patterns that are relevant to me”.

With their spelling lists created, students freely engaged in any of the spelling tasks arranged around the learning space. They were encouraged by teachers to select activities they believed would best help them to learn their words. Of the new tasks, only a written reflection was compulsory, requiring students to reflect on: their choice of tasks, the spelling strategies the tasks called for them to use, and how these tasks helped their spelling learning.

Students could also choose the duration of time spent completing tasks. In one lesson introduction Ann-Marie told the class:

This is not about getting activities done; it’s about providing you with increased choice and responsibility for your learning. We’re all different learners and learn in different ways, so think about which activities will help you to learn the words most effectively.

In the second unit, students could spend more than one lesson on a given task if they were working effectively. As the spelling tasks focused on different spelling strategies, the students’ choice of tasks became a crucial part of the experience; however, the classroom observations revealed that student justifications of choices were not always about deep learning. While some students chose tasks that were meaningful for their spelling development, others indicated they chose tasks that were “the easiest” or “the most fun”. In this way, student comments suggested some potential issues around the degree and quality of particular students’ choices in the second unit. Despite Ann-Marie continuously stressing the importance of making meaningful choices, this resonated as an area of future opportunity for the ongoing design of Literacy Toolbox tasks.

***Teacher uncertainty in the second spelling unit***

Despite the redesigned tasks and teacher enthusiasm in planning, disruption once again characterised the second spelling unit in the areas of technology, staffing and school scheduling. As students were required to create personalised spelling lists with the assistance of school laptops, the same connectivity issues that plagued the first unit led to an initial lesson where the researchers observed that many students sat idly by computers that did not work as intended. Ann-Marie addressed this in the following lesson by providing paper copies of spelling lists, divided into various spelling patterns. This disruption meant that approximately half of the second lesson was spent completing the first lesson’s main outcome, which was required before students could participate in the selection of spelling tasks.

During the observation of the final Literacy Toolbox lesson to end the second unit, Ann-Marie introduced the unit of spelling again for the benefit of a relief teacher, and made the comment that “disruption has been normal this term”. The final lesson involved only 36 students, as many were involved in extra-curricular activities such as drama and sport. Ann-Marie explained that this class had missed the previous week’s Literacy Toolbox lesson and another lesson in the unit, due to school assemblies. Further, a small number of students had been unwell on Fridays, meaning they missed the entire second spelling unit. As such, Ann-Marie’s comment in the introduction of the final lesson resonated as a salient aspect of the wider situation of the Literacy Toolbox as a program that sought to foster personalised student learning and deprivatised teacher practice.

**Discussion**

In this section, we draw on the research findings to identify contextual influences that constrained and enabled attempts to personalise student learning and deprivatise teacher practice through the Literacy Toolbox initiative. The school’s attempts were constrained by four contextual influences: (1) constant disruption to the planned schedule; (2) initial teacher discomfort about deprivatised practice; (3) limited team planning for the first spelling unit; and (4) issues in the design of the first spelling unit. Conversely, the school’s attempts were enabled by four contextual influences: (1) increased emphasis on team planning, co-teaching and assessment in the second unit; (2) increased flexibility of the second unit tasks; (3) opportunities for students to make meaningful choices during the second unit; and (4) assistance from researchers to retain focus on the goals of the initiative. We now discuss these contextual influences in turn.

***Constraint 1: Constant disruption to the planned schedule***

A challenge during Literacy Toolbox was regular disruption to the Friday morning schedule with assemblies, excursions and sporting events interrupting the momentum of both five-week units. Disruption is increasingly part of what Jeanette described during one lesson as the “busy nature of schools”; a notion also discussed in the research literature (e.g. Dilkes, Cunningham and Gray 2014). When writing about the process of designing the spelling units in her reflection, Jeanette stated: “there are always time constraints so we come up with whatever we can”. Local curriculum innovations designed to personalise learning in contemporary educational settings need to accommodate disruptions to weekly classroom schedules whilst providing a sufficiently flexible and supportive structure for personalisation to occur. The underlying regularity of Literacy Toolbox sessions meant the teachers and students could progress towards the intended learning outcomes, despite the constant disruptions.

***Constraint 2: Initial teacher discomfort about the deprivatised approach***

The design of Literacy Toolbox deprivatised practice, as teachers planned, taught, assessed and reflected on learning opportunities together, yet as warned by Fullan (2007), the process of deprivatising practice is “much harder than anyone thought... because such a change requires tremendous sophistication as well as some risk taking by teachers and other leaders” (p. 36). In their reflections, Jeanette and Ann-Marie both noted that, for some teachers, the sharing of practice and having practice observed was an uncomfortable experience. This constrained their enthusiasm about catering for individual student needs and promoting increased student agency. Ann-Marie commented: “the main challenge with the project was teachers feeling uneasy about being observed and having to let go of their class for one lesson a week and team teach”. Jeanette recognised teacher uneasiness too yet explained why such practices were useful for continuing teacher development: “some teachers found observations confronting; however, this is a growing practice in education and was a helpful step in breaking down barriers to sharing classroom practice”.

***Constraint 3: Lack of team planning for the first spelling unit***

The first spelling unit involved four tasks designed by the literacy leaders. The classroom literacy teachers were not involved in this planning, and during Literacy Toolbox sessions, they were positioned at given tasks for the duration of the unit. As argued by Elmore (1996), when teachers work in teams to plan and continuously observe each other, discuss and provide feedback on their practice, this enhances peer learning, problem solving and capacity to cater for diverse learner needs. By contrast, the lack of involvement of literacy teachers in planning the teaching material of the first spelling unit, and their focus on one spelling task each, constrained their ability to cater for individual student needs and learn from one another.

***Constraint 4: Issues in the design of the first spelling unit***

The design of the first unit involved a restricted spelling focus on *ough* words, driven by the literacy leaders’ review of students’ single word spelling test results. While data-informed practice has the potential to improve student performance and achievement (Schildkamp and Kuiper 2010), the rigid focus on *ough* words in the first unit constrained personalised learning, as some students in the cohort had already mastered this pattern.

In addition, some spelling tasks in the first unit were more complex than others. This allowed students completing the less complex tasks to conclude them quickly at the start or end of lessons, and chat and spend time off-task for the rest of the time. The relative difference in challenge between tasks, when linked with the requirement to spend a full lesson on each, emerged as another design issue in the first unit.

The first unit provided little choice for students over the content in which they engaged. As the provision of meaningful student choice over elements of their learning is a key method of enacting personalised learning (Paludan 2006; Thomas, 2017), the small range of tasks and the requirement to complete all tasks in the first unit constrained students in choosing to complete tasks that were personally relevant or useful.

***Enabler 1: Increased team planning, co-teaching and assessment in the second unit***

The second spelling unit generated involvement from the school’s literacy PLCs in designing learning opportunities to enhance students’ capacities as independent learners. “Each teacher had opportunities to construct the spelling resources. In a sense, it was trying to develop more shared control amongst the teaching team” (Jeanette written reflection). Jeanette wrote:

We are all in there as a team, and teachers can’t default to a worksheet. We’ve seen this in the past. We can collaboratively plan and have success criteria, but when teachers go to their own spaces, they may default to a worksheet. With this co-teaching setup, everyone is accountable to one another to come up with something that’s of a high quality.

In addition to enhancements in shared control and teacher accountability, the focus on team planning and co-teaching in the second unit allowed teachers to overcome initial feelings of discomfort with deprivatised practice. While the language of “defaulting” to a worksheet conveys a particularly negative view of this practice, we do note that worksheets represent didactic teaching tools found to be effective for some teaching. However, the larger point of the literacy leader was that through the approach the school is taking, teachers can develop teaching strategies using the skills and capabilities they are developing through the Literacy Toolbox. Using the example of one teacher, Jeanette wrote about the uptake of such practices:

One teacher in that group has been resistant to change in the past but is now asking to do more of this kind of thing and be more active in getting it set up. She has said she’s really enjoying this.

The regularity and consistency of the Literacy Toolbox program, combined with the supportive team approach, led to the program becoming a welcome part of the teaching schedule. Ann-Marie explained in her reflection how deprivatised practices supported the interpretation of data and planning:

Having scheduled PLC sessions made teachers feel part of a team and alleviated their initial concerns that they were going to be individually critiqued. By interpreting data and planning together, it took the pressure off teachers and enabled them to see that we can be much more effective as a team than as individuals.

Regarding the impact of deprivatised practices on PL, Jeanette explained:

Teachers are now designing assessment tasks with more choice embedded in them. It’s fair to say Literacy Toolbox is driving this shift in practice, and it’s exciting to see the teachers doing this independently.

The deprivatised practices in Literacy Toolbox allowed the teachers to support one another with data-informed planning, teaching and reflecting. A key benefit of revising teacher roles in the second unit was in how this positioned them to assist students collaboratively across 13 spelling tasks, drawing on and learning from skills and knowledge of colleagues to address learner needs. As found by Prain and colleagues (2014), high levels of incidental and informal learning can occur when teachers co-teach in flexible learning settings. As the spelling tasks required students to draw on various spelling strategies to achieve their objectives, the teachers considered and prompted students about connections between spelling concepts in meaningful, personalised ways.

***Enabler 2: Increased flexibility of the second unit tasks***

The teaching team designed the second unit to enable more personalised literacy learning. The rigid focus on *ough* words in the first unit represented a meaningless experience for students who already possessed strong spelling skills. To enable personalisation, the tasks in the second unit were designed collaboratively in PLCs to cater for any letter pattern. Students began the second unit by generating their own spelling lists, based on spelling patterns they found personally challenging. In this way, the design of the second unit achieved what Prain and colleagues (2015) described as meaningful learning, as it enabled students to view the learning tasks as directly addressing their immediate learning needs. At the core of successful personalisation, learning opportunities must be flexible enough to cater for student differences, enabling them to learn about prescribed curriculum content in ways that are personally relevant and appropriately challenging.

***Enabler 3: Opportunities for students to make meaningful choices***

The second spelling unit was designed “to develop shared control and give students more choice and to be more actively involved in their learning” (Ann-Marie). As suggested by Moje (2007), learning experiences are likely to be perceived by students as meaningful when they enable opportunities for differentiation of what, when, why, with whom, and at what pace students learn. For the second unit, the teaching team designed tasks that were not considered too easy by most students, and not bound by a set completion time. Instead, students were free to choose from the 13 available tasks to develop personally relevant spelling strategies, in the order they preferred, taking as much time as required on each task. In this way, each student’s experience was personalised, in that they developed understandings of spelling strategies that addressed personally challenging spelling patterns, at the students’ pace, and with support from a team of teachers. Despite some evidence to suggest particular students were motivated to choose the *easiest* or *most fun* tasks, overall, the provision of choice in the second unit made for a more meaningful experience for most learners.

***Enabler 4: Assistance from researchers to retain focus***

The researchers’ involvement in the project provided a further benefit to teacher practice: *focus*. As Jeanette explained: “often, teachers are contending with a number of conflicting priorities, and maintaining clarity of focus can be a challenge”. Jeanette’s comment spoke to the increasing demands placed on teachers, and the negative impact this can have on pedagogy (Andrich 2009). The researchers’ involvement enabled a more refined focus on outcomes for students relating to the initiative, as Jeanette explained:

The project has assisted teaching teams to tighten practice and consider a broader range of data sources, and supported them to design their own instruments for student feedback. Partnering with Damon and Sherridan enabled us to keep a sharp focus on a key area of student learning need.

The researchers provided a consistent point of contact and ongoing discussions and feedback, anchored in the aligned purposes of school priorities and the wider ARC project. Jeanette outlined the benefit of this, stating that “regular meetings and involvement with the researchers ensured we would maintain the focus on learning”. School-university research partnerships are sometimes experienced as adding to teachers’ busy work lives, but aligning the goals of research projects with school priorities can be an enabling influence when this overcomes uncertainties and disruptions by retaining focus on improving teaching and learning.

**Conclusion**

Despite a lack of studies evaluating the nature of activities implemented as personalised learning initiatives, and the impact of attempts at personalising learning on student achievement (Prain et al 2015), there have been increased calls for Australian teachers to personalise student learning and deprivatise practice (e.g. Commonwealth of Australia 2018; Hattie 2015). This paper reported on attempts made by literacy leaders and teachers at one school to achieve such goals, though the Literacy Toolbox initiative. While the findings are specific to this context, the school’s experience may provide useful insight into the sorts of contextual influences that can enable and constrain attempts at personalising learning and deprivatising practice in other educational settings. Influences that constrained and enabled personalisation across the two spelling units in this context are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Key constraints and enablers in the first and second spelling units

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **First unit - constraints** | **Second unit - enablers** |
| **Planning of spelling tasks** | Tasks planned by literacy leaders only | Tasks planned collaboratively by literacy leaders and teachers in PLCs |
| **Spelling focus** | Restricted focus on learning words containing the *ough* letter pattern | Students constructed personalised spelling lists before completing tasks that could cater for any letter pattern |
| **Teacher roles during Literacy Toolbox sessions** | Literacy teachers were positioned at the same spelling task for the full unit | Literacy teachers supported students to complete and make connections between any of 13 spelling tasks |
| **Student choice/agency** | Limited choice: students chose the order in which to complete four set tasks that lasted a session each, regardless of challenge | Meaningful choice: students chose from a selection of 13 spelling tasks to learn about personalised spelling lists, completing them at their own pace |

Elements that appeared to make the Literacy Toolbox a supportive structure for personalised learning included a team planning and co-teaching approach that combined classes and enabled teachers to support students in weekly sessions. The classroom-embedded program meant there was an underlying regularity to Literacy Toolbox, despite occasional and unavoidable disruptions. Constant disruptions are part of the teaching landscape and impact upon the introduction of initiatives in schools; however, the consistency of the flexible co-teaching format of the sessions provided a familiarity and safety for teachers and students in which they could trial such initiatives. After the first spelling unit, the teachers reflected on its effectiveness and modified aspects of the local teaching innovation when planning the second spelling unit. The first unit was an experimental foray into deprivatised practice, and at its end, the teachers reflected on its effectiveness and modified its design when planning the second spelling unit. As a result, the second unit had an increased emphasis on team planning and co-teaching, flexibility in the spelling focus and teacher roles, and increased opportunities for student choice about key elements of the experience.

While Literacy Toolbox represented a modest innovation in the busy life of one secondary school, yet the feelings of optimism it generated for the teachers and researchers emphasise the positive potential of local curriculum innovations that seek to personalise learning and deprivatise teacher practice. The findings from the project suggest ways that research partnerships can work to improve student literacy learning and overcome some of the uncertainties of contemporary schooling.

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