LITERACY TEACHING IN THE UPPER PRIMARY YEARS

**Peter Underwood Centre**

Fact sheet 8/2020

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OVERVIEW – LITERACY FROM YEARS 3-6

In Years 3-6 students move towards independence as the depth and breadth of their knowledge and skills increase and they learn to use more complex literacy strategies.

The *UK-based Education Endowment Foundation*[2] has synthesised the best current evidence, to provide guidance about good practice in the teaching of literacy in the upper years of primary school. Their guidance has been updated for the Australian context by the *Evidence for Learning (E4L) Group*[3] and aligns well with the Australian Curriculum[1]. This fact sheet provides an overview of the eight recommendations in these Guidance Reports, illustrated with examples from our research in Tasmania[4].

Overall key points:
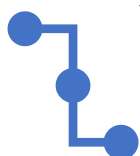
> The elements of literacy are interconnected, although they are separated in the Guidance recommendations addressed below[2,3].

> In upper primary school, children:
> • consolidate their receptive and expressive literacy skills
> • build their vocabulary, and
> • develop their fluency as speakers/listeners, writers/readers, and creators/viewers.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

1. Developing oral language capability

- • Children's oral language capability at this stage of development is essential for supporting reading and writing, receptive and expressive vocabulary, and thinking and communication.
- • In upper primary school children may have acquired the decoding skills needed to vocalise a word, but they are unlikely to understand its meaning if it is not in their vocabulary. To build vocabulary it is recommended both to explicitly teach new words, to teach students to use morphemes (root words, prefixes and suffixes), and to expose children to language-rich environments where children can experiment freely with words.
- • Useful strategies for further developing oral literacy include teachers modelling thinking aloud, reading to students, discussing books, and approaches to collaboration that promote talk between learners, including lower achieving students.

> In Years 3-6, Tasmanian teachers supported students to speak clearly and confidently, through informal sharing of ideas as well as formal oral presentations. In addition, teachers emphasised 'what a respectful listener looks like, sounds like, feels like'.

2. Developing reading fluency

- Supporting fluent reading capabilities requires attention to both word recognition and language comprehension.
- Useful strategies include repeated reading of a short and meaningful text, and reading aloud first modelled by a fluent adult or peer and then practised by the student.
- Phonics remains relevant, especially attention to less common grapheme-phoneme correspondences.
- Fluency in reading supports comprehension because the less a reader needs to focus on word recognition, the more they can direct their attention to understanding the meaning of the text.

3. Teaching reading comprehension

- Teaching metacognitive strategies has a strong impact on improving reading comprehension for children aged 7 to 11 years. The strategies introduced in lower primary school remain relevant: activating prior knowledge, prediction, questioning, clarifying, summarising, and inference.
- Students need to learn both what the strategy is and how, when, and why to use each strategy. The aim is for students to take increasing responsibility for using these strategies to monitor their own comprehension.

An engaging reading strategy in Tasmanian upper primary schools is the literature circle. Students read the same book, but each student has a different role, such as discussion director, connector, vocabulary enricher, and summariser. Over time, students get a turn at each role.

WRITING

4. Teaching writing composition

- Teaching students that writing is a process involves explicitly explaining the series of staged strategies that lead to the production of a polished piece of writing. These stages are: planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising, editing, and publishing.
- Using 'think-alouds', teachers can share their thought processes for each strategy, providing the appropriate modelling and making their thinking visible to students.
- Children at this developmental stage need to be aware of audience and purpose for their writing, and be able to choose and apply a relevant genre of writing.

5. Developing transcription and sentence construction skills	• Spelling needs to be explicitly taught and not only tested and is most effectively learned when related to lesson content. Useful strategies include introducing children to 'word families'; paired learning; and techniques such as 'look-say-cover-write-check'. • Strategies to address spelling errors should suit the nature of the error, e.g. phonological, orthographical, or morphological errors. • In upper primary school students need to learn to construct multi-clause, complex sentences to achieve meaning and effect in their writing.

Tasmanian teachers discussed how writing genres are 'crosscurricular and linked'. Therefore they wove various genres of writing through different learning areas such as science.

Spelling remained important in Tasmanian Years 3-6 classooms. Teachers aimed to make spelling engaging and 'to develop a love of words' by using quizzes, games, and etymology.

ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

6. Targeting teaching to student needs	• Teachers should accurately use a range of assessments, including baseline testing and professional judgement, and act on those to provide timely and appropriate support by changing the focus of or approach to teaching. • Planning for targeted teaching needs time, to ensure the support is matched to student needs. • Digital technology tools can be a useful supplement, especially to improve students' writing.

7. Providing evidence-based structured interventions	• The evidence in favour of structured interventions and intensive one-to-one support for students who are struggling with literacy is extensive and consistent. • Programs have the greatest impact when they align with a specific need for a school, class or student, and when staff have participated in professional learning to enable fidelity in implementation.

In Tasmanian classrooms teacher assistants provided key support to students who were struggling with literacy or who had specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia.

Individual Education Plans were central to matching the nature of the support to student needs.

Sources

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[2] Education Endowment Foundation (2017). *Improving literacy in Key Stage 2.* London: Education Endowment Foundation. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-2/

[3] Evidence for Learning (2020). *Improving literacy in upper primary.* Sydney: Evidence for Learning. https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/guidance-reports/improving-literacy-in-upper-primary/

[4] Stewart, S., Te Riele, K. & Stratford, E. (2019). *Literacy Teaching Practice in Tasmanian Schools. Stakeholder Report*. http://ecite.utas.edu.au/135644

Further reading

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This is fact sheet #8 (out of 11), produced as part of the
"Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice in Government Schools"
and is intended to align with the Department of Education Literacy Plan for Action 2019-2022.
https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Literacy-Plan-for-Action-2019-2022.pdf
For information about the review, other fact sheets and five detailed reports, see:
https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects

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