

Exploring literacy:

How six schools lifted achievement

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

Given the importance of early success in reading and writing, the question of how schools can support children to make progress in these areas is of great interest. This project set out to explore this question by identifying schools that appear to be successful in achieving progress in literacy and asking them how they have gone about this. Our aim was to uncover common themes between schools, which might help other schools work towards similar lifts in literacy achievement.

Using National Standards data from 2012–16, we were able to identify schools that seemed to have made greater-than-average sustained shifts in literacy achievement (reading and writing). We selected six of these schools as our case studies, representing a broad range of contexts. We visited each school to talk to a range of staff. We asked each person, “In your view, what has contributed to the greater-than-average progress in literacy at your school?”

Two main clusters of factors emerged:

- school-wide: elements relating to the overall school culture and not directly focused on literacy
- literacy-focused: elements relating to actions specifically designed to lift literacy achievement.

Our interviewees often mentioned elements of their school culture first, in relation to progress in literacy. Their thoughts could be summed up by the sentiment: “This is the way we do things here—it’s the [school name] way.” Common school-wide elements included:

- a safe, supportive, and positive learning environment
- a focus on developing and nurturing relationships
- strong leadership with use of achievement data to drive strategic goals.

Elements focused specifically on literacy included:

- a clear, well-articulated strategic focus on an aspect of literacy (for example, writing)
- whole-school professional learning and development (PLD) related to the strategic focus
- support for the development of oral language.

These school-wide and literacy-focused elements were combined in different, unique, and dynamic ways within each school. However, running through all the elements and weaving them together was the concept of “coherence”. This manifested as a strong sense of purpose shared by leadership, staff, students, and whānau, which enabled them to work in a collaborative team towards the goal of increased literacy achievement. Coherence also encompassed shared understanding about how

this goal would be achieved, about what progression in literacy looked like across the school, and about the language used to discuss literacy.

Our research suggests there are three essential elements that combine to create a framework to support progress in literacy achievement. These elements are:

1. a well-defined, positive school culture
2. a strategic focus on literacy combined with whole-school PLD, and
3. coherence of purpose, where the school community works collaboratively as a team towards a commonly understood goal.

1. Introduction

The importance of literacy cannot be overstated. Literacy opens doors to education, employment, wellbeing, and meaningful participation in society. We know from research that adults with low levels of literacy are more likely to have low incomes, poor health, and less involvement in social and political activities (Benseman & Sutton, 2011).

For most people, formal literacy learning begins in the primary school. As described in the Ministry of Education handbook *Effective Literacy Practice*, the focus is on “Teaching students to read and write using the written forms of the English language” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 19). While acknowledging that literacy practices are changing, and that texts are becoming increasingly multimodal (see, for example, New London Group, 1996), reading and writing remain foundational skills that unlock access to other learning areas.

Early success in reading and writing is important. Falling behind at an early age increases the likelihood of having low levels of literacy at a later stage. The “Matthew Effect” (Stanovich, 2009) describes the phenomenon, whereby children who make good initial progress in reading tend to continue to do so, whereas children who do not get off to a good start are unlikely to catch up. The result is a widening gap between students with lower and higher levels of skill over the primary school years.

Given the importance of early success in reading and writing, knowing how schools can support children to make progress is of great interest. This project set out to explore this question by identifying schools that appear to be successful in achieving progress in literacy and asking staff and leaders what they thought had contributed to this success. We wanted to uncover the factors that helped these schools make sustained lifts in literacy achievement, then offer this information in a way that others could use and adapt for their own contexts. This report summarises and discusses the factors identified in our study. The case studies of the schools we visited are included in Section 4 and offer more detailed descriptions of each context.

2. Method

The project took place at an opportune time for identifying schools with success in literacy. National Standards data in reading and writing made it possible to identify schools that seemed to have made greater-than-average progress in literacy—that is, sustained shifts in literacy achievement across the school over several years. By talking to some of these schools, we hoped to uncover common factors that might be useful for others to consider.

We performed statistical analysis of the National Standards database from the Ministry of Education to identify schools that appeared to have made greater-than-average progress in lifting student achievement in literacy (reading and writing) during the period 2012–16.¹ Data files were provided in different formats for different time periods but were “cleaned” to provide data files with one record per school.

From these data we calculated the proportions of student groups at, above, below, and well below the national standard in reading for each school. Once the proportions per calendar year were known, a measure of “progress” could be calculated as the difference between two proportions; for example, the difference between the proportion of all students in a school at the standard in reading in 2013 compared with the same proportion in 2014. This process was repeated using National Standards data for writing. Outlined below is a summary of the approach taken to identify and select schools for this study.

Identifying and selecting schools

In order to explore progress, we developed progress indicators calculated by differences in proportions. For each proportion of students *above*, *at*, *below*, or *well below* the standard, we calculated the change between 2012–13, 2013–14, 2014–15, and 2015–16. This process was firstly carried out with reading data and then repeated with writing data.

To judge which schools were consistently making progress over time, we needed to combine the different progress indicators. To do this, we firstly created a progress ranking for each school for reading and writing.

The methodology used to do this was as follows:

¹ Further details about the statistical analysis are available from NZCER.

- For each indicator we ranked the schools in order of most improved.
- We summed these ranks to get an overall impression.
- We then compared each rank sum using vigesiles (20 equal groups).

For example, for reading (overall) we could rank the schools in terms of most progress made *above*, *at*, and *below* the standard² over the years 2012–13, 2013–14, 2014–15, and 2015–16. This gave 12 rankings which we could sum and then divide into 20 groups, each with 100 schools (except the last one which is larger as we have approximately 2,100 schools in our data set).

Once we had done this for reading and writing, we had a relative comparison we could use to identify schools making more or less progress than others. We chose to use a relative system of ranking schools against each other. There are other ways of doing this, such as taking absolute measures of progress. We chose the ranking method as it allowed the same “measure” to be used for all indicators across all learning areas. If absolute measures had been used, decisions would have needed to be made about “how much” progress to use to group schools for each indicator.

The next stage was to combine the ranking groups across reading and writing for each school to allow us to see which schools were consistently making progress across both learning areas over time.

From this data, we compiled a list of about 20 schools that had made greater-than-average gains in both reading and writing achievement. We analysed recent Education Review Office (ERO) review reports for each of these schools for references to improved literacy achievement and for contextual information to help our selection of case-study schools.

From the list of 20 schools that had made greater-than-average gains in literacy achievement, we selected six case-study schools. The selection was made with the intention of providing a spread across deciles, urban/rural situation, size, and ethnicity. Our aim was to include a mix of schools from a broad range of contexts. Table 1 below describes the main characteristics of the six case-study schools. All schools are categorised by the Ministry of Education as “Main Urban” but the actual locations varied and included locations that would be better described as semi-rural, provincial suburban, and major city suburban. The selection included schools with a range of deciles, size, and ethnic composition.

² We do not use the *well below* progress indicator as it is often zero and does not provide much extra information.

Table 1 Case-study school characteristics

No	School type	Decile	School roll (approx.)	% roll New Zealand European	% roll Māori	% roll Pacific	% roll Asian	% roll Middle Eastern, Latin American, African (MELAA)
1	Full primary (Y0–8)	2	100	12	63	21	1	3
2	Full primary (Y0–8)	1	500	6	69	25	0	0
3	Contributing (Y0–6)	7	200	75	23	0	2	1
4	Contributing (Y0–6)	8	450	31	3	1	52	12
5	Full primary (Y0–8)	2	150	12	75	10	1	3
6	Contributing (Y0–6)	4	450	52	40	3	3	2

Visiting case-study schools

We contacted the principal at each school to introduce the project and ask for permission to visit and talk to relevant staff about the factors that had contributed to achievement in literacy. We asked to speak to the literacy leader, junior and senior teachers, representatives of the senior leadership team, and the principal. We gave the school information about the project and how the information they provided would be used to create case studies. Each interviewee gave their informed consent to participate. We explained that schools and individuals would not be named in any reporting.

On our visit to the school, we spoke to each of these people and were also often able to spend some time looking around the school and chatting informally with other staff. Our primary question for each person was, “In your view, what has contributed to the greater-than-average progress in literacy at your school?” A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Limitations

One limitation of our approach to this study is that National Standards data are not standardised—they are based on teacher judgements about a child’s overall performance in each area (mathematics, reading, writing). The accuracy and comparability of teachers’ judgements therefore depended on a robust and consistent understanding of what ‘the standard’ looked like.

It is also important to keep in mind that our visit to each case-study school was brief—we spent no more than a day at each one—and that we spoke to a small number of staff. The question “What do you think has contributed to the school’s greater-than-average progress in literacy achievement?” was about our interviewees’ *perceptions* about what had made a difference. It is also important to remember that a range of other factors that we didn’t hear about may also have been at work. Nevertheless, the factors that people at each school told us were important, and which most readily came to mind in response to our question, had enough in common for us to be reasonably confident about our findings. These case studies offer a picture of how schools can do things differently and identify some aspects that are important in building effective literacy practice across a school.³

³ Each school had an opportunity to read and provide feedback on their case study.

3. Case studies

School 1

The main factor in improving our literacy achievement is the way that we actually get the children to take ownership of their learning and that it's purposeful. It's about being quite deliberate ... knowing the curriculum inside out, knowing what we want and why, knowing where we want our children to get to and being clear about that with them. (Literacy leader)

School 1 is a full primary (Years 0–8), English-medium school. It has a roll of just over 100 students. Around two-thirds of the students identify as Māori and around one-fifth identify as Pacific. Most students come from low-income families. The school is part of a Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako.

When we visited the school, we talked to seven members of staff—the principal, the literacy leader, three experienced teachers, a beginning teacher, and a teacher's aide. The current principal took up the role in 2014 and has led change since that time. She has worked alongside staff, students, and the community to develop a renewed vision for the school. The co-construction of this new vision provided a strong foundation for ongoing work on teaching practice and student achievement.

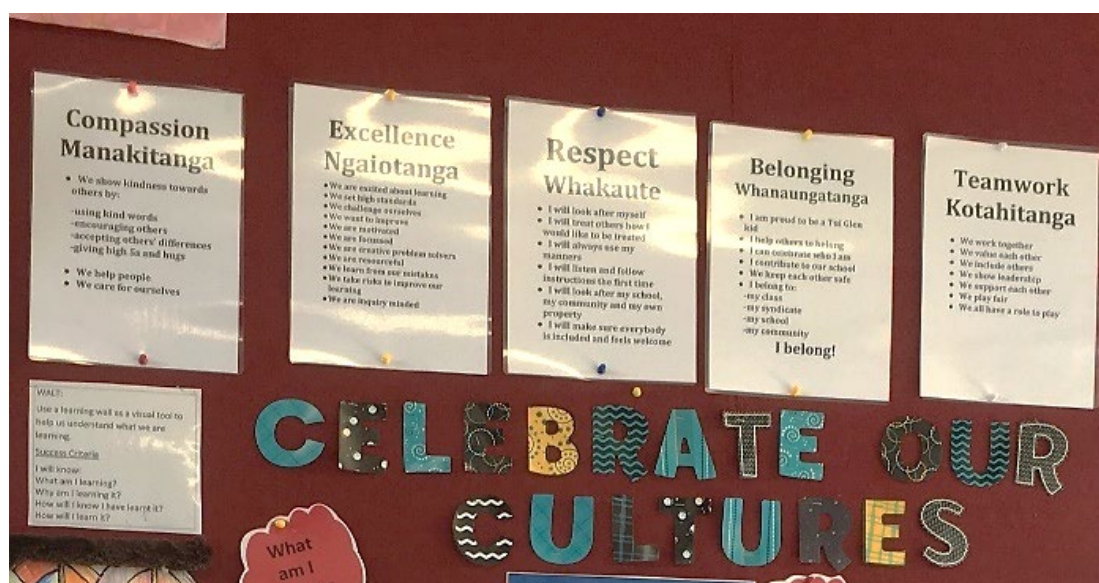
Senior leaders told us that from 2012 to 2016 “many good things were happening at the school” that had contributed to improving literacy achievement. Ideas about what had enabled the school to make a difference to literacy teaching and learning included:

- building a strong foundation for literacy learning, based on shared school values and a focus on students' wellbeing
- literacy-focused, whole-school PLD
- school-wide commitment to making teaching and learning deliberate, explicit, and purposeful.

Building a strong foundation for literacy learning

Literacy teaching and learning at this school is underpinned by a considerable amount of prior and ongoing work that is not directly curriculum related but which provides the foundation that enables learning. As the principal said, “It's more than just explicit teaching—we have to meet all their

needs to make a difference.” While meeting children’s needs is important in all schools, it is particularly important for schools whose children may face greater challenges associated with their families’ circumstances, or with their families’ inability or reluctance to be closely involved with the school. Communicating with parents and whānau and building their confidence and trust was an important part of the school’s foundational work.



Re-visioning the school values

Much of the foundation work was done collectively by the principal, school staff, students, and community. It included renewing connections with the local marae and working with the Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako. School values were co-constructed with students, whānau, and the community as part of a “re-visioning” process. This helped ensure that the values are meaningful and “owned” by everyone. The re-visioned school values are:

- compassion/manaakitanga
- striving for excellence/ngaiotanga
- respect/whakaute
- belonging/whanaungatanga
- teamwork/kotahitanga.

These values encapsulate the school’s vision for relationships based on reciprocal caring and kindness, a sense of safety and belonging, positive attitudes to learning and success, high expectations, and a growth mindset. The values are displayed in all classrooms and are sometimes represented by the acronym MERIT (Manaakitanga; Excellence; Respect; I belong; Teamwork).

Staff have worked collaboratively to relate the values to each curriculum area, including literacy.

We've unpacked the values and aligned them with the key competencies ... We then break that down into the literacy aspects. (Literacy leader)



Ensuring students' wellbeing

With the revised school vision and values in place, the focus turned to students' wellbeing. Staff and children completed a wellbeing survey, which revealed pockets of need. During this process, staff identified concerns about student behaviour. Addressing these concerns was a critical step in improving achievement. Changes to behaviour were supported through the PB4L School-Wide⁴ initiative and the renewed focus on school values. The values have become a school 'script' to ensure everyone gets the same messages, and lessons sometimes include an explicit focus on them. These changes have helped to create safe, supportive learning environments.

The values have become part of everyday life. Our first step was about behaviour and how we show the values when we walk around the school and how we show the values as learners. We live and breathe it every morning. We use scripts and explicit language. It's been so powerful. (Principal)

It's allowed classrooms to be really settled places where learning can happen. (Principal)

Teaching and support staff appreciate that the leadership team genuinely models the values. This helps to create strong relationships amongst the staff and strengthen partnerships with parents, whānau, and the community.

⁴ PB4L School-Wide looks at behaviour and learning from a whole-of-school as well as an individual child perspective. The framework is based on international evidence.

A great leadership team! [The principal] is welcoming and approachable to ask for help, ask questions, and I feel comfortable doing that. We all get along really well. If there are problems we are able to talk about it and sort it out. (Teacher)

Engaging parents, whānau, and the community

Drawing on the collectively agreed values, staff and the board of trustees (BOT) also worked on ways to build closer relationships with parents and whānau, especially those who were shy or nervous about approaching the school. They wanted to help these whānau feel safe and confident to be part of the school community.

The staff spent time unpacking and understanding Ka Hikitia,⁵ and used the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) Governance Internal Evaluation Tool (IET)⁶ and Hautū Tool⁷ to review how they were interacting with parents and whānau. Their goal was to understand their families' lives better, and to communicate with families and whānau regularly. To do this they needed to create opportunities for families to interact with school staff in ways that built confidence and trust. As a small school with about 70 families, they found that getting together informally on a regular basis, often using the neighbouring marae as the venue, made it possible to start building that confidence.

Every term we have a hui, with pizza for everyone, and movie tickets, and babysitters. It's always a celebration. In 2014 we were only getting 4–6 people to these meetings and now we get 40 plus! (Principal)

Modelling the value of manaakitanga, the principal and staff learnt parents' and whānau members' names. They also made a point of contacting whānau to celebrate success and share good news. Parents and whānau have become more willing to come into the school and talk with staff as they have become more confident that the school values them as partners in their children's learning. This has made the more formal reporting requirements easier. For instance, if a child is reported as falling behind (previously reported as "well below the national standard"), parents and whānau are told about the support that is being put in place for them at school—for example, through the Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) or the High and Complex Needs Unit (HCN).

We're always asking the hard questions but supporting [parents] too. We ask about what are our collective ideas, what would help at home? It's important to have those conversations and to celebrate success so they want to come back. (Principal)

5 <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/ka-hikitia-accelerating-success-20132017/>

6 An online tool to help boards identify areas where they need to improve their governance practice. See <https://www.nzsta.org.nz/advice-and-support/professional-development/governance-internal-evaluation-tool-iet/>

7 Māori cultural responsiveness self-review tool for boards of trustees. See, for example, <http://nzst01w5.clients4.nvinteractive.co.nz/professional-development/hautu-maori-cultural-responsiveness-self-review-tool-for-boards-of-trustees>

The principal and staff recognised the need to co-ordinate the support available to families from various government and community organisations. They saw this as an effective way of helping to meet children’s wellbeing needs, which could be extended even further by sharing information across Communities of Learning.

There’s lots of support out there, but it’s knowing about who needs what, and making families comfortable with using it. It’s getting the services talking and working together, and families feeling safe to access it. (Principal)

A health nurse is funded in decile 1–3 schools; Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) are also funded through MSD [Ministry of Social Development]. These are really important people, because it helps us collectively carry and support families ... Infant Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (ICAMHS) were in the school last week and we have amazing support from the local church—they’re in school twice a week to do lunches—and we go to the marae on Monday mornings. [The service agencies] work in together with the staff. (Principal)

While the work on co-ordinating support for families may not be directly focused on literacy achievement, it helps to build a strong foundation for learning by supporting whānau and student wellbeing. This strong foundation underpins learning across the curriculum, including literacy.

Literacy-focused, whole-school professional learning and development (PLD)

To raise literacy achievement, the principal recognised it was important to identify the teaching and learning approaches that best suited the teachers and students. She also wanted to see these approaches more consistently implemented across the school.

The school has been engaged with literacy-focused PLD over the past 3 years. The focus has been on developing an understanding of what an effective practitioner looks like. The journey of reflection and professional learning has involved acknowledging what teachers already knew and did, as well as trialling new ideas and tools. The literacy leader remarked, “We’ve done a lot of PLD.”

A focus on writing

One of the PLD components involved an outside PLD provider working with teachers to reflect on their planning and teaching practice, and to identify what works for their students. Staff noted that in earlier years “reading seemed to happen”, but students struggled with writing. Much of the focus has therefore been on exploring practice around writing and how to improve students’ achievement.

The challenges for the PLD were to help all teachers improve their practice, and to build greater coherence in the way writing is taught across the school. Teachers had previously used a wide range of approaches and had very different levels of experience. Experienced teachers said they

sometimes felt challenged by new ideas from the PLD and some newer teachers commented on how much they felt they needed to learn.

I was not well prepared through my ITE [initial teacher education], especially for literacy. I feel no one really told you how to teach writing—it was all mystery! Both my associate teachers said writing wasn't their strength, so I just had to learn on the job. I would have liked more in-class time while studying. It's one of those things that you just keep on learning. I liked the modelling of lessons—that practical thing I can see. I finally feel like I'm getting there and learn heaps each year. (Beginning teacher)

In their PLD sessions, teachers discussed a variety of strategies to accelerate children's progress. Many of these came from the Accelerating Learning in Literacy (ALL)⁸ programme, including frontloading vocabulary, “just in time” teaching, mini lessons, and using matrices. The staff worked together to unpack the curriculum, Best Evidence Synthesis (BES),⁹ and the Effective Literacy Practice handbooks (ELP).¹⁰ They also explored the Learning Progression Frameworks and the Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT),¹¹ which they were beginning to use alongside other assessment tools such as running records and e-asTTle.¹²

Staff also worked on using assessment data to identify areas of need, plan next steps, and develop students' understanding of expectations. Moderating writing together was a key factor in this process.

Another huge thing is analysing data and learning how to moderate effectively. We sat down as a staff to look at writing together, moderating e-asTTle, and what would reading at levels 1–2–3 look like. We brought along samples and unpacked and discussed them, which showed the huge difference. Our data actually dipped as we came onto the same page. Now we feel fully confident that every teacher is on the same page with the marking. (Principal)

Staff told us that being videoed while teaching a lesson was an influential PLD tool that supported reflection and discussion about teaching practice and enabled them to see themselves as learners. Leaders and teachers acknowledged that being videoed was initially a bit confrontational and some teachers felt insecure about it. However, they stressed that it was used for professional development

⁸ Accelerating Learning in Literacy is a short intervention for Years 1–10 students who have had at least 40 weeks of schooling and are not meeting expectations in reading or writing. This intervention is a supplementary support to lift student achievement. It is in addition to, and connected to, students' classroom programmes. (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl.-PLD/School-initiated-supports/Programmes-for-Students-PfS>)

⁹ The New Zealand Ministry of Education's Best Evidence Synthesis iterations draw together, explain, and illustrate bodies of evidence about what works to improve education outcomes, and what can make a bigger difference for the education of children and young people. (<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515>)

¹⁰ Ministry of Education handbooks Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4 and Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8 set out six dimensions of effective literacy practice, which have been identified in both New Zealand and international studies. (<https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Archives/Assessment/Reading-and-writing-standards/Effective-literacy-practice>)

¹¹ The Progress and Consistency Tool is an online tool that includes learning progression frameworks which help teachers notice students' progress in their learning. (<https://pactinfo.education.govt.nz/about-the-pact/>)

¹² e-asTTle is an online assessment tool, developed to assess students' achievement and progress in reading, mathematics, writing, and in pānui, pāngarau, and tuhituhi. (<https://e-asttle.tki.org.nz/About-e-asTTle>)

purposes rather than as part of appraisal purposes. The literacy leader described how being videoed made it possible for teachers to critically reflect on specific areas of their practice:

I could ask, “Am I talking too much? Am I too teacher directed?” By being videoed you can actually see what you are doing. For example, I could see that I totally shut that child out. Why did I do that? We didn’t want it to be confrontational. It’s about trust. (Literacy leader)

Building a consistent approach

The whole-school approach to the PLD sessions, including leaders and teacher aides as well as teachers, helped build confidence and coherence so that practice across the school was aligned. Everyone was a learner, and together they supported each other to build a shared understanding of the concepts being presented.

Understanding that as leaders we are also learners. We’re sitting alongside our teachers as we’re doing it—upskilling ourselves. It’s more powerful when we are learners too. We can do that as a whole staff because we’re a small school and we can share the things we’re struggling with in the practice sessions. (Literacy leader)

Another benefit of the whole-school approach to PLD was that it promoted the development of a common language about literacy. This common language has facilitated deeper discussions about aspects of literacy. Ensuring all teachers talk about literacy in the same way also means that students, parents, and whānau receive consistent messages about expectations and how the children might work towards these. Previously, these expectations varied between classes.

Collectively we established that there were lots of good things happening but there was some inconsistency. The children even articulated the different expectations in different classes. (Principal)

We’re unpacking the terminology and using the same vocab right from five-year-olds’ WALT¹³ success criteria. When we first started there was inconsistency, so making it consistent and unpacking what this jargon means for kids and their whānau. (Literacy leader)

Making literacy teaching and learning deliberate, explicit, and purposeful

Staff work collaboratively, frequently coming together to discuss priorities and goals. This collaboration underpins a shared understanding and consistency of approach across the school.

We have strategic goals and discuss how to make the links for the teachers. We have leadership meetings, staff meetings, syndicate meeting with kids, we include the teacher aides, we even get together in the holidays—it’s the whole group coming up with the ideas. So it’s about

¹³ WALT: Defined as a learning objective in child-friendly terms: “What am I learning today”.

working collaboratively. It's a better way of making ideas together and school-wide implementation. (Literacy leader)

Working on consistency is an ongoing process with staff collaborating to re-evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches. For example, they agreed they would no longer remove a child to another room to do a separate programme with a teacher aide as a matter of course.

We used to remove kids from class all the time, but it didn't work because it wasn't in context, which is why I love the PB4 learning. Kids hate being pulled out of class. (Literacy leader)

Tailoring to the context and specific needs

While approaches to literacy have become more consistent across the school, there is room for teachers to try out specific programmes or approaches that they feel may be effective for individual students. Some teachers told us about their use of programmes such as Early Words. Some teachers were also trialling the information-sharing tool Seesaw as a way of getting parents involved with their children's literacy learning.

If it is found that a child can benefit from separate attention, such as through the Reading Recovery programme, efforts are made to ensure there is consistency between the intervention and the classroom expectations, to create an overall coherence to the approach.

We do some Reading Recovery as well. The teacher is really great and we use the same strategies and we communicate really well. That's been helpful as the kids don't get confused if the approach is the same as in class. The children know that I know what they can do in Reading Recovery, so I can say "Mrs T says you can do this". (Literacy leader)

There is strong agreement among staff on the importance of using tools and programmes appropriately for the context or specific needs. For example, digital technology is integrated into some class activities but is more likely to be used in senior classes or for individual children.

I don't use digital devices for writing but have been thinking about it for one boy in my class who doesn't have the fine motor skills [for writing]. (Teacher)

We try to find programmes that are right for them but we [make] sure these are in context—certainly not remedial work, and not rehashing things children haven't picked up, because if they haven't, we haven't done it in the right way. Not just do-more-of-the-same but how we can teach them in a different way ... for example, getting ESOL children to do a task before the others, so that they can lead some aspects of the lesson. That builds their mana ... Sometimes showing the kids how to be the 'teacher' really cements their learning. (Literacy leader)

Explicit teaching

The principal described the core of the approach to literacy across the school as “explicit acts of teaching”. Teachers use explicit language and modelling, so that pathways for learning are clear and children know what they are expected to do at each step.

I find it helps to model what you want them [Years 2–3 students] to do, whereas J [who has Years 4–5 students] uses explicit language like “success criteria”. (Teacher)

We’ve had to refine our teaching in a huge way. Planning was very much ability-based and teachers had a clear idea of next steps, but the children didn’t. So, it’s been about giving them the understanding by saying, “What’s our WALT today?” and looking at the purpose, who’s interested in this, and why we are interested. (Literacy leader)

Teachers said that, by working collaboratively at syndicate and whole-staff level, they have been better able to identify learning objectives and next steps, and to plan lessons more coherently across the school. They have worked on structuring their teaching so that each student has a clear understanding of what they need to learn and the pathway to get there, while also having some choices about the journey. For example, the literacy leader described a class where students talked about what an effective piece of writing looked like and analysed the steps involved. Setting up such clear structures to guide students’ learning offers them a “safe” environment for learning.

There is some whole-class teaching that lays the foundation for what we’re exploring. It includes giving the kids the language, some experience, something to connect to which is also culturally responsive and student driven. You can build on what they know, and make sure it’s something they want to do. Also the structure of the programme—our children are at ease when they know what’s happening. This supports positive behaviour. We aim to deliver the programme in a controlled, structured way so they feel safe ... If we just jump into the content they resist and lose it. (Literacy leader)

One advantage of being a small school is the possibility of holding whole-staff literacy practice sessions. At these sessions, staff support each other to work on “puzzles of practice” for individual children.

In the practice sessions [...] we can ask, “Who has an idea of what I could do with this child?” Over time we’ve developed the puzzle of practice, where a teacher can introduce the child and ask, “What is their puzzle?” Then as a group we dive into the literacy books. A Years 7 and 8 teacher can look at a Year 1 child and think about what we would expect from these literacy programmes. Diving into the curriculum is a stronghold. (Literacy leader)

We always have someone typing out the ideas as we go, so that teachers can concentrate, and we have a takeaway pack with things you can trial. At the next session we give feedback on how that’s gone. The follow-up is the big thing. It gives us accountability. It does have to be deliberate and, for us, that’s been important. “What is effective practice?” was our overarching inquiry and priority. We’ve started off in writing and literacy but found it doesn’t matter which area—there are certain tools you’re using that are applicable everywhere. And a topic wall, then a literacy wall, then maths wall ... well actually, it’s a learning wall! (Literacy leader)

Learning walls

Teachers across the school showed us how they use “learning walls” to make learning steps explicit. While these vary from class to class and across year levels, the learning wall is a place where children can pool information that is relevant to them and that they can use to achieve a task. In the New Entrant to Year 1 class, the learning wall includes a ‘word wall’ to support the strong emphasis on oral language development, which is also



supported by play-based learning. Junior classes have a lot of photos on their learning walls, which teachers sometimes use as starting points for conversations with children: “Remember when you wrote your name by yourself and got the letters the right way? Remember you can write your name.”



Learning walls for older children include tip charts for writing, KWL¹⁴ charts, examples of their own work, and exemplars. One wall included a piece of writing modelled in five different ways by the teacher to exemplify writing for five different purposes. Senior students have small photos of themselves which they pin on the wall to track their progress along sets of exemplars.

Along with the learning wall, students also use modelling books to keep track of what they are learning. These tools provide a structure that helps children feel secure, by setting out what is expected of them and giving them somewhere to look for the information they need. They can look back at work they’ve done before and see examples of what is expected next.

We use [the learning wall] as a place where children can find information but also the things they have an interest in. They’re filling up their kete. (Teacher)

Modelling books are something the children can always refer back to. We make sure we identify a WALT so that we have the success criteria, and usually there is some evidence of what you’ve been working on with a child, for example things like sound–letter knowledge, or descriptive writing. (Teacher)

¹⁴ A KWL chart is designed to help in learning. The letters KWL stand for: what a student knows (K), wants to know (W), and has learned (L).



Many teachers at this school spoke about making learning relevant and purposeful and how this helps students to take ownership of their learning. Students can generate their own specific WALTs and success criteria. In one class, students decide on a topic for their writing based on their interests, then get to choose which purpose to write for (explanation, description, etc.). Their reading groups are arranged so that they read examples of writing for that purpose, to support their own work.

We used to do worksheets, but it didn't mean anything. If it is important, for example that 'n' is in my name, and not just because it comes after 'm', then it becomes their own work. It's about purpose. (Teacher)

In a junior class, students chose to write and post thank-you letters.

We'd been talking about letterboxes, because they wanted to say thank you to parents and whānau who'd done some work in the school over the holidays. They chose what they wanted to do, but we had a process for doing that. So we took a walk to the post office and on the way we looked at letterboxes, took photos, and then we posted their letters. So it was purposeful for them. Then over the next week we had parents and whānau coming in saying they got their letters. So that made it even more purposeful for them, and they wanted to write even more. (Teacher)

Deliberate teaching and making the learning steps explicit provides a structure for children to feel safe and confident and helps them to discover the relevance and purpose of what they are learning. The literacy leader feels that the relationship between purpose, interest, and engagement makes for more powerful learning than the earlier approach of working with ability groups.

So we had to think about what is purposeful and how do we get kids to own their work? We were taking ability groups and they didn't understand why they were doing it—it was just what the teacher made [them] do. That was huge for us, and we're still developing it. (Literacy leader)

Summary

The main factors that have helped improve literacy learning in this school are those that form the strong foundation for supporting students and their families, which enables learning. The approach is likely to have strengthened learning in other areas besides literacy, as well as helping to develop

key competencies. School-wide PLD on writing has led to a common approach and consistency of language that has supported coherent learning pathways through the school.

School 2

It's knowing who your professional development providers are going to be and being very careful. (Principal)

School 2 is a large full primary (Years 0–8) with just over 500 students. The students are predominantly Māori (around 75%) and there is a large group of Pacific students (around 20%). Most come from low-income families in the local area. The school is part of a Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako.

We spoke with the principal, the deputy principal who is also the literacy leader, the associate principal, and three senior and junior classroom teachers. The school environment is bright and modern. There is a new classroom block for the New Entrants / Year 1 children where teachers use play-based learning and team teaching.

Over the past few years, the school has focused on lifting students' achievement in literacy. They began by concentrating on reading, successfully lifting achievement rates to around 70% of students at or above standard (National Standards were in place at this time). When they looked at the data for writing, the story was quite different. In 2014, only 24% of students were at or above the National Standard. The school identified an urgent need for change and implemented a 2-year planned process to review and refresh the teaching of writing across the school. The review process, and the strategic implementation of PLD to support it, was led by the deputy principal / literacy leader.

The focus on literacy and review of writing was also supported by a range of school-wide factors, evident in the culture of the school.

School culture supports literacy learning

The school culture provides a safe learning environment, sets high expectations for learning, and encourages strong relationships with parents and whānau. These, in turn, support children in their literacy learning and contribute to improved literacy achievement.

Secure physical and emotional environment

The school places a great deal of emphasis on providing a safe physical and emotional environment for its students. This is underpinned by established structures, routines, and expectations. School and sports uniforms, equipment, and buildings are all high standard. The principal believes it's

important that students feel positive about themselves, and providing a pleasant environment is part of this. He states, “They come in here and they know what’s what.”

The school is a PB4L school, with every staff member, including the principal, trained through the Incredible Years¹⁵ programme (for students aged 3–8 years). The whole staff has also had professional development in restorative practice. They offer a strong wrap-around service, with a Social Worker in Schools (SWIS) and a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

The importance of the safe environment is reflected in the school’s values which are promoted through the three ‘kete’ of:

- maramatanga (I think)
- manaakitanga (I care)
- whanaunatanga (I belong).

These kete guide behaviour and culture and are displayed around the school and conveyed to parents and whānau and students when they enrol. Kete awards are given out at school assembly for children who have been seen to have been modelling the values.

High expectations

The school sets high expectations for learning for all the children. While many come from difficult or disadvantaged backgrounds, the school doesn’t believe that is a reason to accept lower expectations.

It’s about expectations. I mean, the expectation is that they’re going to do well. And we never let up on that. We push them, and they step up. (Principal)

It’s looking beyond the baggage that they bring in. Yes, they do have that, and we acknowledge that, but that can’t be why they don’t achieve. (Principal)

They work to provide children with experiences and opportunities they wouldn’t otherwise have, such as going to the mountain for skiing. The principal acknowledges that such activities take money, but feels they are important. He notes that the decile funding system has helped with that: “Decile funding has made a difference—having the money to do things, to make environments fabulous, and to have professional development.”

¹⁵ Incredible Years Parent is a 14-session programme for parents of children aged 3–8, which provides parents with skills to better manage children with behavioural problems, creating a home environment that is conducive to positive social and educational outcomes. (<https://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/Literacy-Online/Planning-for-my-students-needs>)

Strong partnerships with whānau and students

Students feel a strong connection with the school, and staff describe the school as having a “whānau feel”. Staff and leaders work hard to get to know the children and develop relationships with them.

You’ve got to love those kids; you’ve got to know them; you’ve got to know the parents too. The parents are trusting you with their babies, so you have to build trust, work on open communication. (Principal)

The school has a strong history of working in partnership with parents and whānau to raise expectations and break cycles of underachievement. They encourage parents, many of whom had negative experiences of school as children, to feel comfortable at the school, become part of the school family, and see the school as “their place”.

A school Facebook page was developed in response to a need for clear communication and because many of the parents are “Facebookers”. The online portfolio system Seesaw means that parents can see what their children are doing and the progress they’re making.



Reviewing the writing programme

The motivation for the school’s focus on writing was a long hard look at the National Standards data. The deputy principal describes how it felt to realise that the majority of children were below standard in writing.

I’ve been here for ten years and for the first seven of those we’d been working our butts off to try and get all these things happening and basically it just wasn’t. Three and a half years ago we were at 24% for National Standards in writing. You look at that and all you can see is the 76%. (Deputy principal)

Something had to be done. Some Year 8 children were “walking out of this place without capital letters and full stops and sentences”—a situation that the deputy principal saw as evidence that the school’s current teaching approaches weren’t working.

If by the end of eight years they haven’t got it, we’ve got to look at ourselves ... It’s us. It’s not that the kids can’t do it—it’s the way we’re teaching. It’s not happening. (Deputy principal)

Reading had traditionally been the strongest area at the school. A recent focus on reading had seen sustained improvement from around 50% to 70% of children at or above standard. The senior leadership team decided to look at the approach that had worked to lift reading achievement and see if it could be transferred to writing. Three key themes that characterised the approach were building a toolbox of programmes and strategies; developing consistency of knowledge, understanding, and terminology across the school; and lifting the profile of reading across the

school. The literacy leader used these themes to construct an approach to lifting writing achievement across the school.

Building a toolbox of approaches

The literacy leader felt from the start that lifting achievement in writing would be a 2-year journey rather than a quick fix. Because of the size of the problem, it was important to “lay writing bare” and take a good, hard look at what was happening. She had been fortunate to attend a wide range of professional development on teaching writing over the years. She began by working through this list to plan a structured programme of professional development for the school.

In the past, focusing on one approach or programme as “the answer” hadn’t worked. There were always some staff who didn’t agree with the approach, and no one approach on its own would suit the needs of all children. The professional development programme for writing would therefore include sessions from a range of different writing experts with a range of different strategies. In this way, staff would be able to build a “grab bag” or toolbox of approaches that they could draw on to suit their class, individual children, and personal preferences.

I was very mindful at the start that we weren’t going to do anybody’s programme. We were going to take bits and pieces out of what came to us and what fit with our kids in our context here. (Deputy principal)

We are not believers in a programme. The achievement and the way it is able to move is through the ‘grab bag’ approach—grabbing what’s right for our kids at that time, in that context. And that’s not necessarily going to be the same next year. You need your tools to grab down what you need for [each child]. And what this class needs isn’t going to be what next door needs. (Deputy principal)

The deputy principal thought carefully about how to structure the professional development programme to bring all teachers on board and get maximum impact. She used what she knew about each expert’s approach to judge the point in the programme when staff would be most receptive to what that expert had to offer. Some sessions, she knew, would be challenging and best left to the end of the programme.

The first expert to visit was to “light the fire” and start conversations about writing. As expected, not all teachers agreed with this expert’s approach. However, as they began talking about writing as a staff, gaps and inconsistencies began to surface. For example, while everyone agreed that oral language was an important foundation for writing, the school had no specific programme for oral language; things were done ad hoc and staff had different understandings about how to “teach” oral language. The same was true for spelling: some classes used specific spelling programmes, others did generic spelling lists. Each time children moved class, they had to learn a different system of what spelling means.

Developing consistency in knowledge, understanding, and terminology

When asked what made the single most important impact on changing attitudes and achievement in writing, the deputy principal identified consistency: taking everyone on the writing journey together, and so developing consistency of knowledge, understanding, and terminology across the school.

During the first year, the focus was on bringing consistency to the language and spelling programmes. The school began by focusing on oral language, implementing an oral language programme across the school and sharing ideas at staff meetings. To introduce consistency to the spelling programme, the deputy principal brought another specialist to the school, drawing on her own previous experience of this expert's approach. The emphasis on sound-to-letter knowledge was also an important factor for junior teachers. Gradually, staff implemented a consistent approach to spelling across the school, which extended to messages about spelling to parents and whānau. This was not always easy for teachers. Some had to build their own knowledge, often just ahead of the children.

The teachers have been learning just before the kids ... we had to really pull them out of their comfort zone and say, "That's okay. Tell [the children] you're learning. That's okay. Or that you're learning it together." (Literacy leader)

At the beginning of the second year of the writing project, some teachers questioned why they were focusing on writing again. The deputy principal explained that there was still work to do to build a consistent school-wide approach.

We needed a consolidation year. We had worked on personal teacher knowledge, we had started to work with the kids ... but we still didn't have the "How we do writing at [our school]" part. (Deputy principal)

At this point, she brought in another literacy consultant whose approach included a focus on a finite set of generic skills in writing, and on developing a list of "I can" statements around these. Her message was about identifying what children can do and focusing teaching on the things that they can't. This created structure and focus for staff. They decided to develop and trial their own set of "I can" statements, based on "what our kids need". They are now on their fourth iteration of "I can" statements across the school.

The first step in creating the "I can" statements was developing a clear set of expectations at each year level, beginning with oral language and spelling. These expectations draw on curriculum documents such as the Literacy Learning Progressions (Ministry of Education, 2010), but the key consideration was making sure that the expectations were relevant for their school and children. For oral language, that meant including tikanga Māori, such as karakia.

We added in things like that because we do, for Māori tikanga, karakia in the morning, karakia before our food. For us it's very important in our context, our culture, that the kids know those

things. So we've added those to our oral language expectations: "I'm attempting to say some of the Māori words; I know 1–2 karakia." (Literacy leader)

The set of year-by-year expectations formed the basis of the "I can" statements. Teachers looked at the expectations and worked out how to make them manageable for children, keeping them to one or two pages. The idea is that children work through the list of "I cans", marking the ones they have achieved. This helps children experience success and be very clear about their next learning steps.

The expectations and "I cans" went into the teachers' planners. Once the expectations, planners, and "I can" statements were in place, it was time to bring in another writing expert. The deputy principal knew that this particular expert could be "a little bit in your face and very challenging", with an "up and active" full-on style. She'd been asked to bring him to the school several times, but she had held off because she knew he had to be "that last person". She felt getting him in at the beginning of the project would have been too much of a challenge for the teachers, but that now was the right time. Teachers could see the expert's approach working as he modelled it with their own classes of children. This modelling made a huge impact.



<p>SHORT LONG</p> <p> ^ ^</p> <p>cat lake</p> <p>cap lake</p> <p>rat train</p> <p>map rain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know how to recognise all long and short vowel sounds. • I know all vowel and consonant clusters.
<p>rain bow</p> <p>grass hopper</p> <p>jelly bean</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can recognise most compound words.
<p>-er -est</p> <p>more most</p> <p> </p> <p>smaller biggest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can recognise and use suffixes.

They could see him walking the talk ... when he's in there and it's actually working, they're on the edge of their seats. (Deputy principal)

That gives them the encouragement "I can do this." It's relevant and it's real and I can actually put that into practice. (Deputy principal)

Lessons that really hit home from this approach were about simplifying the teaching of genre. An example was how altering tense and adding time sequence words can change a report into a recount. The advice of this expert resulted in many "light bulb" moments for teachers.

You get to that point where you're so annoyed you've been teaching for 20 years and nobody has told you this. (Teacher)

After the session, the whole school did a 6-week trial using the approach that he had modelled, and working with "I can" statements related to different genres of writing. This was followed by individual self-reflection and appraisal. There was a noticeable change in attitude and progress, with some students making considerable gain in working through the "I cans".

The other important lesson was about the need for consistency of language across the school when talking about writing. What some classes called instructional writing, others would call procedural writing, leading children to imagine that these were two different things.

The same was true for editing and proofreading, with different classes and teachers previously using different systems to mark errors and suggest changes. The staff got together and came up with a set of symbols that they could all agree on and made these into a poster. Students now learn the symbols gradually as they progress through school until they have the full set under their belts. The deputy principal noted that, “by the time a Year 8 leaves, we expect them to know how, and to be able to edit their work”.

Making writing visible

A third strand in the project to lift writing achievement was raising the profile of writing in the school. One way of doing this was by introducing the digital portfolio tool Seesaw. Children now put their writing on Seesaw every few weeks so that parents can see the progress they are making. Other strategies are making sure there are always writing displays around the school, giving awards for writing, talking about writing, and commenting on the benefits of being an effective writer.

Staff have also become excited about writing, celebrating their students’ success. Success leads to confidence, which leads to more success in an upward cycle. The deputy principal described this growth in confidence and in teachers’ ability to select from the tools they have in their kete.

When we get a kid [who is struggling with writing] it’s no longer the kid’s problem. My teachers have become investigators. “Right, I think I need a bit of [expert A], chuck in a bit of [expert B] in there, needs a sprinkle of spelling.” They’ve got the tools to answer those questions now. It’s made a huge difference. (Deputy principal)

Alongside the tools from professional development sessions, teachers also purposefully select from a range of digital resources and apps, including Audio Visual Achievement in Literacy, Language and Learning (AVAILLL) and Explain Everything.¹⁶

Children’s attitudes towards writing have also changed, with many now seeing themselves as writers.

The students are using writing as a creative expression of voice now, whereas before writing was just a horrible thing we had to do for 20 minutes. They say things like, “I have something to say. I’m an author.” (Deputy principal)

¹⁶ Two interactive websites where teachers can source, create, and share literacy learning resources. (<https://literacyinnovators.co.nz/availll/> and <https://explaineverything.com/education/>)

Using data

At the end of the first year, the percentage of students at or above standard for writing had shifted, but not by much: only about 5% to 6%. The deputy principal described this as quite disheartening, saying, “All that work, and that’s all we got!”

At the start of the second year, after reading an ERO report (Education Review Office, 2015) on raising school achievement through targeted actions, the senior leaders decided on a whole-school approach where everyone—board, students, parents, teachers, teacher aides—understood and played a part in achieving the targeted actions. They began by carefully identifying their overall goal (move writing achievement from 24% at standard to 75% at or above standard). Then they broke this up into years (20% plus per year). There was a clear and coherent plan of how these targets were going to be achieved, and what each person’s role in this was.

Each person was responsible for highlighting their actions when they’d completed them. The whole plan is displayed in the principal’s office.

A clear focus, based on data

The principal offered additional insights about why the process to review the writing programme had been so successful. A key factor was maintaining a whole-school focus on the target area and integrating all professional development, review, appraisal, and teacher inquiry with this, resulting in a ‘seamless’ approach.

The principal felt that keeping a tight school-wide focus on the target area of writing had been beneficial. In the past, they’d tried to fix everything at once, which had not been effective.

We tried in the past to do too much. Bad mistake—it was a shotgun approach. So we isolated everything down to our improvement goals based on writing. All of a sudden, we hit success ... teachers were focused, the resources were all there. They could just look at what was targeted, instead of trying to do maths and reading and doing none very well at all. All of a sudden things started changing. We needed to consolidate; we needed to make sure that teachers had time to trial things, rather than running from one to another. (Principal)

Having an action plan also helped to keep a tight focus on writing. If a professional development opportunity came up in another area, staff could remind themselves that the action plan focused solely on lifting writing achievement. Effectively, the plan gave them permission to concentrate on one area rather than skipping from learning area to learning area—from science to social studies to PE and so on.

Using the Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT)

The school is enthusiastic about using PaCT for making judgements about writing and the impact this has had on their moderation of writing. They find it works well because it is evidence based,

drawing on the work that students have done as part of their normal class activities, rather than on their performance on a specific assessment. Use of the Learning Progressions Frameworks has also opened up discussions about writing, especially during moderation of students' writing.

A bonus from work already completed on reading and writing is that the connections between the two are now becoming more obvious.

That correlation between writing and reading is becoming very evident as writing has become as strong as reading. We can see all the different opportunities in our day when teaching needs things that correlate to each other very strongly. That's how practice is maintaining and moving, because when we're teaching reading we're also grabbing bits of writing—"This reading—what sort of writing is it?" Those sorts of benefits have come. (Literacy leader)

Summary

This school credits its progress in lifting literacy achievement to a strong whole-school focus on improving writing. This was implemented through a carefully planned and co-ordinated 2-year programme of professional development, which drew on input from multiple professional development providers. While each teacher gained a toolbox of approaches to select from, the tight whole-school focus on writing also helped develop coherence across the school. This coherence extended to attitudes to writing, consistency in terminology, and an enhanced profile for writing.

The focus on writing was underpinned by commitment to creating a secure learning environment, ensuring students' wellbeing, a focus on core values, and a belief in the importance of relationships with whānau.

School 3

We had 72 years of experience in the previous AP and DP at this school. We were almost a little step back in time. You know, we'd do SRA¹⁷ in week three and aspects of that were really working well, but then the question was, "What about these kids who don't need SRA?" The challenge was to take a school that was deemed successful, to challenge some of those beliefs, and to move things forward. (Principal)

School 3 is a small rural primary school with a roll of fewer than 200 students, including approximately 25% who identify as Māori. While the school is designated as decile 7, the roll includes a mix of children from both high and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Up to 20% of the children on the roll are from families described as transient. These include low-income families who may be following seasonal work or looking for affordable housing.

On our visit to the school in March 2018 we spoke with the principal, deputy principal and Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), literacy leader, Years 2 and 3 teachers, and the teacher in charge of library (TIC).

The principal described staffing at the school as stable, with many teachers having been at the school for a long time. The principal found this stability an advantage as the teachers were highly skilled and very knowledgeable about the children, their families, and the local area. However, when she was appointed in 2010, she found it could also be a disadvantage in terms of resistance to change.

While literacy achievement at the school already appeared robust, the principal saw room for more consistency and cohesion across the school. She led the development of a renewed strategic focus on literacy achievement underpinned by a whole-school literacy framework. Teachers were able to work creatively within this framework to meet the needs of their children. Achievement has improved steadily over the past few years.

Increased school focus on literacy achievement

The increased focus on literacy began in earnest in 2011 following a "Literacy Bus Tour". This tour gave teachers the opportunity to visit other schools and explore how they taught reading and writing. Although the school's literacy approach at the time was thought to be successful, this tour opened

¹⁷ Science Research Associates Inc., commonly known as SRA, is a publisher of educational materials and reading comprehension products.

teachers' eyes to other approaches. The principal thought this experience had contributed to the "myriad" of approaches that teachers now use across the school. In her view, this multifaceted approach has advantages because it alleviates the risk associated with relying on a small number of programmes, initiatives, or individual teachers.

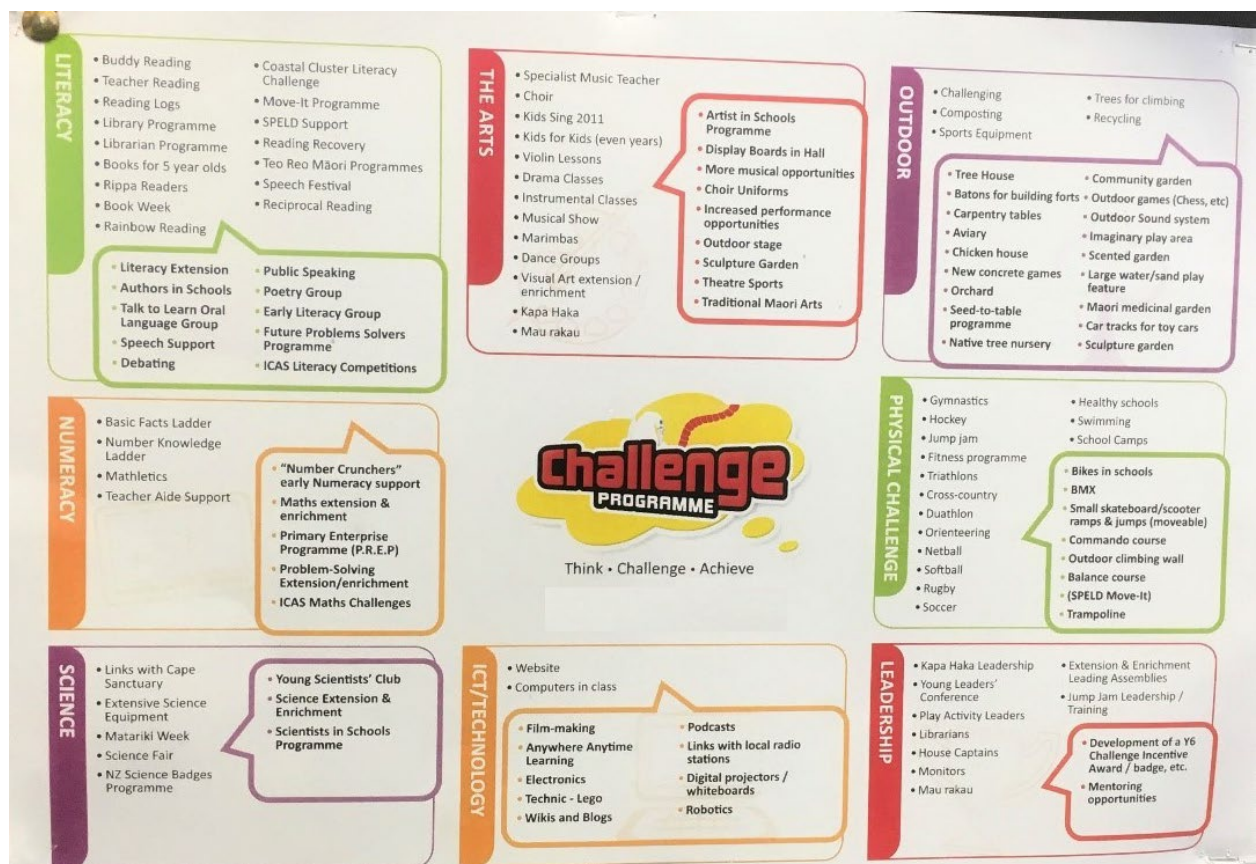
When we thought about it, there are strengths in doing a myriad of things at different levels, because if your achievement and progress relies on one or two individuals, or the current principal, or one or two exciting initiatives, if they leave or something stops getting funded, it all falls over. (Principal)

Strategic planning

In the same year, 2011, literacy became a priority in the strategic plan as part of the principal's aim to improve achievement results. The school's strategic plan is comprehensive, with learning areas broken down into detailed aspects and levels. The literacy aspects are reviewed each year against achievement data to identify priority areas and set targets. Rather than being prescriptive, this plan acts as a framework that provides direction but also allows individual teachers the freedom to decide how they will work within it.

I believe if you have a strong structure, people can be creative within it. So, we matched the curriculum to National Standards and the Learning Progressions to give teachers a clear, easy model of how to cover different essentials—a clear framework ... That is one feature that I think makes a difference; and each teacher does it through their own passion. (Principal)

Recognising that the strategic plan needed to be visible and workable on a day-to-day basis, the principal and board of trustees worked to encapsulate it in the school vision statement. The result was the statement, "Think–Challenge–Achieve". This vision statement is at the heart of the school's "Challenge Programme" poster, which shows some of the approaches, strategies, and tools the school uses to help students' achievement in different areas, including literacy.



Developing consistent assessment practices

When the principal first started at the school, National Standards data showed students achieving at high levels. However, processes for assessment and data-recording had been variable, with staff members each having their own well-established, independent ways of working.

One of the principal's first aims was to build greater consistency in the way staff assessed reading and writing. Her goal was to ensure accurate data, partly for reporting but also as a basis for identifying areas of strength and areas for strategic focus across the whole school.

When I first came here, we had a really good look at the National Standards data, which showed that 95% of the children were at or above the standard for reading—but I quickly realised it wasn't accurate. One of the first things we did for literacy was standardising.

To achieve greater consistency, the senior leaders and literacy leader supported staff to work together to unpack the curriculum, increase peer observations, and improve moderation processes. By having more conversations about how they assessed their students' literacy skills, staff were able to better align their individual approaches. As in some other schools we visited, this period of adjustment led to a dip in their achievement records.

In 2011 our achievement dropped in some areas because we were actually moderating and having honest discussions. Within literacy you have to respect the need for standardisation but also the importance of it, especially with an eclectic group of staff and only one year group at each year level. (Principal)

Use of assessment data

The principal clearly values having quality data to lead improvement in the school. The senior leadership team monitors all data closely to help identify patterns and trends across the school, to report to the board, and to assess children at certain stages or critical transitions, such as from the junior to senior school.

The team realised that the most efficient way to provide an overview of school progress in reading and writing is to have all Year 3 children complete the same assessment at the beginning of the year. They use the Progress and Achievement Test (PAT): Listening and STAR Reading for this assessment because this combination helps to identify children who may have reading difficulties.

[It] highlights those children who have excellent listening comprehension but struggle with decoding in reading.

The principal also notes that assessing later than Year 3 leaves little time for teachers to really make a difference for children who are struggling.

Assessment data also provide evidence for discussions between the senior leadership team, which includes the SENCO and literacy leader, and teachers about areas of strength and potential areas for increased focus in their classes. The aim is to make sure that all children continue to make progress.

We use the data in a meaningful way, and we target [teaching] to where it needs to be. For example, at the end of 2016 e-asTTle data showed us that surface features were dragging us down. So at the beginning of the following year, the senior school did the PAT punctuation test, which gave teachers their teaching points for the year. It made a significant difference. So ... we have some standard [assessments] every year, and then we tailor [assessment] with some specific ones in different years. (Principal)

The detailed records for such a small roll of children mean that each child is easily recognised in the data. Any changes or anomalies may trigger a review of a child's achievement in other areas and often generates a conversation about their needs. The SENCO register records both assessment data and in-depth information about target learners, which teachers can use in their planning.

Literacy-related PLD and support for teachers

Senior leaders have supported teachers to become more familiar with different literacy assessments, with analysing assessment data, and with using data to inform their planning. Initially, as part of

developing a consistent approach to assessment, the principal required all teachers to attend courses on assessment and making overall teacher judgments. Staff also take part in whole-school and group discussions and moderation exercises. This is especially important for assessments such as e-asTTle writing.

We do a lot of moderation as a whole staff and sometimes we'll do a bit in syndicate teams and share what we've done. (Literacy leader)

e-asTTle writing was really useful because it's broken down into so many parts and you can analyse it carefully. For instance we might have a piece of writing with lots of spelling errors which gives the perception of low ability but proper analysis was quite enlightening for staff. (Teacher)

Professional development sessions with an external provider also helped teachers develop a shared understanding of effective pedagogy and practice.

We worked on defining effective pedagogy—in everything. Previously leaders hadn't been involved in appraisal, and teachers hadn't been in each other's classes. So, we worked on the 'Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis programme' (BES¹⁸) and, as a staff, came up with what effective pedagogy looks like at our school so there was an agreement that these would be the things that we did. (Principal)

In subsequent years, teachers have often chosen professional development courses associated with specific programmes or approaches, such as the ALL¹⁹ programme, Sharp Reading,²⁰ and play-based learning. Some professional development covered aspects of wellbeing to support learners.

I went to professional development session about reluctant writers and strategies to use with them. They talked a lot about anxiety, so I've learned a lot about that. For example, one boy was highly anxious [about writing] but I didn't realise it, and that was because he was confident in the playground and compliant in the classroom and worked hard. Then when I went on the course I recognised this. So anxiety is something I'm passionate about minimising and play is one strategy that seems to be working for that. (Teacher)

¹⁸ BES is a collaborative knowledge building strategy designed to strengthen the evidence base that informs education policy and practice in New Zealand. (<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/topics/BES>)

¹⁹ Accelerated Literacy Learning. ALL, ALiM, and MST are interventions designed to support schools to inquire into their teaching practices to do something new or different to accelerate the progress of students not meeting expectations in mathematics, reading, and/or writing of Years 1–10 students. (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl-PLD/School-initiated-supports/Programmes-for-Students-PFS>)

²⁰ An online series of professional development courses supporting teachers to develop aspects of literacy teaching. (<https://www.sharpreading.com/page/sharpreading-online/>)

In catering for individual learner needs, teachers and students have also worked with external providers such as SPELD and BLENNZ.²¹ They have also used Reading Recovery, though getting access to this has become difficult in recent years.

We've accessed the RT Lit [Resource teacher: Literacy] for a group of students with different needs, because we can't get anyone to do Reading Recovery anymore. Our Reading Recovery trained teacher retired and they're not training any more in this region. There's some controversy about Reading Recovery but it's worked well for our kids, with good movement after one year because we've prioritised Reading Recovery and it's made a difference for the kids who need it. We can't find anyone here, or willing to travel, to cover our Reading Recovery allocation. It's a bit of a dilemma for us, and we're currently looking for another resource or programme to put in place. (Literacy leader)

Teachers use a wide range of resources in their classrooms to meet the needs and preferences of students. They also described making use of events such as book week, the speech festival, a library information skills programme, and a literacy challenge with other schools, to add variety to their literacy teaching programmes.

Programme-wise there's not one "wonder thing". We all do the programmes slightly differently but it's about the progression and building on what the children know. (Teacher)

Drawing on teachers' strengths and passions

Within a school environment of increased collaboration and greater consistency, the principal also supported teachers to design cross-curricular programmes that align with their personal interests and passions.

²¹ SPELD: an organisation that supports learners with dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties.
BLENNZ: Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ.

Teachers weave their literacy teaching around these areas of interest, which include cookery, art, the environment, and the library. For example, junior students learn through a range of Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) activities that have been developed from their teacher's passion for the environment. Some of these activities—all of which provide contexts for literacy teaching—have become school traditions, such as the annual beach clean-up. At another year level, the Garden to Table²² programme



sets much of the context for children's reading and writing. As an ex-chef, this teacher feels that practical activities such as growing food and cooking give children experience to draw on for their writing. They also increase children's motivation to read; for example, children have been researching and reading about how foods are grown and prepared in other countries.

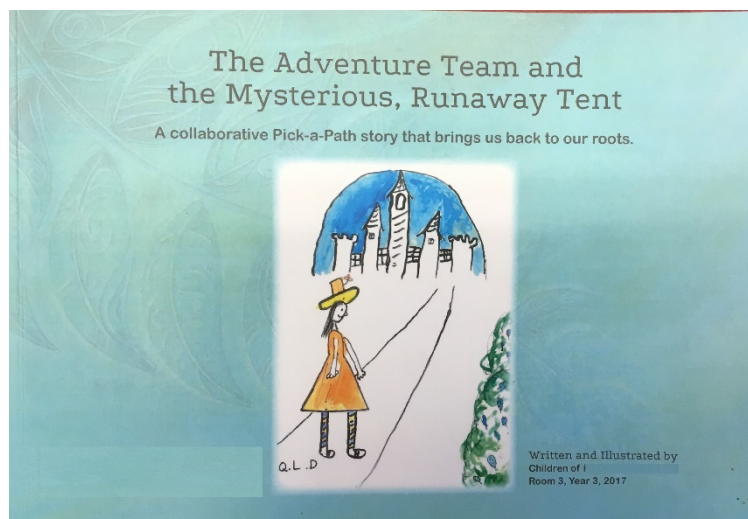
They cook every Friday, so their reading is centred around recipes and learning where different foods come from, and what sort of dishes come from those countries. They do lots of research around that. (Literacy leader)

The library is another part of the school where literacy learning is supported through a teacher's passion. This teacher ensures the library is well stocked, up-to-date, and responsive to current events. She maintains a high profile for the library across the school, with children presenting and reviewing new books in assembly. Children's enthusiasm for reading is also evident in their eagerness to spend time in the library and to volunteer as student librarians.

Encouraging students to talk about their learning also encourages them to develop a sense of ownership of their learning. This is seen by the school as an important ingredient in improving children's literacy.

²² The Garden to Table programme builds skills for life through highly practical, hands-on classes—not only teaching growing and cooking skills but also building awareness of individual and collective responsibility for the environment, healthy eating, and community connectedness. (<http://www.gardentotable.org.nz/the-programme>)

One Year 3 class chose to collaboratively write and publish a “pick-a-path” book. For a whole term, their literacy programme was focused around the book. The pick-a-path style meant that children had to collaborate and take turns to write. They generated new ideas, read and reviewed previous sections to think about continuity, proofread, and created illustrations. They also worked on the overall publication of the book, including fundraising so that all members of the class could have a copy. The children were able to build on each other’s ideas and natural leaders emerged. One boy became a co-editor with the teacher. Another led the creation of a film version of the story. In their teacher’s view, this collaborative, student-led project had been highly engaging for students and a valuable way of using and developing literacy skills.



This wasn’t in my plan, but it was an idea from the children. This is what they wanted to do. They are so proud of it. There was lots of collaboration in an authentic context. The kids were so highly motivated and it was totally student led. (Teacher)

Student choice is also important for older students at this school to help keep them engaged with reading and writing. Students are often given a choice in how they work and who they work with. They have input to their lessons and give feedback about what works or doesn’t work for them. Teachers are responsive to this feedback. For example, reading logs were discontinued after some students described them as a barrier to enjoying reading.

Development of oral language

The school places a high value on oral language as the foundation for literacy achievement. As the principal noted, “Oral language is a logical link in everything.”

The staff work to support students to develop confidence through oral language. Previously, there was a culture of students not being allowed to talk; this has now changed to a culture where discussion is promoted and valued.

Singing, performing, and speaking to an audience are all seen as valuable ways of supporting the development of self-confidence and oral language, which in turn underpin successful literacy learning. Students are offered a variety of activities that help to develop their oral language skills; for example, Jump Jam, kapa haka, and singing.

We have a strong music programme, in which most kids will happily sing solo in a production. Year 2 can run an assembly and are totally confident using the microphone. (Principal)

Oral language is also supported through play-based learning in the junior classes. Teachers feel play-based learning has been effective in supporting the development of language skills and confidence.

Play-based learning has had a huge impact. For example, a mixed ability group were playing a game creating rooms on bits of paper. As they joined them together, it got so big it became a palace ... “a castle ... for hamsters”! There was all this talking amongst themselves about what they were creating with this huge piece of paper. From that, they chose to write the fictional story that went with it. (Teacher)

Other staff encourage students to develop their oral language skills by talking about their learning. Some have adapted the concepts from programmes such as Talk Moves.²³

I teach them how to do their learning talk explicitly. For example, a lot of children used to say they agreed with someone even if they didn't. So, we're teaching them it's ok to disagree with or challenge somebody in a respectful way. It's ok to say “I disagree because ...” so long as they give a reason. We teach them how to clarify their thinking or get more information out of their buddy. It's all about talking about their thinking and justifying why they think that. (Literacy leader)

Literacy is seen not as an end result in itself, but rather as part of a cycle in which literacy-based activities support the development of other skills. For example, an activity such as buddy reading supports the development of leadership and social skills.

Summary

Improving literacy achievement in a school already considered “successful” has involved creating a balance between a consistent whole-school framework for literacy and allowing teachers' freedom to create innovative learning experiences. The senior leaders, along with staff and the board, created the detailed literacy framework as part of a strategic focus on raising literacy achievement. This has provided coherence across the school and acts as a guide for teachers.

It's a high trust model—it's that professional trust to let teachers have flexibility to innovate and experiment because we have a good handle on where each child is—and we're quite firm about achievement and progress data. But that sits quite nicely with a relaxed model. High trust backed up by good data and high-level reporting to the board—that's the reassurance.

²³ A set of five principles for eliciting and encouraging critical thinking and talking about maths concepts, including: repeat in own words, agree/disagree/why, add on or say more, revoice (teacher reiterates what student has said), and wait time (giving students time to think about the problem).

School 4

One of the biggest things that happened was taking the mystery out of the learning for the children. Previously, children could say what they were doing, for example, “I wrote a story about going to the zoo”, but they couldn’t say what they were learning. The only person who knew what the children were learning was the teacher. So the learning wasn’t focused. (Principal)

This urban Years 1–6 primary school has a roll of over 400 students. Over half the children identify as Asian (mostly Chinese and Korean), around a quarter as Pākehā, and the remaining students as Māori, Pacific, or “other”. The school has a small number of international (fee-paying) students.

The school is a “magnet” for ESOL students. Its increased focus on literacy in recent years is therefore intertwined with addressing the needs of the very high proportion of students who start at this school with little or no English. An important aspect of this school’s context is the large proportion (50% to 70%) of new students for whom English is a second or other language. Effective ESOL teaching and use of ESOL resourcing contribute to the overall school achievement levels in literacy and are discussed later in this section.

When we visited the school, we spoke with the principal and deputy principal, the literacy leader, and a classroom teacher in their second year of teaching. We also informally observed teachers and children in several classrooms.

Strategic leadership with a focus on improving literacy achievement

The focus on raising literacy achievement was introduced during 2014–16, with changes in the senior leadership team. Two senior leaders appointed in this period had expertise and a specific interest in literacy. The deputy principal in 2015 had completed postgraduate study focused on boys’ writing and influenced literacy teaching in the school in her role as literacy leader. The current principal, originally appointed to replace the deputy principal in 2014, was a trained Reading Recovery teacher. When appointed as principal in 2015, she provided strategic leadership for literacy as a whole-school focus.

The principal worked on improving moderation processes and Overall Teacher Judgement (OTJ) decision making across the school, set high expectations for staff to use data to inform their practice, and introduced a more robust appraisal process to help teachers reflect on and improve their practice. She also implemented a strategic approach to PLD, including specific PLD to improve assessment practices.

Some of the changes the principal has led include:

- encouraging and enabling more collaboration within teams, across the school, and across the Community of Learning | Kāhui Ako (COL). This has enabled greater understanding of progression and achievement across year levels and better tailoring of lessons to individual students' needs
- implementing the Assessment for Learning professional development contract, to increase understanding of achievement data and its strategic use in planning and teaching
- implementing peer observations and appraisal processes to further develop teaching practice and to encourage greater shared responsibility for improving student achievement
- encouraging teachers to make learning visible through explicit instruction and giving students more ownership of their learning
- improved resourcing of reading material to support literacy teaching and learning across the school.

Staff we talked to commented on the changes that the new principal had made, and how these changes impacted on teachers' understanding of progression through greater collaboration, sharing data, and making learning visible for students.

Understanding progression through greater collaboration

With the introduction of National Standards, teachers at this school began to have conversations in their teams about what they were doing in their reading and writing classes and how they were assessing their students' literacy achievement. This was the beginning of a more collaborative way of working. Previously, teachers had tended to work in "knowledge silos", concentrating on their own year level and classes.

As senior leaders worked with the school's National Standards data, it became clear that they, too, had been working in silos. They made a strategic decision to work more collaboratively across the school, at both whole-staff and leadership levels.

We really looked at the way we had knowledge silos. We realised we needed to change that.
(Senior leader)

However, it was through collaboration with other schools, initially with their cluster and then as a COL, that teachers became aware that the way they assessed literacy differed from other schools. Their judgements were "quite harsh" in comparison with other schools' and were based on rigid criteria. Rather than assessing children as working *within* a level, they only moved them up once they had achieved everything at a level.

We realised that we had a line in the sand, and not a band. When we swapped notes with others, that's when we realised we had a different interpretation [of making OTJs]. (Senior leader)

These discussions also highlighted “assumptions about what a year level was”. Some teachers had tended to restrict their teaching to one curriculum level, rather than differentiating for individual students. As teachers began to work with rubrics that showed progression in different aspects of reading and writing, they gradually moved away from the whole-class approach to teaching reading and writing.

The tipping point was ... the realisation that kids could do some things at a higher level but still have a gap at lower levels ... So it’s about filling in the gaps and then bringing the others up to level. Then overcoming that little bit of fear that if we bring them up to level 4 then we’ll have to teach them at level 5. (Literacy leader)

Sharing data

These assumptions had previously been sustained by systems that required teachers to submit data but not necessarily to share it or engage deeply with it. By changing the data-sharing systems and increasing opportunities for staff to collaborate across the school, the principal helped teachers begin to change how they assessed students’ literacy.

Better use of the Student Management System (SMS) to record and track individual students’ progress gave staff access to more information about each child. This was especially important for target or priority learners. These learners had previously only been identified on the team leader’s printed list and would be dropped off it once they had reached “at standard”.

Staff also began sharing information via Google Docs, which they described as “opening up a new world of collaboration”. Increasing opportunities for staff to engage with data and collaborate across the school also led to changes in the assessment of reading comprehension for children who were learning English. These children often lacked fluency when answering comprehension questions, which resulted in them appearing to be unable to answer. Consequently, they were not advanced or exposed to higher reading level texts, when they were, in fact, capable of understanding them. When this was addressed in staff meetings and PLD sessions, some children were found to be up to a year and a half ahead of where they had been previously assessed. The principal noted:

They might not have the right English to be able to interpret your question or to give the right answer back, but that doesn’t mean they don’t understand what they’re reading. While they were stuck on yellow texts, they had continued to learn and improve their reading in spite of their teachers. (Principal)

The way we’re working now with a new principal is quite different and I think that’s significant as well. One example is what we’re doing with our data, how we’re unpacking it, and who is doing that. (Senior leader)

Using data to inform teaching

All staff at the school engaged with Assessment for Learning PLD, focused on writing. This was important in helping them develop their understanding of assessment and how to use it to inform their teaching, not only in writing but also in other curriculum areas.

The leadership team implemented the programme strategically. Senior leaders and learning leaders completed it in the first year. The following year, the PLD facilitator supported these leaders to deliver the programme to their teams across the school. This meant that the whole staff completed the same PLD programme and received the same messages about assessment.

The PLD programme encompassed the whole teaching and learning cycle, with each participant completing five cycles of inquiry. Observation of and feedback on their own and colleagues' teaching was an important part of the programme. This was "scary at first" and took some getting used to because it had not been part of the school's previous culture.

The assessment for learning PLD involved having observations ... teachers just got used to it once they realised it wasn't scary, and that we weren't in there judging, but were there as colleagues. It was also a process of having a discussion to talk about what your hunches are; what you can see you need to work on; what the children's needs are; planning what you're going to do; co-constructing what the person will observe specifically; and then having a conversation. (Senior leader)

Teachers also had to get used to receiving feedback from their students.

I think it was probably the first time we really got student voice. After every session the observer would interview the children and ask, 'What was it you were learning? What was difficult? How does your teacher help you learn? Which bit did you get stuck on?' Next steps and all those sorts of things. It opened people up to realise what did and didn't get through ... This was powerful for teachers. (Senior leader)

These cycles involved discussions with colleagues and the facilitator, observations of teaching, interviews about their writing programmes, interviews with students, videoing and analysing lessons, and setting rubrics of good formative assessment practice. Staff were able to reflect on every aspect of their teaching and make changes to specific areas.

Another thing that had never happened in school prior to 2015 was there had never been an observation of a teacher, nor robust appraisal. We changed all that as well. If you know you're being observed, setting inquiry goals and being appraised, that's probably going to make a difference for your learners. (Principal)

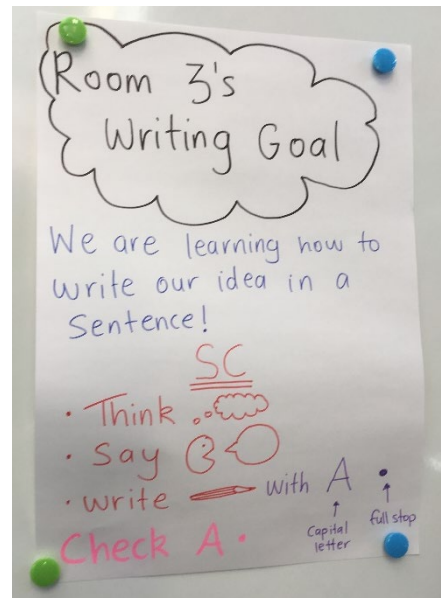
Everyone had a pre-observation discussion and a follow-up feedback session where they could talk about what they saw in the lesson. Then they developed next steps together. It might be that my children have clarity about their learning but they're not able to self-assess yet. So then we'd set some self-assessment goals. The PLD programme goes through clarity about what they're learning, self-assessment, giving effective feedback, promoting further learning or next steps. That saw a massive shift for us. (Principal)

The PLD made a big difference to the way staff perceived their own teaching practice and what they could change. Despite the intensity of the programme, it was well received and readily taken up, with leaders keen to tell their teams about what they were learning in the first year.

Leaders were so excited about what was happening that they were talking to their teams, and so the teachers were starting to dabble in improving their practice based on what their leaders were doing. (Principal)

As staff developed their understanding of assessment processes, and conversations about practice opened up, the principal also began to explicitly bring student achievement data to teachers' attention in meetings and discussions. This also helped staff to build a greater shared understanding of any gaps in students' learning and gave teams more ownership of the ways they planned to address those gaps. Using rubrics to recognise finer grained skills, and to identify any gaps in these skills, was particularly helpful for teachers to plan and design activities that addressed these gaps more effectively.

Looking at 2017 data and thinking about where we are moving to for 2018, we gave each of the year groups the data from the children coming to them—they could see a couple of years' data. We asked each year group where they thought their team needed to go. We hoped that the Year 1–3 reading would come back for discussion—and it did. So while we [senior leaders] had already identified this, doing it this way gave the group leaders that chance to also notice it and have input into the decisions around it. (Senior leader)



Making learning visible for students

Increased understanding of assessment processes, more information about each child, and more opportunity to discuss and share ideas through collaborative working structures helped teachers plan effectively for their students' individual needs.

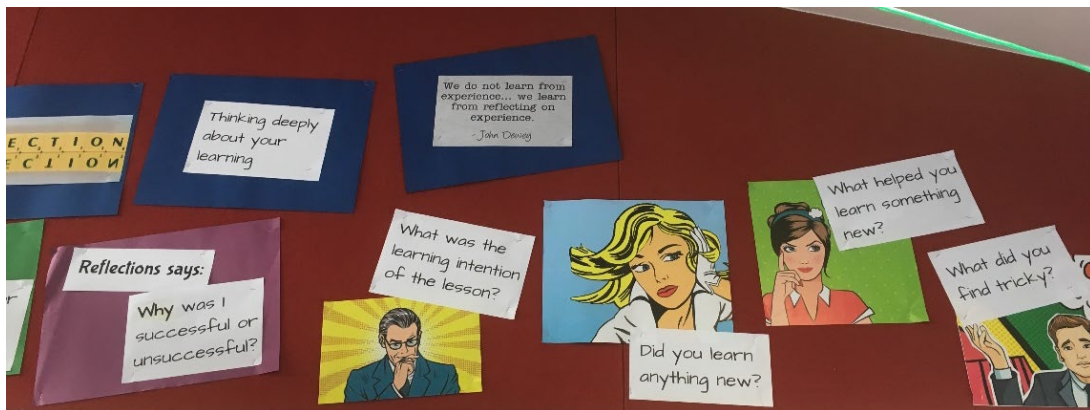
Teachers moved away from whole-class lessons and began to make learning visible and explicit; for example, by displaying writing samples and learning steps on classroom walls. Children were encouraged to use these displays to make decisions about their learning.

Children became more actively involved in decisions about their learning goals.

Relevance is important for children. To know that they're not just doing this because their teacher says they have to ... when you can't see the bigger picture, you're not going to enjoy it, or feel you have any control of that. This builds the children's ownership and they co-construct next steps. (Principal)

Previously, when they completed a task, children didn't necessarily get much feedback on it. Children are now involved in more discussions about their work, what they can do, and what they need to work on. This increased interaction is what allows them to take ownership of their learning and responsibility for working on the next step.

Teachers started sharing the [writing] samples with the children, saying "Let's look at it together." They were able to highlight what the child could do in child-speak and by using "I can" sheets. The child can see, for example, "I am at the beginning of level 2, and I need to be at the beginning of level 3 and this is what I need to do to shift." (Principal)



Resourcing a text-rich learning environment

Resourcing is an important part of making and sustaining change in schools, and resourcing for literacy clearly requires a plentiful supply of quality reading material. An internal review of reading in 2013 highlighted a "dire situation with a depleted supply of reading books" (Principal). Teachers often had difficulties gathering enough readers at appropriate levels for their classes.

Through that [review] we discovered we didn't really have text-rich rooms because everyone was under such pressure to "get the blue readers back". I think that that helped in our shift between 2013 and 14, because the teachers actually had a choice of texts. Previously they'd go to the book room and have 6 children in a reading group but only be able to find 3 books. That was just hopeless! (Principal)

The BOT agreed in 2014 to spend a significant amount on new readers, and this helped to fill the gaps and provide a text-rich environment for children. The principal has plans to continue refreshing and adding to the reading resources.

Improving literacy achievement in a multilingual context

The school manages resourcing to provide extra support for ESOL students alongside general literacy programmes. It has a full-time ESOL teacher and a Mandarin-speaking teacher, both of

whom have been involved in the Assessment for Learning PLD programme. Their main focus is on working with children in Years 3 to 6. At Years 0 to 2 children do a lot of their English language learning alongside their peers as part of the everyday programme.

In a new entrant class you're all learning what the letters are, what sound they make, what the high frequency words look like. They're all learning how to read from magenta, pointing one-to-one, left to right direction and all of those things. At Year 1, rather than pouring learning assistance in there, they just need to be immersed in a normal new entrants programme and they're going to learn English pretty fast, making sure of course that there's lots of poetry, reading to, lots of books available, and lots of oral language happening. (Principal)

The school also values students' first languages and is proactive in finding ways to communicate with their families. For example, general school information is presented in several languages on the school website. There are large groups of Chinese and Korean families, and these are catered for with once-a-term meetings where senior leaders communicate with parents through a translator. A group of Russian-speaking children and the Mandarin-speaking teacher aide sometimes act as translators for both children and parents. The school has also organised ESOL classes for parents.

We have 19 parents enrolled, all from different cultures. It's been arranged through [a local organisation]. We put a case to them and they went out and got funding. They'll run groups of 8–10 people every Friday. We've focused it on our ability to communicate with those parents, but it's also for the parents who want to talk with their kids in English. For example, there is one grandma who is fully involved with the children, and she is a critical contact for one boy who has had some troubles. Any time we needed to contact home we couldn't talk with her at all. We've got her enrolled, as she's a critical part of that family. (Senior leader)

Summary

Of all the factors that staff described as having contributed to the improved literacy achievement results in recent years, the most significant was the teachers' increased understanding of effective assessment of students' capabilities in reading and writing. An increased appreciation for assessment and use of assessment data was the result of the in-depth PLD over a period of 2 years. This PLD also seems to have led to a changed culture among staff. Staff have become more reflective in their practice and have developed strategies to give children more ownership of their learning. Collaboration and shared responsibility for improvement have become the norm.

School 5

One of the things at this school is the celebration of whanaunatanga and tuakana–teina. In our classroom [children] know they are part of a family and have the confidence to share ideas without judgement. There are none of those self-doubt issues when putting yourself out there. It gives our kids, especially Māori kids, the confidence to explore things in all curriculum areas. (Years 3–5 teacher)

School 5 is a small full primary school (Years 0–8) in a low socioeconomic area. It has a roll of around 130 students, 75% of whom identify as Māori and 10% as Pacific. Some families have lived in the area for a long time and have strong intergenerational connections with the school.

School 5 is a dual-medium school in which about a third of students are taught in te reo. Māori-medium teaching has been a feature of the school for over 25 years and began in response to community wishes and aspirations.²⁴ The school is organised as two units: te whānau o te kakano, which is the Māori-medium or rumaki strand; and ngā ruma auraki, which is the English-medium or auraki strand. Both parts of the school have multi-level class groupings.

On our visit to the school we spoke with the principal, the deputy principal (who is also the junior teacher in te whānau o te kakano), the junior English-medium literacy leader, two classroom teachers (from junior and senior class teachers in English-medium classes), and a teacher aide.



The principal started at the school in mid-2014. He was an experienced educator and leader, who prioritised giving students a broad range of experience and quality teaching time focused on learning and New Zealand Curriculum / Te Marautanga o Aotearoa core competency development. He believes that the children need “every countable minute of teaching/learning time with their teachers”. He also set high expectations for raising student achievement with clear strategic planning.

Many of the teaching staff have served at the school for a long time and in a few cases find themselves teaching the children or even grandchildren of their former students. There are also some long-serving support staff. A few of these have multiple roles, such as classroom support and

²⁴ The Māori immersion unit was established in 1990 (school website).

caretaking or sports coaching. These long-standing, multi-layered relationships between staff members, whānau, and students contribute to strong whānau relationships across the whole school.

There is a strong, cohesive whole-school culture. This was a notable feature of the school when we visited, and one that the school’s ERO reports as a “key strength”. Literacy development in the school is indirectly supported by the strong whānau relationships and culture, and the multi-level classroom structures. Literacy has been more directly addressed through raising expectations of staff, developing their skills and reflective practice through PLD, and the use of specific literacy strategies and programmes within classrooms.

All classes have the support of at least one teacher aide who is familiar with the way the teacher works. Teacher aides work alongside teachers to support children with aspects of their literacy learning such as grammar and punctuation. Teachers described their teacher aides as skilled and knowledgeable about how to encourage students to think about their work.



A whānau-based structure supports literacy learning

The principal and teachers described the school structure of multi-level whānau classes as one of the most significant contributors to the school’s “solid literacy results”. Implemented some years ago as a strategy to manage behaviour issues, the whānau structure has evolved into a key feature of the school’s culture. This approach provides a settled learning environment where, in most years, children return to familiar routines and well-established relationships with teachers and classmates. This settled start to each year is credited with giving them a head start on learning and goes some way towards mitigating the “summer effect”.²⁵

The children spend two years in E’s class then three years in mine and three in T’s class, so they don’t go into a new class every year. You don’t have to start the year doing getting-to-know-each-other things—the relationships have already been embodied. The comfort thing is huge—first and foremost—and we know [the children] well. (Years 3–5 teacher)

The settled environment helps build self-confidence, and encourages exploration.

²⁵ Research (e.g., McNaughton, Jesson, & Kolose, 2012) shows that children who don’t read during the long summer break lose months of reading progress.

They feel safe, and often it's the place where they can be themselves, and they thrive on that. It's about the way we are. I have a student teacher here and he can't get over the close relationship we have with the kids, and how we care for them. They are part of our family, and not just our own class, but the whole school. (Senior class teacher)

The safety and the holistic approach are the biggest factors for the type of kids we have in this school. (Māori-medium teacher)

The whānau grouping also supports peer-tutoring and collaborative learning. Opportunities to work with peers of different ages reinforce learning and allow children to mentor and care for others. For example, children tend to help each other with their reading as a natural part of the tuakana-teina culture within the classroom. Whanaungatanga and tuakana-teina are promoted, valued, and modelled throughout the school. Tuakana-teina relationships flourish in the multi-level classes. The small number of children who move to a new class at the start of the year are actively supported into the new routines by the older children. Older children are encouraged to take on this mentoring role.

Extending children's oral language

The principal places great importance on developing oral language as part of supporting children's progress in literacy. He has encouraged teachers to offer children a wide range of experiences to stimulate language development, including outdoor camps; trips to the beach; and visits to the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, the zoo, museums, and historic buildings. The principal and staff also look for opportunities to invite people to come into the school to share interesting things with the children. These experiences provide real-life topics for children to talk about and use in their reading and writing; they also help children to make connections between spoken and written words.

One of the real commitments the school has is to give these kids as many language opportunities as they can. Some of our kids don't get these opportunities otherwise. If they haven't had these experiences ... how can they write about it? (Principal)

We do lots of visits out of school. We introduce them to new words, so literacy activities are connected to real life and to interest—as well as from books. It has to be meaningful. (Teacher)

We do lots of work here on oral language. We have to work very hard to give them lots of new experiences, so it's about exposing kids to different things and talking about it. For example, science experience. We bring in the specific language of science, often around things that happen in the moment, like the spider in the toilet, or bringing things like monarch butterflies into the classroom. That way we expand their experience and vocabulary. (Teacher)

A strategic focus on lifting achievement in writing

Ring-fencing time for writing

Reading was relatively strong in the school when the principal arrived in 2014. Classroom reading programmes are well resourced with access to suitable reading material and a library and teacher aide support. The school also has a Reading Recovery teacher in training and use a Resource Teacher Literacy (RT Lit).

Writing achievement was not so strong, and the principal identified it as a focus area. To identify specific strategies to strengthen writing, the principal asked teachers about the biggest barriers to teaching writing. Their response was lack of classroom time to focus on it. The challenge for the staff and senior leaders was to balance the additional activities, which gave children valuable and interesting experiences to talk and write about, with actual time to do the writing. As a result, the principal made protecting quality teaching time for writing a priority. Specific times of the day and week were ring-fenced for writing, wherever possible. This helped to give writing “the attention it needs”.

So we’ve been trying for eighteen months to two years to have quality classroom time to focus on the core curriculum. For example, we refused to have nurses vaccinating children in morning literacy time; we’re trying to set strong boundaries around writing time. (Principal)

Collaborative writing

Another strategy that the staff use is to take a collaborative approach, where children work together on their writing in interest groups, sometimes across classes. This approach also supports tuakana-teina relationships and encourages children to take ownership of their learning. Sometimes the whole school works on a particular topic, with children choosing special areas of interest within this.

We might use a topic like natural disasters and get kids to write a report or descriptive piece and get them to do research together in groups using devices. Kids can choose a specific topic, and we’ll group them according to interest. Writing and working together builds some excitement. They design what they’re going to do ... It’s about the kids taking ownership. (Teacher)

We do lots of collaboration for the kids’ writing. We get them to explore each other’s ideas. These lead to evolving organic discussions, vocabulary and so on. Even some younger ones will have a special area of interest, for example the Titanic, so they share this. (Teacher)

Building foundational literacy skills

The principal introduced a reinvigorated PLD programme for staff, which aimed to reconnect teachers and teacher aides with the wider education community. The principal aims to take a long-term approach to PLD, believing that “one hit wonders don’t work”. He notes that longer professional learning programmes allow teachers to embed the new knowledge in their practice more effectively.

One local literacy project has been especially beneficial for staff and students. This project was part of a community-based initiative designed to support children’s literacy achievement through collaboration between local schools. It aimed to improve children’s success with initial literacy instruction through explicit teaching of foundational literacy skills such as letter–sound recognition, decoding, and encoding. Use of an associated data management app arose out of this project and has proved helpful for teachers in tracking student progress. Teachers use a range of assessment tools such as running records, PAT tests, and e-asTTle for writing, to monitor students’ progress and to inform next steps.

All my data is on the app now and that is superb. Testing and entering data is time consuming but it highlights the levels children are at. It is a great way to show progress and is easy to read.
(Junior English-medium literacy project leader)

Teachers in the junior classes felt that approaches that focus on early development of foundational literacy skills such as phonological awareness and letter–sound relationships are particularly useful for some of their children.

Using digital devices

Increasing use of digital devices in the school came about as a result of PLD through te whānau o te kakano (Māori-medium strand). The school later invested in a number of Chromebooks, tablets, and iPads. Some students use these regularly, especially older children who use them for research. However, the staff have mixed feelings about how much these devices currently contribute to literacy development. One teacher of younger children noted that freely available software is “full of ads”; and that more appropriate software is needed so that more could be done with digital devices.

I’d like more ICT capability. We’re currently only touching the surface. I can do guided reading sessions easily, but some programmes would offer a bit of excitement. (Teacher)

We would love a literacy resource bank for teachers, and to see what other schools are using, and sharing ideas. Many of the literacy programmes are American so more NZ-based resources would be great. (Teacher)

Summary

Some aspects of this school's approach to literacy stand out as unique responses to their community's needs. Like other schools, senior leadership has developed a strategic focus on literacy, a renewed focus on professional learning for teachers, and deliberate use of a range of strategies to help learners develop oral and written language. The most vital feature of this school's approach to learning in general, which underpins robust literacy achievement, is the strong whānau relationships built through the multi-level grouping structure and enhanced by a small roll and a long-serving staff. The values that underlie the concepts of whanaungatanga and tuakana-teina are made explicit and permeate the whole school.

School 6

Whatever you focus on is reinforced. Focusing on deficits in literacy does not help improve students' achievement, and filling gaps just reinforces them. So we focus on strengths ... We have to continually make it real. The children have to do things for them, not the teacher. Literacy is not an isolated event. (Principal)

School 6 is an urban, Years 1–6, decile 4 contributing primary school. It has a roll of over 500 students. The student population is described in the latest ERO evaluation report as “mainly bicultural”, with about half the roll identifying as New Zealand European, just under half as Māori, and a few as Pacific, Asian, or “other”. Changing demographics in the community mean the school is currently experiencing significant roll growth. New classrooms and teaching spaces were under construction at the time we visited the school.

We spoke with the principal, three senior leaders, the literacy leader, and two classroom teachers. They told us about strategic changes the school had made that had contributed to students' improved literacy achievement in recent years. Some of these changes were specifically about teaching literacy skills, but others were about building a whole-school philosophy that provides a foundation for active learning in all areas of the curriculum. The changes were motivated by a desire to improve students' wellbeing and help them achieve their potential. They were also motivated by the realisation that, despite implementing specific initiatives and increasing professional development, there had been little real change in some areas of student achievement.

Every year we were getting exactly the same results. We had all this professional development, we did personal development programmes for staff, we consulted with our community, we used ... Reading Recovery, and everything. We had everything going, but still the results were exactly the same. We had to do something that changed that. If what we were doing wasn't making any difference, why would we keep doing that? (Principal)

The 2017 ERO report for the school noted that achievement information showed there was accelerated progress in writing between 2013 and 2015, but little improvement in reading over the same period. It also noted that, in 2016, there were lifts in achievement in reading, writing and mathematics for nearly all Māori children and the disparity between boys and girls was also decreasing. This case study examines the strategies senior leaders and staff implemented in this period that contributed to this difference, beginning with the revision of the strategic plan.

Developing a collective vision

There was a sense that, with much changing in the community, it was important for the school to have a strong sense of identity and purpose. The senior leadership, BOT, teaching staff, support

staff, and students worked collaboratively to explore the issues. The result was a renewed strategic plan that identified three concepts central to the school's vision of "Together we shape our future". These concepts—collaboration, ownership, and capabilities—relate to community, student, and teacher roles in this vision and act as foundational principles that underpin the everyday work of the school.

The strength of our strategic vision is it's the glue of our school. It's very future focused and relevant to now to meet the needs of today's kids. I believe far too many schools are meeting the needs of parents rather than kids, and when you're doing that you're always about 20 years behind the game. (Principal)

Introducing new structures and processes

With the collective vision in place, staff and leadership examined the school's processes and routines to question how they contributed to helping students learn. This involved challenging taken-for-granted routines and expectations, such as timetabling, staffing, class structures, meetings, appraisal processes and review cycles, and reporting to parents and whānau. As a result, many processes were revised and new ways of thinking introduced and reinforced. Being involved in these discussions from the start has meant the majority of staff have readily embraced new ways of thinking and working.

Static pockets of unchanged things still exist, but they're getting harder to find because we've given it a good shakeup. When you find yourself doing something like that you suddenly think "Why am I doing it this way? Maybe it needs to change!" (Principal)

One of the first areas to be shaken up was the structure of syndicate teams. Discussions between senior leaders and staff about ways to foster greater collaboration led to a re-organisation of these teams. Staff nominated who they would like to work with in their syndicate, based on personal preference and personality profiles. The resulting four syndicate teams are multi-year level and include teachers with different levels of experience. This structure has encouraged across-school collaboration and has helped teachers gain more appreciation for literacy needs and progress at levels other than their own.

The senior leaders and teachers also questioned the effectiveness of regular whole-staff meetings. Most meetings are now held within the four collaborative teams. These smaller group meetings make it possible to focus on specific students' progress and to share literacy activities and ideas.

Last year, every morning of term 3, we had a short 20-minute PLD session where you left with something you could try that day, for example a cool website, or an activity to try. ... For me this had a literacy focus and so we're building up resource banks and getting teachers on board. (Literacy leader)

Another revision to school-wide processes involved the way teacher appraisal was carried out. Rather than the previous system, which was a "tick box exercise", there is now an expectation of

constant self-reflection and review as part of a high-trust model of management. School leaders have created an environment that encourages openness between staff. They also support teachers to reflect on and discuss their practice, ideas, and problems. This discussion most often occurs within the strong, collegial syndicate teams.

Teachers are trusted to take ownership of their practice and to structure their teaching and learning activities in ways that work for their students, and which allow the students to take genuine ownership of their learning. Senior leaders take an active role in monitoring how teachers and students are working, through the team meetings, wider discussions, and first-hand observation. They have developed a culture where teachers and senior leaders are comfortable popping into each other's classes and talking with students.

The senior leaders found that changed ways of working required more collaboration between staff, and a purpose-built "mahi tahi" room was created where the staff could have "strong discussions". The principal commented that the conversations held in this room are qualitatively different from normal staffroom conversations and serve to strengthen how the staff works together.

Timetabling at the school was also given a "shake up". This included getting rid of boundaries between subjects and helping students make connections between learning in different curriculum areas.

We decompartmentalised our timetable; made connections between writing and maths; did away with separate exercise books—moved to just one learning journal and constantly learning about their learning, in a sort of map, and asking, "What did this bit of learning fit with? How did that thing you did on that day help you with this thing?" ... It was a real unshackling, especially for us as teachers. It was unsettling, but really freeing! And I wouldn't ever go back. The difference in attitudes and dispositions of students changed from me changing mine.
(Teacher)

A change to lunchtime routines means that children now eat their lunch as a class. Eating lunch together is a social event which has had a positive influence on literacy learning, by increasing opportunities for informal, authentic conversation between teachers and students.

Communicating with parents and whānau

Senior leaders and staff recognise the importance of parents supporting their children's literacy learning. However, they also recognise it is not always easy to make this happen. They found that traditional parent-teacher interviews rarely worked to engage parents with their child's reading and writing if they weren't already engaged. Instead, the principal asked teachers to focus on developing a relationship with parents and whānau. He trusted teachers to find ways of doing this that best suited the child and their parents. With some parents and whānau, this was relatively easy and led straight to conversations about their child's literacy learning. With others it took time before they were comfortable speaking with a teacher. This process offered potential for meaningful discussions

about a child's learning. It also exposed some assumptions about why parents may not communicate with schools and teachers.

The relationship building is the fundamental one. Every teacher must form a relation with parents and whānau. It's up to them how they do it, and they need to keep a record of it with some key points that come out of discussions. They may take all year to build it before they can start talking about a child's learning or for some maybe after half an hour. Term one must start that process. (Principal)

Teachers are increasingly using a range of digital technologies to communicate with and strengthen relationships with parents and note the benefits of this for children's learning.

We have a real focus at this school about how to build relationships. Dojo and Seesaw and things like that are used in almost every class, but it's never been made compulsory. That has just happened naturally and it happens because we focus on relationships. Nowadays one of the best ways to form and cement a relationship is through social media—whether we accept it, like it, or not—that's how it is. And that assists in the face-to-face context, whereas before you didn't have that amount of contact because it was just an interview. (Principal)

Introducing a whole-school approach to literacy

The principal and staff believe that, to be successful, literacy approaches must align with the school's vision and grow out of a strong and positive school culture and attitude towards learning. Rather than being a series of isolated interventions, literacy approaches must be seamlessly embedded in and reinforced through the daily activities of the school.

You can't get results for anything unless you have a really good foundation behind it ... that's why our results didn't improve—we were getting snippets of people's visions for literacy and for maths being put into environments where it might happen while the programme was on, but it wasn't happening in the down times or lunchtimes, or the home-talk, or the thinking in the classroom. What happens in the literacy programme fits in with everything that happens every day. Our literacy and numeracy results are up on last year and we know none of this happens without that foundational stuff. Interventions in isolation don't work. (Principal)

Senior leaders and literacy leaders spoke highly of the school's participation in the Accelerated Literacy Learning programme (ALL).²⁶ The school opted into ALL in 2013 with the aim of accelerating student achievement in writing. As a short withdrawal intervention, the ALL programme made a significant difference for target students. Children were more engaged with their learning as a result of teachers' increased focus on their specific needs. Literacy leaders felt that the ALL programme was successful as it was “in step with the school's practices and philosophy and linked well with the school's strength-based approach”. As a result, they redesigned

²⁶ Programme for Students ALL Accelerated Literacy Learning project is an intervention for students not on track to meet the expected level.

their approach, using ALL across the school, not only to improve writing but also to build a sustainable school-wide literacy programme.

The number of teachers and students involved with the programme increased over 2 years, with more experienced teachers mentoring those new to the programme. This strategic approach helped build sustainability. The literacy leaders supported teachers in their cycles of inquiry, and in turn were supported by an outside facilitator to continue developing their own mentoring skills.



We want this programme to be just part of everything we do ... we want ALL to become the usual writing programme. So no matter who you're working with, the whole idea is that the big picture thinking around the ALL programme is going to be the big picture thinking of what writing is going to look like in your class and what reading is going to look like in your class—because you can't have one without the other. (Literacy leader)

It's not just something you do for 15 weeks. (Teacher)

The coherence across the school means that, when target children work in withdrawal sessions with a literacy teacher, the approach is the same as that used in the classroom. This consistency means children keep working on areas that need strengthening across all their learning and not just in “literacy time”. The ALL programme has helped with all aspects of literacy, as reading and writing are integrated across the curriculum.

Literacy has to be in everything you do: it's not something separate. You don't have a “reading” time ... the whole time is reading and writing time, and teachers need to genuinely acknowledge and validate that. So, for instance, when they're doing Arts there are still deliberate little acts of making links with the reading. When you integrate all this, you don't have a crowded curriculum. (Literacy leader)

Two examples of student-led activities that integrated literacy activities in authentic and relevant ways are the annual commemoration of Anzac Day and the regular community market held at the school. This year the Anzac celebrations were entirely student-led and involved a range of displays and activities, each of which required planning, research, rehearsal, and production. The community market grew out of another project and was initially teacher-led. Now, however, the children not only run the market but they have also developed new products to sell. Children develop many skills from these real-life activities—literacy, numeracy, oral language, organisation, and so on.

Having the children involved in decisions about their learning is an important part of the programme. Careful and deliberate use of assessment data, and talking with students about what their assessment means, helps teachers focus on each child's needs. Teachers think carefully about

what assessment data they need for each child, rather than doing routine assessments. They also involve children in their assessments as part of encouraging ownership of their learning.

The expectation is that you use whatever tools are appropriate to find out what you need to know about each child. You test to inform your teaching. (Literacy leader)

Summary

In this school, an insightful leadership team has encouraged and supported staff to make bold changes. The high-trust leadership style has balanced giving teachers the autonomy to work in ways that best suit them and their students, with robust support and monitoring. Deliberate strategies for building strong relationships between staff, between teachers and students, with parents, and with the community have been at the heart of this. However, it is likely that the integration of a robust, long-term school-wide literacy programme with a well-embedded school philosophy of ensuring that everything they do is designed with children's wellbeing and learning at the fore has made the difference to students' improved literacy achievement in recent years.



4. Findings

In our discussions with staff at each school, two main clusters of factors or “elements” contributing to literacy achievement emerged:

- school-wide: elements relating to the culture/philosophy of the school and not directly focused on literacy
- literacy-focused: elements relating to actions specifically designed to lift literacy achievement.

It is important to note that these factors/elements are closely related and tightly interwoven within each school context. The pattern of factors and the way they relate varied from school to school. In each school, school-wide and literacy-focused factors seemed to work together. Sometimes particular factors were more to the fore. However, both school-wide and literacy-focused factors were present; they combined to create a complex, dynamic, and unique environment that facilitated progress in literacy achievement.

An important theme that emerged from the relatedness of these factors, though not talked about explicitly in the interviews, was the idea of “coherence”. We found coherence was the best way to describe the interplay between the separate elements each school described.

- Coherence: alignment of actions and resources across the school in response to a shared sense of purpose.

The autonomy that New Zealand schools enjoy means they often do things in different ways to suit their individual context. While the separation into distinct factors is somewhat artificial, it allows us to describe common elements we found in the schools we visited. The following sections describe these common factors and how they appeared in the case-study schools.

School-wide factors

It was interesting that, when we asked people what they thought had made the biggest contribution to progress in literacy achievement, they frequently began by telling us about things that were not obviously related to literacy. For example, they talked about the school’s culture or philosophy, or the way the school supported learning, or the relationships between staff and students. Their thoughts could be summed up by the often-expressed sentiment: “This is the way we do things here—it’s the [name of school] way.”

Several factors operated at a school-wide level. These combined to create a strong sense of school culture, identity, and purpose that was shared by all members of the school community—students, teachers, leaders, and whānau. There was a sense that the school community worked as a team towards a common goal or purpose. To a greater or lesser extent, all the case-study schools put an emphasis on providing a safe, supportive, and secure learning environment for students and on developing relationships between staff, students, whānau, and the local community. This supportive, positive school culture was underpinned and guided by strong leadership and the setting of clear strategic goals.

A safe, supportive, and positive learning environment

Some schools, especially those in low socioeconomic environments, put a great deal of emphasis on creating a safe and secure environment for students. There were clear expectations for behaviour, and consistent routines. These routines were not necessarily conventional, and schools found solutions to suit the needs of their students (see, for example, School 6). These schools aimed to create a calm, consistent, and supportive learning environment for students whose lives outside school might be difficult or challenging. A strengths-based approach to learning underpinned this supportive learning environment. Several of the schools mentioned the importance of having a strong wrap-around service for students, and the value of extra support such as a Social Worker in Schools (SWIS) and/or a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

School values

Case-study schools commonly had a core set of values that were actively promoted, and which formed the foundation for everything else that happened in the school. These values had often been determined collectively. For example, at School 1, a low decile school with a predominantly Māori roll, the values were co-constructed with students, whānau, and the local community as part of a “re-visioning” process for the school. This collective ownership of the values helped ensure they were meaningful and relevant for students and their families. School 1’s values include:

- compassion/manaakitanga
- striving for excellence/ngaiotanga
- respect/whakaute
- belonging/whanaungatanga
- teamwork/kotahitanga.

These values encapsulate the school’s and community’s vision for relationships based on reciprocal caring and kindness, a sense of safety and belonging, positive attitudes to learning and success, high expectations, and a growth mindset. The values are displayed in all classrooms, sometimes represented by the acronym MERIT (Manaakitanga; Excellence; Respect; I belong; Teamwork).

In all case-study schools, values were prominently displayed around the school and incorporated into school websites, brochures, leaflets, and communications. Some schools had given thought to how to integrate the values into learning areas. For example, the staff at School 1 had worked collaboratively to relate the values to each curriculum area, including literacy, and aligned them with the key competencies.

Clear expectations for behaviour and learning

Schools we talked to described a culture where students knew what was expected of them, in terms of both behaviour and learning.

Many of the schools had been involved in the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) School-Wide²⁷ initiative and credited that with contributing to the positive school culture. At School 2, another low decile school with a high percentage of Māori students, every staff member, including the principal, had trained through the Incredible Years²⁸ programme. The whole staff also had professional development in restorative practice.

Most schools also worked hard to ensure that students had clear expectations about their learning. Children had input to their learning and could describe their learning goals and their next learning steps.

The physical environment could play a part in setting expectations. The principal at School 2 described how providing a neat, tidy, and well-kept school environment encouraged students to take pride in the school. This school also emphasised the importance of providing students with high-quality equipment and school uniforms. The aim was to develop students' sense of self-worth and sense of belonging, which in turn helped to set the foundations for learning.

Developing relationships

Strong relationships at every level of the school community were a constant theme in our interviews with school staff. Leaders and teachers told us how they worked hard to build relationships with parents and whānau, local community, marae, and sometimes social services, as a way of ensuring children's wellbeing and sense of safety at school. They also talked about the importance of developing strong, reciprocal relationships with the children they taught.

Leaders described strategies to build relationships and understanding amongst staff. One of the key aspects they talked about was building a clear vision for the school and a clear, coherent purpose

²⁷ See, e.g., <http://pb4l.tki.org.nz/PB4L-School-Wide>

²⁸ See, e.g., <http://pb4l.tki.org.nz/Incredible-Years-teacher>

for the staff to work towards. They also strived to develop a collaborative culture, where staff worked together, in groups, teams, and at whole-school level.

Close, collaborative relationships and a clear sense of direction were themes that ran through all our interviews. School leadership had a key role to play in establishing a culture in which this sense of purpose and collaboration was able to flourish.

Strong leadership

Leadership is well known to be an important factor in schools' success (Education Review Office, 2016), so it is no surprise that strong and dynamic leadership was an important theme across all the schools we visited. The styles differed according to the personalities of the principal and the senior leadership team. The way they approached the challenge of raising student achievement also differed. The leaders we spoke with were motivated by a desire to do the very best for their students and had the capacity to see the big picture for their school and students. In working towards solutions that were effective for their students, they identified things that could be changed, worked on building a shared vision, and enabled staff, students, and their community to play a part in moving towards that vision. For example, School 2 gave everyone involved responsibility for some part of achieving their target.

The principals were all experienced, having been at their current school for at least 4 years, and some much longer. Like most principals when starting at a new school, they had set new expectations and goals and implemented some structural or process changes to work towards these. However, making changes can be difficult and some changes were not necessarily or immediately effective at changing outcomes for students. Some of the leaders in these schools told us that, initially, no matter what they did, the expected or desired outcomes did not eventuate. For example, in School 6, the principal explained that, while they thought they were doing all the right things—such as setting a strategic focus and implementing professional and personal development programmes for staff, and curriculum initiatives for students—“The results were exactly the same.” This realisation motivated them to question everything, including day-to-day processes that had until then been taken for granted. In complex and dynamic systems like schools, change affects the system at many levels and the outcome is not always predictable. The process of creating effective change can take time. In School 2, senior leaders told us that they had worked hard for many years to improve student achievement but had only made meaningful progress in the past 3 years.

By working with their staff, boards, community, marae, parents and whānau, and students to create a vision, these principals had started the process of building relationships and coherence across the school. The vision statements of all these schools tended to be about relationships and values. One principal described the vision statement as “the glue of our school”. Understanding how these leaders developed this “glue” is an important part of understanding their success as a school.

One thing all the principals had in common was a keen focus on what they could learn from achievement data and how this could be used to help a team understand needs, introduce change, and assess the effectiveness of change. Their approach varied from school to school, but it was clear that using data effectively was an important factor in these schools' success in raising achievement.

At senior leader level, achievement data informed strategic planning. At the classroom level, data allowed teachers to assess student progress and identify next steps. Several schools incorporated a focus on effective use of assessment data in their PLD programmes.

All the schools we talked to described strong leadership with use of achievement data to identify areas for strategic focus. Clear communication of the strategic goals to the whole team and a collective sense of ownership of these goals were also common.

Literacy-focused factors

In this section we discuss the approaches and strategies that teachers and leaders in the case-study schools believed had helped to lift students' literacy achievement. Factors that were common across all the schools included a strategic focus on literacy achievement, and whole-school PLD in literacy. Many of the schools also mentioned the importance of oral language in supporting the development of reading and writing.

Strategic focus on lifting literacy

At all the schools we visited, staff talked to us about a strategic focus on an aspect of literacy as one of the factors leading to increased achievement. As already mentioned, achievement data (for example, National Standards data) were often the mechanism for deciding on an area for strategic focus. It is interesting that a majority of the schools decided to focus on writing (rather than reading) as an area for improvement in literacy. This corresponds with studies such as the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement English: Writing, which have found that achievement in writing is more problematic than achievement in reading (Educational Assessment Research Unit & New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2013).

Once a focus was established, most of our case-study schools developed a well-defined strategy for how they would lift achievement. A common theme was for the whole staff to be aware of the strategic focus, the reasons for focusing on that aspect of literacy, the goals to be achieved, and the ways in which the school planned to achieve these goals. There was a sense of the whole school working cohesively as a team, focused on a clear objective and working together to achieve it.

Strong leadership focused the school's efforts on achieving these goals through allocating resources for specific PLD, for example. Sometimes responsibility for planning and co-ordinating the PLD was delegated to a literacy leader. In other cases, the principal provided greater direction.

When we talked to schools, we discovered that a strategic focus on literacy sometimes included revisiting understandings and practices around judgements and standards. For example, many schools used the e-asTTle writing assessment to inform their judgements for writing. Sometimes, a school's focus on literacy uncovered inconsistencies in the way teachers had marked their students' e-asTTle writing scripts, either across the school or in comparison with other schools. This led to a correction in marking, often through school-wide moderation and discussion (see, for example, School 3). The high rates of progress in literacy achievement that we saw in the National Standards data might be partly due to this correction, rather than a result of a deliberate strategy or approach. For example, if teachers discovered they had been marking their students more "harshly" than other schools, a correction to more lenient marking could result in an apparent sudden "lift" in students' achievement against the standard (see, for example, School 4). Conversely, if they found that they had been marking more leniently than other schools, results could drop (for example, see School 3). It is important to realise that, even so, there were tangible benefits associated with this process of readjustment. For example, moderating writing collectively and discussing understandings about the writing process as a team helped teachers refine their understanding about both writing and progress.

Whole-school professional learning and development

Most of the schools we visited had engaged in whole-school PLD on an aspect of literacy. Often this focus was on writing, which has been recognised as a priority nationally and an aspect of literacy that has been "neglected" in the past both in New Zealand and overseas (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Parr & Gadd, 2018). Generally, the PLD was long term, over 1 or 2 years. A key feature was that all staff were involved, including teacher aides. From our interviews, it was possible to identify some common features of the PLD:

- All staff attended. Sometimes all staff attended at the same time. In other cases, groups of staff (for example, senior leaders) attended the PLD first, then introduced it to the rest of the staff in subsequent "waves", leading to a ripple effect throughout the school. The result was that all staff received the same input and messages. School 4 attributed much of its improved achievement results to a longer term PLD programme, where senior leaders completed intensive PLD over a whole year, then mentored their team members the following year. In the second year, leaders noted that some of their team members were already engaging with the new ideas and practices, having observed these the previous year.

- A shared understanding of progression across the whole school (for example, in writing). Staff developed an understanding of progression from Year 1 to Year 8 and beyond, rather than focusing on their particular year level. School 6, for example, introduced multi-level teacher syndicates to encourage understanding of achievement and progress across the whole school.
- Consistency of language and terminology. Through engaging in the same PLD, all staff across the school developed consistent understandings, and used the same terminology. This consistency meant that students also experienced consistency and continuity in approach between classes and year levels. For example, each teacher used the same terminology to describe different genres or purposes for writing, so avoiding confusion when children transferred between their classes. Sometimes this consistency was formalised: for example, one school decided on a consistent set of editing/proofreading symbols which were then introduced and used across the whole school. In other cases, the consistency was a by-product of a shared experience of PLD. In either case, our interviewees often mentioned such consistency as a key factor in lifting achievement in literacy.
- Consistency of approach. Some schools adopted a particular approach to an aspect of literacy, with all teachers implementing that approach in their classroom. Others chose to expose teachers to a range of approaches from which to pick and choose to suit the needs of their children. In either case, the key point was that the teachers had completed school-wide PLD and had developed understanding of the same set of literacy tools.

Teachers talked about making changes to their practice as a result of a focus on literacy and the associated PLD. Frequently mentioned changes included encouraging students to take ownership of aspects of their learning (for example, student-led parent conferences at School 3); making teaching and learning explicit and deliberate (many schools used visual forms of learning goals or learning records, such as the “learning walls” in School 1); and individualising tasks and teaching for students’ particular needs (for example, see Schools 1, 3, and 4).

These aspects of the PLD and the consequent adjustments teachers made in their practice are consistent with the ‘four dimensions’ of effective writing pedagogy described in a recent study by Parr and Gadd (2018). These four dimensions are:

1. *knowledge of students*: getting to know the students really well, knowing individual needs and keeping track of them, using humour/fun as a relationship tool
2. *learning goals/learning tasks*: encouraging student initiation and contribution, especially in topic selection
3. *direct instruction*: using active modelling and receptive modelling, breaking tasks into more manageable components, and making links between reading and writing, and
4. *differentiation*: touching base often with students, working with students in small groups based on needs, not ability, using a tuakana–teina approach, and using different scaffolds according to student needs.

Supporting the development of oral language

At all our case-study schools, staff talked about the important role of oral language in supporting literacy development. Some schools had specific strategies in place to encourage the development of children's oral language. As the principal of School 3 commented, "Oral language is the logical link in everything." At School 3, these strategies included singing, performing, and speaking to an audience. In a junior class in School 1, vocabulary development is supported by a "word wall" which is used as a conversation starter. School 2 implemented an oral language programme, which included tikanga Māori, across the whole school. These activities were seen by the schools as valuable ways of supporting the development of both self-confidence and oral language, which in turn supported literacy learning. Some of these schools had also introduced play-based learning in junior classes as a way of encouraging their younger students to develop oral language.

5. Discussion

In the previous section, we categorised and described the factors that our interviewees across the case-study schools most commonly mentioned as contributing to increased achievement in literacy. We divided these factors into two main groups: contextual factors related to a school-wide culture, such as the development of a supportive learning environment; and those that focused specifically on literacy, such as literacy-focused PLD. Table 2 summarises the factors that were most commonly identified by interviewees as supporting literacy achievement in our case-study schools. However, as mentioned earlier, these often overlapped and influenced each other (as indicated by the arrows in Table 2 below).

Table 2 **Most frequently mentioned factors supporting achievement in literacy across case-study schools**

School-wide factors		Literacy-focused factors
School culture		Strategic focus on improving literacy achievement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a “safe” culture for students • Taking a strengths-based approach 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resourcing adequate quality literacy material • Planning how to achieve short- and long-term goals • Using assessment data to understand progress and identify next steps • Building a coherent approach from planning to implementation across the whole school
Relationships		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging collegial relationships between staff and with leadership • Supporting the development of effective relationships with children • Developing and supporting relationships with parents, whānau, and community 	↔	
Leadership		Literacy-related PLD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioning and reviewing school structures and processes • Increasing collaboration within and across schools • Using achievement data to determine areas for strategic focus • Supporting teachers to improve their data literacy • Reviewing assessment and moderation practices • Increasing coherence across the school (including consistency of the language used to talk about literacy, understanding of progression, and assessment and teaching practices across the school) 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing understanding of how to use achievement data to inform teaching and learning • Unpacking the curriculum and understanding the continuum of literacy progression throughout the school • Enabling teachers to offer students a variety of diverse activities and relevant and engaging opportunities for reading and writing • Differentiating learning and personalising each child’s learning journey • Making learning visible through developing explicit learning goals and progressions for students
		Development of oral language
	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing rich opportunities for students to develop and use oral language, such as introducing play-based learning in the early years of schooling

Many of the strategies and approaches we have described are common in New Zealand schools and have been detailed in other studies, such as a recent Education Review Office report on strategies for teaching reading (Education Review Office, 2018). However, they are not always easily “transplanted”, and do not necessarily flourish in the different and dynamic contexts of other schools. Simply describing these strategies, and even how they are enacted in different contexts, does not adequately capture what it was about these schools that enabled them to improve literacy achievement.

It is important to reiterate that the factors we noticed in the case-study schools are all closely related, interwoven, and support each other. For example, a well-defined positive school culture also involves developing and nurturing relationships between staff, students, whānau, and the community. Strong relationships between staff members are needed to ensure that whole-school PLD is effective. The patterns in which different factors overlap and interweave are unique to each school. It is a case of the whole being more, and more complex, than the sum of its parts. Nevertheless, we found common key elements that, when combined, provide a framework that supports literacy achievement. This framework is defined enough to provide direction, but loose enough to allow schools and teachers to find diverse and creative solutions to the complex problem of raising literacy achievement. Such frameworks provide the “independence and freedom with limits and responsibilities” that Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) describe as “enabling constraints”. Enabling constraints refers to the idea of “a structure that is simultaneously constraining and enabling—imposing rules that delimit possibilities and that allow choice at the same time” (Davis et al., 2000, p. 194). One principal (School 3) described this idea when she said she believed that having a strong structure allows staff to be creative within it.

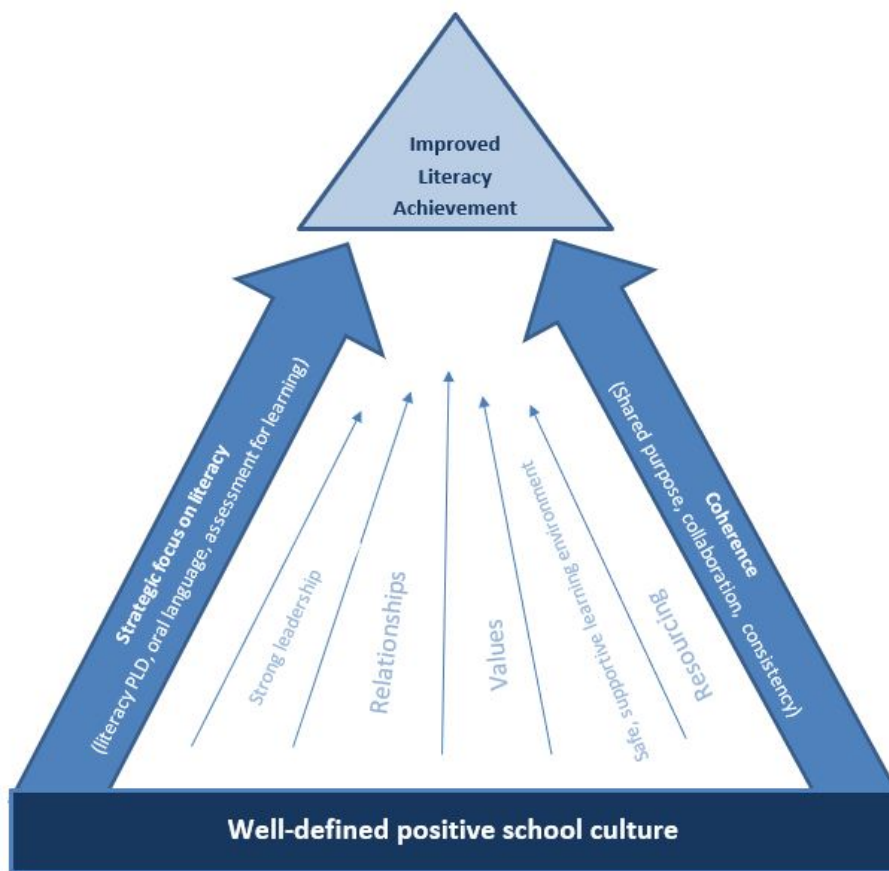
The nature of the structures or frameworks varied across the case-study schools. At School 3, a framework was provided by the strategic focus on literacy combined with the school culture that encouraged each teacher to use their interests and passions as contexts for literacy teaching. Within this framework, there was plenty of room for teachers to work creatively to achieve the joint goal of raising literacy achievement. Each teacher contributed to the goal by bringing their individual passions and talents to bear within a focus on raising achievement in literacy. School 3 was an example of a “looser” framework, where teachers had a great deal of freedom in the way they contributed to the overall goal. Other schools had more a structured or “tighter” framework. For example, at School 2 all staff worked within a common approach developed through the whole-school PLD. Regardless of whether it was tighter or looser, the framework provided “sufficient structure to limit a pool of virtually limitless possibilities, and sufficient openness to allow for flexible and varied responses” (Davis et al., 2000, p. 194).

We found three essential elements to the frameworks across the schools we visited:

1. a foundation based on a well-defined positive school culture
2. literacy-related PLD tailored to the context of the school
3. a coherent focus that ensures all efforts and resources are aligned with the goal of raising achievement.

Figure 1 illustrates how these three elements work together to support the goal of improved literacy achievement.

Figure 1 A framework of essential elements for improved literacy achievement



Building a foundation

In all the case-study schools, the development of “foundational” or school-wide factors was seen to be of vital importance. Our interviewees often mentioned school-wide factors first, when asked about what had contributed to literacy achievement. They emphasised the importance of paying attention to children’s wellbeing through fostering a strong, supportive environment in which

learning could flourish. School-wide factors involved developing and strengthening relationships, building shared understanding, and ensuring children's wellbeing.

Our case-study schools were all strongly child-centred, wanting the best for each and every one of their students and working hard to help each child realise their potential. These schools also placed emphasis on developing strong, respectful relationships with others, including between staff members, between staff and students, and between the school and whānau. In at least two of the schools, individual staff members talked about the school culture as their prime motivation for joining the staff. They often talked about helping children taking an active role in their learning and making decisions about what, when, and how to learn. All the schools took a strengths-based approach to build students' confidence and foster positive attitudes to learning.

In the view of our interviewees, this well-defined positive school culture forms a strong foundation on which to build specific strategies for raising literacy achievement. With this foundation in place, a strategic focus on literacy, supported by whole-school literacy PLD, helped to raise literacy achievement across the school.

Professional Learning and Development

All the schools told us about literacy-focused PLD as an important part of what made a difference to the literacy achievement in their school. The nature of the PLD varied from school to school but always included aspects of developing content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and the use of data to support teaching and learning.

Content knowledge involved developing understanding of an area of literacy (for example, writing) and the progression of skills in that area. The PLD often resulted in shared language with which to talk about aspects of literacy between staff and with students. The PLD also resulted in consistent understanding of progression, which translated into coherent literacy teaching and learning across the school. (This coherence was noted in ERO's 2012 report on effective strategies for teaching reading as one of the three least implemented principles evident in schools' curricula.) Many people talked about the benefits of in-depth discussions with colleagues about literacy (for example, during group moderation of children's writing). These benefits included greater confidence and consistency in assessing children's work, and a feeling of collegiality (for example, when addressing "puzzles of practice" as a team).

Pedagogical knowledge helped teachers develop and extend their approaches and strategies in the focus area. Schools focused on various numbers and types of literacy approaches and strategies. Some schools concentrated on one approach (see School 5) and others developed a toolbox of approaches (see School 2). Nevertheless, staff in each school, often including teacher aides, received similar messages. This whole-school approach to PLD contributed to coherence across the school.

Knowledge about using formative assessment data to support teaching and learning was often an integral part of literacy-related PLD. For example, some schools focused their PLD on assessment for learning in the context of writing (see School 4). The development of their assessment skills helped teachers allow students to take control of their learning and to recognise next steps.

Coherence

Besides a strong foundation and a strategic focus on literacy development, a third element evident in our case-study schools was a common sense of purpose. Resources, structures, processes, and language were all aligned towards this purpose, with staff working collaboratively towards the goal of raising literacy achievement. This was not always explicitly identified by individual participants but was evident across the interviews at each school. Fullan and Quinn (2016) describe this common sense of purpose as “coherence”. There are many aspects to developing this coherence. It requires careful nurturing of the relationships between staff, to foster a culture of collaboration that enables a whole group to work together. It also requires building shared understanding of the desired change and how to get there or, as one senior leader told us, “getting everyone to sing from the same song sheet”. In addition to shared understanding, individuals need a clear picture of their particular role and contribution and how these fit in the overall plan.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) noted that coherence “is not simply alignment of goals, resources and structures”. Rather, it is about the depth of understanding that a group shares about the nature of the work (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 30). In their view, school leaders must build coherence to create system change. The lack of coherence was identified as a barrier to shifting practice in the analysis of data from the Teaching and School Practices Survey Tool (Wylie, McDowall, Ferral, Felgate, & Visser, 2018). This suggests that coherence is a vital concept. In our case-study schools, it is coherence that pulled together the various factors identified as having contributed to raised literacy achievement. Coherence could be seen as the critical element (the “glue”) that links foundational school-wide factors and literacy-focused factors to create positive movement towards the goal of raised achievement in literacy (see Figure 1).

What can other schools take from this?

Our investigation has identified a number of factors common to schools that have made greater than average progress in raising literacy achievement. It is the ways in which the factors are combined that seem to have made the difference in the case-study schools. The factors fall into two broad groups: school-wide factors and literacy-focused factors.

The school-wide factors include the development of a well-defined, positive school culture that supports students in their learning journeys. This positive school culture was foremost in the minds of many of our interviewees as they talked about raising literacy achievement. The importance of a positive culture as a foundation for learning is already well known (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli &

Pickeral, 2009). However, we believe our findings are a timely and healthy reminder of the importance of building a strong foundation. Without it, raising achievement in any area of the curriculum might be more problematic.

The literacy-focused factors are also not surprising. We would expect that relevant PLD would be a significant part of developing effective literacy practice. Likewise, a focus on oral language is well-known to support the growth of literacy skills (Education Review Office, 2017; Hancock & Brown, 2009). The literacy strategies and approaches mentioned by our interviewees are identified in the literature as being important for lifting achievement (Ministry of Education, 2003). Again, this is a reminder of the importance of focusing on practices that are known to support learners and that are appropriate for their contexts and needs.

A strong foundation and a focus on literacy may not be sufficient in themselves to bring about change in literacy achievement. In trying to identify what did make a difference to these schools, we put forward the idea of “coherence” as the essential thread that weaves the factors together. In addition to the school-wide and literacy-focused factors, a shared sense of purpose is required to enable all the elements, people, and resources to work, not only collectively, but more importantly, cohesively, on the goal of raising literacy achievement. There needs to be a coherent story about how the school plans to bring about change in literacy achievement. This story needs to align the school culture, the strategic focus on literacy, and the PLD plan with individual and group actions. The case studies provide examples of what coherence looked like in different school contexts.

The case studies show that everyone has a part to play in creating coherence. However, senior leadership has a critical role in developing, facilitating, and monitoring the overall coherence of the efforts to increase literacy achievement. It is our hope that naming and describing coherence will bring it to the attention of more school leaders and allow discussion of ways to foster it in their strategic planning.

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Appendix 1: Interview questions

Our main research question is:

In schools where students are making higher-than-average shifts in literacy, what factors are supporting these shifts?

Our sub-questions are:

- What factors—initiatives, pedagogies, strategies, processes, or approaches—support effective teaching and learning in literacy? (thinking about all aspects of literacy, e.g., reading, writing, oral language, presenting ...)
- What conditions enable or constrain these factors?
- Are any factors associated with particular groups of students (e.g., priority learners)?

Interview questions

1. Your school has been identified as making greater-than-average progress in reading and writing since 2012. What do you think has contributed to this sustained improvement? (we are trying to capture their story)

Possible prompts:

- Planning
- Strategic priorities
- Leadership
- PLD and other support (e.g., RTLit)
- Assessment and moderation
- Programmes and interventions or people (e.g., reading together, writers in residence, phonics)
- PaCT
- Digital technologies
- Community/parent involvement
- Oral language
- Anything else? (make sure both reading and writing have been covered)
- What enabled you to make these changes? (for each aspect raised)

2. What do teachers (at this school/in your syndicate) do in their classroom that contributes to this sustained improvement?
3. Of all these things we've been talking about, what do you think is the main factor? (if it isn't already clear)

4. If you were to advise another school that wanted to improve literacy achievement across the school, what would you suggest they do?
5. Where are you/is the school heading next—do you see this carrying on into the future and why or why not?

