LEARNING TO READ
READING TO LEARN

A Middle Years Literacy Intervention Research Project

Final Report

2003-2004

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Acknowledgments

Dr David Rose, Consultant to the CEOM *Learning to Read:Reading to Learn* Project
Dr David Rose leads a literacy research program with school and university programs across Australia and internationally, entitled *Learning to Read:Reading to Learn*. This program develops and trains teachers in strategies for scaffolding reading and writing across the curriculum, at all educational levels from early childhood to undergraduate study. Dr Rose also holds the position of Principal Research Fellow with the Koori Centre, University of Sydney. His work is particularly concerned with Indigenous Australian communities, languages and education programs, with whom he has worked for over twenty years. He has published extensively in the field of Indigenous language and literacy, as well as in the field of technical and scientific literacies.

Schools Involved in the CEOM *Learning to Read:Reading to Learn* Project

2003	Sacré Coeur College, Glen Iris
	St Peter's School, Epping
	Santa Maria College, Northcote
	De La Salle College, Malvern
	St Joseph's School, Springvale
	St John's School, Thomastown East
2003-2004	St Paul's School, Bentleigh
	Caroline Chisholm Catholic College, Braybrook
	Mercy College, Coburg
	St John's Regional College, Dandenong
	St Gerard's School, Dandenong North
	St Monica's College, Epping
	Nazareth College, Noble Park North
2004	St Peter's School, Bentleigh East
	St Elizabeth's School, Dandenong North
	St Monica's School, Footscray
	Catholic Regional College, Melton
	St Catherine's School, Melton West
	St Francis of Assisi School, Mill Park
	Mazenod College, Mulgrave
	St Francis de Sales School, Oak Park
	St Simon's School, Rowville
	Holy Saviour Parish School, Vermont South
	St Justin's School, Wheeler's Hill

In 2004, St Monica's College, Epping, won one of three Excellence Awards in the National Literacy Week Awards (Non-government Schools Category) for their achievement in the CEOM *Learning to Read:Reading to Learn* Project.

Section 4: Key Findings

This section outlines key findings from the CEOM *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* Middle Years Literacy Intervention Research Project carried out in 2003 and 2004. The project involved approximately 60 middle years teachers from 24 primary and secondary schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese working with approximately 400 students. Though some teachers continued involvement over the two years, the two cohorts of schools, teachers and students in the research differed between 2003 and 2004. The findings summarised here are based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis conducted throughout the project.

4.1   Significantly improved literacy outcomes and student engagement

The project confirmed the effectiveness of the *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* (LRRL) literacy pedagogy for students in the middle years of schooling, particularly those considered to be educationally disadvantaged or at risk. The LRRL approach was highly successful in accelerating the literacy performance of over 95% of the target students underachieving in literacy. However teachers also reported that at the same time it extended the learning of more able students and increased the engagement and participation of all students.

Analysis of pre and post DART test scores, and corresponding CSF-rated scores, showed that average literacy gains across all schools and classes, and among students from all backgrounds and ability ranges, was consistently more than a CSF level in improvement within approximately three school terms, or approximately double the expected rate of literacy development. Furthermore, 20% of students made gains of two or more CSF levels, or four times the expected rate of literacy development. The student gains evident in DART and CSF-rated scores were also supported by the results of miscue analysis of reading and analysis of student writing samples. A small number of students (4.68%) appeared to make no progress, which teachers considered primarily due to non-attendance.

Teachers' evaluations of the project's impact on both the literacy performance of students and their own professional knowledge was highly positive. Key outcomes that teachers identified for students were improved confidence, increased engagement, active participation and better quality reading and writing of texts across the curriculum learning areas. Teachers also acknowledged the valuable links created between primary and secondary schools, and between literacy specialists and mainstream teachers.

Gains in literacy outcomes and engagement were made in no more than a few lessons per week, despite interruptions to learning programs, including classes missed as a result of timetable and staffing changes, or the scheduling of other school activities during LRRL lessons, particularly in secondary schools, as well as fluctuating rates of school attendance among at-risk students. Gains for target students were greatest where LRRL sessions were organised on a regular and consistent basis, and where they occurred frequently enough to impact positively on students' literacy performance over the duration of the project.

The correlation between student gains and consistency of program delivery suggests that gains for at-risk students in LRRL are likely to be highest in schools where the program is a priority, where interruptions and distractions are minimised and where there is a culture of informed support among school leadership teams and the wider school community.

4.2   Advantages of the Learning to Read: Reading to Learn literacy pedagogy

LRRL has a number of distinctive features that make it a highly suitable intervention for the middle years of schooling. These include

• Appropriate pedagogy for adolescent learners

• Inclusive of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds

• Effective in both mainstream and intervention contexts

• Linked to mainstream curriculum and assessment practices

• Flexible and adaptable to different models of delivery

• Supportive of different levels of literacy development, including reading, writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar

• Capable of extending the learning of more able students as well as students underachieving in literacy

• Provides a common literacy pedagogy and builds partnerships between middle years teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Lesson sequences are designed, and teacher-learner interactions are carefully planned, to provide a high level of support for reading and writing texts of all kinds across the curriculum. The strategies provide underachieving students with maximum support as they develop the knowledge and language resources required to read and write texts independently.

4.3   Gains were most significant in whole class delivery

The LRRL strategies are designed to implemented as part of normal teaching practice in whole classes, and can also be used for additional support in small groups. The target students made gains in excess of those of the year level comparison groups in all models of delivery, whether in a small withdrawal group, in a group working separately on LRRL activities within the mainstream class setting, or in a group working on LRRL activities along with their peers in the mainstream class setting. This indicates that LRRL is effective as a literacy pedagogy in both intervention and mainstream learning environments and that it is flexible and adaptable to different student groupings.

However the project results demonstrate that the whole class model of delivery produces better outcomes for underachieving adolescents than withdrawal groups, whether the classes were mixed ability, or dedicated for 'low literacy' students. Advantages of implementing LRRL within a whole class model are that it becomes part of the usual classroom pedagogic routine, rather than creating a differentiated curriculum for underachieving students. This may also give teachers greater flexibility and autonomy over where, when and how often they use the strategies and helps to avoid some of the shortcomings of the withdrawal model, which often compounds some of the difficulties facing underachieving students and can impact negatively on adolescent self-esteem and peer relationships. This finding is supported by evidence from other middle years studies (eg Luke et al. 2003, ACER 2000, VATE 1999) that, while the withdrawal model may suit the structure and resources of schools, it may not deliver improved literacy outcomes for those students who are educationally disadvantaged or at-risk.

Implementing LRRL within a whole class model also guarantees that texts used are curriculum-linked and those from which students are expected to learn independently. In schools where a combination of approaches were used, the most successful combination occurred where the strategies were used with a whole class, then followed up in small-group work on the same text. This enabled teachers to provide additional levels of support to groups of students, working separately as a group within the

classroom or in a withdrawal setting. In schools where specialist teachers worked with small groups to provide additional levels of support on mainstream classroom texts, teachers reported increased communication and collaboration between mainstream and specialist staff.

4.4   LRRL was equally successful for male and female target students

The intervention was equally valuable for all students underachieving in the middle years, whether in single-sex or co-educational school environments. The gains for both male and female students in the project were greater than those of the comparison groups at each year level. The gain for boys in LRRL, however, is a significant achievement in an educational environment where teachers are being called upon to design special programs that recruit boys' subjectivities and combat disengagement and alienation from schooling. The emphasis in LRRL on high quality, challenging, age-appropriate texts and on pedagogic routines involving active participation and physical manipulation of the text engage the interests of all students equally. Also significant is that the approach ensures that all students experience success and receive affirmation and praise. Teachers consistently reported increased engagement of previously disengaged and struggling students as a result.

4.5   Greater gains where teachers worked collaboratively

The project was set up with the expectation of peer support and teachers were requested to videotape, observe and critique their own and colleagues' practice. The project results demonstrate that better results where there was mutual support for pedagogic change and curriculum reform. This helped to overcome within-school inconsistencies in program delivery – such as lack of shared planning time, student absences and timetable clashes –factors which are often beyond the control of the individual teacher. This is consistent with research identifying peer support and peer coaching as successful models of teacher professional learning (eg Joyce & Showers 1996).

Where teachers were able to share key learnings from LRRL, to prepare lessons jointly and clarify questions and issues regarding implementation, and to moderate results from assessment instruments, they reported greater personal achievement and greater progress with their students. Teachers new to the project in 2004 often showed higher student gains where they were partnered with teachers who commenced the project in 2003 than those who implemented the approach on their own.

4.6   Variation in student gains between schools

Where other factors such as the model of delivery were the same, teacher and school factors appear to have produced differential outcomes for underachieving students. Project findings suggest that, even where the model of delivery used by teachers in one school was the same, a number of other variables impacted on levels of student achievement in the intervention. These include factors such as rates of student attendance, the number and frequency of scaffolding sessions and teacher effectiveness in implementing the approach. This is consistent with findings of other research literature (eg. Hill et al. 1996; Ainley et al. 2002) that within-school variation is as significant as across-school variation.

4.7   Gains for students with 'learning disabilities' exceeded expectations

The project results demonstrate that the gains made by students defined as having a learning disability, often in the form of a 'severe language disorder', were significantly higher than teachers expected. This group included numbers of 'integration students' receiving government funding through the program which until recently was called *Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes* (or SAISO). However, also included in

this group of target students were many students who, though not eligible for SAISO funding, were in need of increased levels of support in literacy. Teachers reported higher than usual levels of engagement and participation from these students, and more sustained writing as a result of the scaffolded writing activities.

These outcomes suggest that boundaries separating 'low literacy', 'language difficulty', 'learning difficulty' and 'learning disability' are ill-defined. Yet this lack of definition in characterising the cause and nature of literacy difficulties can have material effects on the approaches and strategies offered to underachieving students. This finding is consistent with other middle years reports investigating underachieving adolescents who are defined as having learning difficulties or learning disabilities. A national study of literacy intervention programs and strategies carried out by Louden et al. (2000) found that the terms 'learning difficulties' and 'learning disabilities' are used and interpreted differently, not only from one state and territory to another, but also between education systems and schools.

Establishing uniform categories and a common terminology for defining or characterising literacy difficulties will assist schools to better target program resources and tailor programs and strategies to suit particular literacy and learning needs and to develop a model of literacy provision that integrates support for students defined as having literacy or learning disabilities.

The CEOM LRRL project provided a foundation for working towards more uniform and consistent ways of defining and categorising different types and levels of literacy difficulty among literacy specialists, Special Education teachers and ESL teachers in order to ensure that the design and delivery of literacy intervention programs meets student needs.

4.8   A model for monitoring the progress of at-risk students.

The project provides a foundation for systematic, longitudinal tracking of underachieving students, particularly in the transition from primary to secondary school where the literacy demands of an increasingly complex, abstract and differentiated curriculum can compound the difficulties facing struggling students.

Concern about a lack of school and system data on the progress and achievement of students at risk is echoed in the findings in other middle years studies (eg Luke et al. 2003). Where information exists, it is not always accessible to teachers in a format that enables it to be used to inform decisions about teaching and learning.

In giving reasons for the selection of target students, many teachers in the project reported having to rely on their own personal knowledge of students, or on anecdotal information about students' literacy 'histories'. In some cases, especially where a student was new to the school, teachers reported that no information was available. The most significant gap in student information concerned target students in Year 7, the first year of secondary school. Despite being encouraged to draw on transition information, teachers targeting students at this year level often reported difficulty accessing information about students' experiences prior to attending the secondary school.

More comprehensive and systematic data on students as they progress from one year level to another, and from one stage of schooling to another, assists education systems and schools both to monitor the progress and achievement of underachieving students and to evaluate the effectiveness of literacy intervention. The project established a foundation for the long-term tracking of at-risk students, particularly from primary to secondary school.

However, the project was also consistent with the claim in *Beyond the Middle* that what is needed is not more tests but rather systematic attention to the ways tests and other forms of literacy assessments are used (Luke et. al 2003). The project brought primary and

secondary teachers together to engage in professional dialogue about literacy assessment and moderation of student work. This enabled teachers to work towards greater consistency, both in conditions governing the administering of literacy assessments and also in the interpretation and analysis of results. Teachers reported increased awareness of the parameters and relative merits of various assessment tools and strategies, and the importance of using assessment information to inform literacy teaching and learning.

4.9 Developing teachers' professional knowledge about language

The LRRL inservice program has been designed to provide teachers with high levels of professional knowledge about text and language, as well as classroom pedagogies that best communicate this knowledge to students. Explicit knowledge about language is crucial in the middle years where the reading and writing demands of the curriculum increase both in amount and complexity, and where students are expected to learn from texts independently

The project results showed that LRRL was successful in equipping teachers with literacy knowledge and skills that apply to all aspects of their practice, whether in small groups or the mainstream classroom, and for the benefit not only of at risk students but for all learners. In particular, the project provided teachers with a language to talk about language (or metalanguage). Teachers in the project reported increased metalinguistic awareness of the complexity of texts across the curriculum and the ability to deconstruct texts at more sophisticated levels to make them accessible to all students.

Many expressed the view that LRRL provides a pedagogy that not only makes texts accessible but also enables students to produce more complex and sophisticated texts themselves. This is important for students as they move up through the middle and secondary years of schooling, where writing is increasingly assessed as the product or evidence of student learning, and where being a competent writer of age-appropriate texts impacts positively on learner identity and self-esteem.

4.10 Sustained support for pedagogic change in middle years literacy.

A key strength in the design of the project was the sustained support participants received in the form of ongoing professional development and school-based consultancy. Teacher evaluations from the project confirmed that a major factor enabling participants to enhance their knowledge about text and language was the spaced-learning model of professional development which has been designed specifically to build teachers' confidence and expertise over time. This model combines expert input with opportunities to implement the approach and to critically reflect on practice in a highly supportive collegial environment.

Teachers continuing into their second year in the project reported higher levels of confidence as practitioners and a wider range of curriculum texts and contexts for implementing the approach with students. In many cases, the increased confidence and knowledge of second-year teachers was evident in the gains made by their students. This reinforces the importance of giving teachers sustained support in mastering the pattern of carefully planned teacher-learner interaction that underpins LRRL approach, and in developing the knowledge about text and language needed to maximise the benefits of the approach for all students.

The emphasis on involving schools already actively participating in the wider CEOM Middle Years Literacy Project also ensured that LRRL was supported by a growing middle years culture and mindset among local area clusters of associate primary and secondary schools.

Conclusion

Results of the research indicate that the *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* literacy pedagogy has an important role to play as a component of comprehensive middle years literacy provision at system and school levels. As a Middle Years Literacy Intervention Research Project, the CEOM LRRL project can be seen as a system response to the call for 'a new wave of research' into sustainable improvements through mainstream pedagogic reform. The project was highly congruent with reform frameworks and recommendations informing CEOM early and middle years initiatives, including the general design for a whole school approach to school improvement (Hill & Crévola 1997), the recommendations from the Middle Years Literacy Research Project (Culican, Emmitt & Oakley, Deakin University, 2001) and the goals and priorities outlined in the most recent major national report on the middle years of schooling in Australia, *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al. 2003).

The findings of the project indicate that the LRRL pedagogy, if adopted across Years 5 to 9 provides a common approach to literacy built around shared approaches, materials, and methods that challenges the 'remediation ethos' and equips mainstream teachers with the knowledge required to teach explicitly to the literacy demands and learning expectations of the middle and secondary years curriculum. These advantages address the concerns identified in the *Beyond the Middle* report, including the 'pull out and remediate' approach as distinct from 'fix the mainstream pedagogy' approach, and 'fragmentation' of target group interventions for ESL students, Indigenous students, weaker readers, and students with disabilities and special needs, where there was 'no consistent and coherent patterns of approaches, materials or methods used' (p. 136). In contrast LRRL offers a powerful set of strategies that address the needs of all students within the context of normal classroom teaching practice.

Moreover, the project was the result of a productive partnership between CEOM and the university sector, through the consultancy of Dr David Rose, of the University of Sydney. Dr Rose is the principal designer of the pedagogy, and delivered the inservice training in collaboration with the expertise in teacher professional development provided by Claire Acevedo and Sarah Culican of CEOM.

As a component of the broader Middle Years Literacy Project, the project involved CEOM staff providing ongoing support to teachers at a number of levels: as individual practitioners and classroom researchers, as members of literacy-focused professional learning teams and as participants in middle years clusters of associate primary and secondary schools. This support included promoting professional dialogue between primary and secondary teachers, moderation of standards of student work, modelling of scaffolding lessons and teacher shadowing and teacher exchange.

The model of teacher professional learning underpinning the CEOM LRRL project is congruent with the call in the *Beyond the Middle* report for 'a strong multi-partner professional development focus on middle years curriculum and pedagogy' (p.137). The report suggests that such partnerships involve teachers, researchers, consultants and teacher educators 'working together and training each other in school and cluster-based activities, teacher moderation of standards of student work, staff exchanges and classroom modelling activities' (p.138).

Finally, the results of the research confirm that, as a literacy intervention, LRRL has an important contribution to make to a comprehensive system-wide strategy that addresses the literacy needs of adolescent learners in the middle years, particularly those identified as educationally disadvantaged or at risk. In the context of Catholic education, it is important that the theory and principles underpinning the LRRL literacy pedagogy are closely aligned with the educational mission of the Church, with social justice values and with democratisation of the literacy curriculum (Rose 2005).