Raising the bar: Setting an agenda for writing improvement in the middle years

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ABSTRACT
Recent national and international benchmark data suggest that younger Australian adolescents are outperforming older adolescents in the domain of writing. This case study describes a high school’s successful efforts to raise the bar in writing achievement through Years 7 to 9 by scaffolding teachers’ essential knowledge about writing using a genre-based pedagogy. It foregrounds a middle years cluster (Years 5–9) initiative, focused on the production of specialised texts that contributed to improved growth in Year 9 writing achievement.

Introduction
In spite of a decade of investment by the Australian Government to improve the scholastic achievement of young Australians, recent evidence reports declining growth in literacy achievement across the middle years. Progressively, the gaps between those students ‘who perform highly and those who perform poorly on standardised measures of literacy increase rather than decrease at this point of schooling’ (Freebody, Morgan, Comber, & Nixon, 2014, p. 9). Globally, results from the 2016 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a worldwide study of 15-year-old school students’ scholastic performance on mathematics, science and reading, shows that Australia continues to fall behind other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations in all three areas (Marginson, Tytler, Freeman, & Roberts, 2013; Prinsley & Johnston, 2015).

In positioning Australia as one of the world’s high-performing school systems (Barber & Mourshed, 2007), the Australian Government has committed to restore the focus on, and to increase student uptake of, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects in the nation’s primary and secondary schools. A recent measure emanating from the National STEM Strategy (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015) targets the development of the National Literacy Progression (F–10) by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). At a state level, the New South Wales (NSW) Government has set a target for the improved literacy and numeracy performance of all students by increasing the proportion of NSW students in the top two NAPLAN bands for reading and numeracy by 8% by 2019.

Consistent with international benchmark data, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data on a national level show that from 2015 to 2016 there has been ‘no significant change in literacy and numeracy results, with results plateauing’ (ACARA, 2015, 2016a). The 2016 NAPLAN data show that there have been some significant gains in some domains in each state and territory, with Western Australia and Queensland standing out more than others. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT), NSW and Victoria continue to have the highest mean achievement across the NAPLAN domains in Years 3, 5 and 7. However, 2016 NAPLAN data show that top performing students in these states and the ACT are making little improvement in all domains. The data also show that since 2008 there have been some significant cumulative gains in some domains and year levels for Indigenous students, including reading (Years 3 and 5), numeracy (Year 5), spelling
Declining growth in writing
Wyatt-Smith and Jackson (2016) report ‘accelerating negative change’ (p. 233) based on NAPLAN writing data, revealing that growing numbers of students are achieving below the national minimum standard in writing. An examination of recent national benchmark data suggests that younger Australian adolescents are outperforming older adolescents in the domain of writing.

The 2015 NAPLAN writing data reveal a significant increase in the percentage of students performing at or above the national minimum standard at Year 7. Conversely, Year 9 writing results have significantly decreased since 2011 (the year from which results can be compared for this domain). The 2016 NAPLAN writing data confirm a continuing increase in the number of adolescent students achieving below the national minimum standard in the domain of writing. This disturbing trend poses questions for educators: Why is it that Year 9 students are not achieving expected growth in writing? How are schools delivering literacy (if at all) in their teaching programs? How might schools raise the bar for writing achievement?

This trend has possible implications for scholastic achievement, subject pedagogies and assessment practices in the secondary school. In the secondary years, academic achievement is primarily measured by an ability to write effectively. Increasingly it is governed by ‘really high-stakes displays of literacy capabilities’, causing learning to become ‘comprehensively and unrelievedly’ dependent on students’ development of literacy capabilities to use and produce specialised texts to display their knowledge (Freebody, Chan, & Barton, 2013, p. 304). The Australian Curriculum requires teachers in all curriculum areas to apply literacy as a General Capability (ACARA, 2016b). Accordingly, secondary teachers must find ways of integrating knowledge about writing in their use of resources and materials, their subject pedagogies and their students’ assessments.

Importance of transitions in the middle years
Understanding the significance of students’ transitions from primary to high school is to recognise the notion of transitions and transitioning. According to Henderson and Woods (2012), transition ‘describes the time or place when someone moves from one place, space or context to another’ (p. 114). In this article, the term transition describes the movement of students between school spaces, as they move from primary to secondary school, but it also describes student readiness to transition to a subsequent stage in their literacy development.

According to Australian students, the main hurdle to an effective transition to high school is the ‘sharp increase’ in demands on their literacy skills (Kiddey & Robson, 2001, p. 11). Seemingly, high school teachers are unfamiliar with this transition point of schooling. They expect students to have mastered advanced literacy skills not usually taught in primary school and assume that students will automatically demonstrate these skills ‘on the job’ (Kiddey & Robson, 2001, p. 6).

However, the kinds of literacy required of students in the lower secondary school alters significantly as they engage in reading and writing to learn across subject-specific areas (Freebody, Morgan, Comber, & Nixon, 2014). Today’s students are expected to demonstrate ‘evidence of conceptual understanding, content details, appropriate genres and discourses and the capacity to work with extended and complex texts that incorporate verbal, visual, and hybrid modes of communication’ (Freebody, Morgan, Comber, & Nixon, 2014, pp. 8–9). They need access to a range of new resources and technologies to satisfy new challenges.
In the last decade, researchers in Australia and the USA confirm that students in the middle years are ill-equipped for transitioning to a discipline-specific curriculum. Invariably, students are required to delve into increasingly complex and specialised text, communicate with others and engage in literacy activity reflective of a range of subject disciplines (Freebody, 2007; Freebody et al., 2013; Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999).

Recent approaches to thinking about texts through a disciplinary lens have resulted in disciplinary literacy, which has been used by researchers to define the growth phase of literacy development (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). As theorised by Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), literacy development may be represented in three growth phases:

- the foundational phase, basic literacy;
- the second growth phase, intermediate literacy;
- the third growth phase, disciplinary literacy. (p. 44)

The foundational phase, basic literacy, targets familiarisation with how written language works and mastery of skills that promote reading. The second growth phase, intermediate literacy, is preoccupied primarily with ‘streamlining and multitasking’; students become adept at ‘orchestrating their repertoire of strategies’, expand their personal communication toolkits, build targeted vocabularies and sample a broader range of text genres (Buehl, 2011, p. 7). Evidence suggests that most students struggle with acquiring advanced literacy practices in this second phase. Buehl (2011) advocates for ‘continued work’ on the second phase, shaped by ‘school-wide conversations about differentiation and interventions focus(ed) on students still growing this phase of literacy development’ (p. 7).

In the third growth phase, disciplinary literacy, students need to be able to transition from more generalised practices to highly contextualised literacy demands: reading, writing and thinking through a range of disciplinary lenses (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Rather than a discrete set of knowledge, habits and skills, disciplinary literacy may be depicted as ‘towers of literacy’ (Buehl, 2011, p. 13). In this phase, students are expected to grow their capacities to successfully engage with disparate disciplinary texts. In facilitating disciplinary learning, teachers need to embed teaching into disciplinary practices so that students can grow their capacities to meet disciplinary specific expectations. To master increasingly advanced textual demands, students need explicit teaching of ‘sophisticated genres, specialised language conventions, disciplinary norms of precision and accuracy, and high level interpretive processes’ (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 43). Nonetheless, some teachers lack a deep understanding of the requisite knowledge and skills for enacting disciplinary literacy. This means that students can be expected to engage in advanced literacy practices that ‘are rarely taught’ (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 45).

Educators need to work with a broad definition of literacy that takes cognisance of how students can manage the changing literacy demands as they transition to an increasingly discipline-specific curriculum. In Australia, students are expected to use the ‘significant, identifiable, and distinctive literacy that is important for learning and representative of the content of that learning area’ (ACARA, 2016b, p. 1). As genre descriptions continue to be refined, the necessity for secondary school students to master disciplinary literacy for success at school has championed the teaching of literacy that needs to be made explicit and accessible to all students (Clary & Feez, 2015).

The teaching and learning of writing
Since the 1990s, a functional text-based perspective has contributed to essential knowledge about the language patterns used to achieve specialised purposes in the secondary school disciplines in the teaching and learning of writing (Christie & Martin, 2005; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Rose & Martin, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004). In many curriculum areas, Australian researchers realised that student success required explicit teaching of language forms and the relevant genres at the different
stages of schooling (Martin, 1989; Rose & Martin, 2012; Rothery, 1996). Subsequently, a pedagogy known as the teaching and learning cycle was developed by Rothery (1996) for the explicit teaching of writing (see Derewianka, 1990; Derewianka & Jones, 2016) and is used widely in Australian schools and schools of education in universities.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the teaching and learning cycle illustrates a four-stage framework for planning and teaching language and literacy in different curriculum areas. Also known as genre-based pedagogy, the teaching and learning cycle uses as its starting point a selection of texts or genres aligned to different purposes for using language, for example, persuading, describing, explaining.

![Figure 1. Teaching and learning cycle](image)

Available from Government of South Australia, 2011, under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.00 Australia License. For more information, see https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/ No changes were made to the figure.

The teaching and learning cycle is intended to guide teachers in developing students’ knowledge about language sensitive to the language demands placed on students and as required by the Australian Curriculum. The teacher’s role is to scaffold students’ learning as they take increasing responsibility for independent use of language and language choices in the written mode. At the first stage, setting the context or building the field, the teacher plans and leads activities to kick start a shared understanding of the topic, so that students’ understanding of the field becomes sufficiently sophisticated. The second stage, modelling and deconstruction, introduces students to the genre specific to the topic. In this stage, the teacher may model the writing process and/or deconstruct an example of the genre.

The third stage, joint construction, supports students through the process of preparing and writing a text in the designated genre as required by the curriculum. In the fourth stage, independent construction, students usually research a related topic and write their own texts. At this stage, a familiarisation with the genre positions students to assume greater responsibility for constructing their texts.

**Locating solutions in research partnerships**

Globally, especially in the USA, there is a shift in focus to the possibilities afforded by the collection of large data sets about students. In Australia, few large-scale inquiries have responded to a perceived need for more structured, intentional and systematic literacy interventions that can be sustained across the middle years. However, one large-scale study led by Faulkner, Rivalland and Hunter (2010) is significant. It provides insights into building teacher capacity and understanding about language
resources for assessing and teaching the linguistic, textual and contextual levels of writing to students in Years 3–8 in Western Australia who did not meet the state benchmark standard.

Faulkner et al.’s (2010) study established that many students ‘reach a plateau in their writing development either before, or as, they make the transition from upper primary through to lower secondary school’ (p. 198). This finding has relevance in light of recent NAPLAN results for addressing ‘possible futures’ (Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016, p. 233) for adolescent students’ literacy development. Faulkner et al.’s research is characterised by a ‘collaborative arrangement’ (p. 199) forged with the education sectors and professional associations and this is illustrative of the ‘power of productive partnerships in research’ (p. 199). Guided by academics, teachers as co-researchers co-constructed a model that afforded ‘essential knowledge about what to assess in writing’ to support the further development of underperforming writers (p. 199).

In recent years, Australian academics have partnered with schools in small-scale research collaborations that go some way towards tackling concerns about writing achievement in the middle years. For example, to address uneven student achievement, a regional high school in NSW collaborated with local academics to apply genre-based strategies (Clary, Feez, Garvey, & Partridge, 2015). This project was conceptualised as the basis for a whole school approach to improving writing outcomes for all students, including Indigenous students. Now in its fourth year, this enduring partnership is illustrative of the continued significance of genre pedagogy to teachers striving to achieve equitable student outcomes.

As well, disciplinary differences in writing have caught the attention of government authorities (e.g., ACARA) and researchers. For example, Hannant and Jetnikoff (2015) reported on a literacy intervention that adopted a disciplinary approach to literacy learning, focused on enhancing students’ writing in Year 8 in a secondary school in Queensland. This study is significant since it uncovers some of the constraints (e.g., school organisation) that can adversely affect students’ development of appropriate writing capabilities for specific disciplines.

The aforementioned small-scale studies underscore the value of ongoing school-based research designed in partners between universities, schools and/or professional associations. In these spaces, interventions might concentrate on enhancing teachers’ essential knowledge about language that can influence students’ learning outcomes (Myhill, 2009). In Australia, the call for large-scale studies that use a data-driven approach seems increasingly urgent with an emphasis on ‘how different teachers design rich curriculum and explicitly teach middle years students to handle new and changing literacy demands that assist them to develop complex repertoires of literacy practices’ (Freebody, Morgan, Comber, & Nixon, 2014, p. 9).

**Raising the bar: A case study**

This case study documents an ACT high school’s attempt to boost student growth in writing from Years 7 through to Year 9, by applying knowledge about language embedded in teachers’ professional learning. It features a collaboration consisting of an academic (also the school’s critical friend), the school’s principal and the literacy coordinator. In moving the school towards a whole school approach to writing improvement within and across the disciplines, the principal engaged the school’s critical friend to assist the literacy coordinator in customising professional learning and to provide ongoing support for a whole school approach. The aim of the collaboration was to provide insights into how teachers apply essential knowledge about writing to the teaching and assessing of writing, with a chance of achieving real improvement. At the heart of the collaboration was a commitment to scaffolding professional learning and customising a writing pedagogy that might best facilitate the teaching of writing specific to the disciplines.

This study was guided by theories governing literacy learning in the discipline areas. In setting an agenda for writing improvement in the middle years, the school adopted a functional text-based
approach (Christie & Martin, 2005; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Rose & Martin, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004) that promised to develop students’ knowledge about language and provide teachers with a clear understanding about language and the specific text-types that students are expected to write in the disciplines. The study aimed to reinforce how teachers’ knowledge about language is integral to planning, teaching, assessing and supporting students in meeting expected educational outcomes (Derewianka, 1990, 2012; Derewianka & Jones, 2012).

Data collected for the study included recorded conversations with the school’s principal, literacy coordinator, a small sample of school executive and classroom teachers, teacher surveys, classroom observation and student writing samples. The school’s critical friend led the investigation, assisted by the literacy coordinator as a co-researcher. The investigator had access to school documents and materials (e.g., faculty action plans, assessment tasks, school literacy audit) and the school’s NAPLAN data. As information was collected, the critical friend and literacy coordinator used holistic analysis to make sense of the data. In subsequent sections of this article, the realisation of a whole school approach for writing improvement is explained, including the origin of a whole school approach, the school-wide literacy audit, teachers’ professional learning and the development of a cluster approach that contributed to narrowing the gap in Year 9 writing achievement (NAPLAN 2016).

**A whole school approach for writing improvement**

The impetus for a whole school approach for writing improvement grew out of the uneven student performance posted by the school’s NAPLAN data. From 2011 to 2016, the school demonstrated growth in the domains of reading and spelling for Years 7 and 9, achieving results above the national standard. At the same time, however, the school’s writing results for Year 9 revealed a broad range of writing abilities among students, many of whom did not achieve expected growth.

The two school’s operational plans (2010–2014; 2015–2019) provided traction for a whole school approach. To achieve the first priority of the plans (student success), the school invested in a literacy coordinator who was given substantial release time. Moreover, the school’s principal determined the need for intentional and systematic professional learning to reverse the trend of declining growth in student writing, and, as such, the school needed to invest in building teachers’ capacities to identify and teach discipline-specific literacy.

Over four years (2013–2016), a systematic framework guided a sequence of intentional and structured interventions and professional learning activities involving the high school and its local primary schools with the goal to achieving growth in all NAPLAN domains, especially writing. The framework for the approach is shown in Figure 2.

The school had various data sources at its disposal: national data (e.g., NAPLAN), school data (e.g., school-wide literacy audit, faculty action plans, writing moderation tasks, professional learning for staff) and cluster data for Years 5–9 (e.g., literacy needs analysis, writing moderation tasks). Details are shown in Table 1.

**School-wide literacy audit**

Under the Australian Curriculum guidelines, ‘all teachers are responsible for teaching the subject-specific literacy of their learning area’ (ACARA, 2016b, p. 1). To investigate the extent to which literacy was being addressed in each curriculum area, the literacy coordinator led a school-wide literacy audit. An outcome of the audit was the development of faculty-specific literacy plans aligned with the Australian Curriculum’s ‘literacy as a general capability’ materials. Initially, teachers struggled with new terminology (e.g., field, tenor, mode) and grammar. As well, they registered their inability to address discipline-specific literacy strands, so literacy plans were customised for each discipline. Subsequently, the school improvement team resolved to embed literacy plans into faculty action plans. These plans were used as a data collection point for gauging school improvement.
Table 1. Literacy data plan for 2013–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NAPLAN</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>NAPLAN is an annual assessment for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It tests the types of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life. The tests cover skills in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. The assessments are undertaken every year in the second full week in May.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAT (Progressive Achievement Testing)</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>The Australian Council for Educational Research's Progressive Achievement approach is used in thousands of schools in Australia and around the world. The approach focuses on assessing and monitoring student growth over time and is underpinned by an understanding that students of the same age and in the same year of school can be at very different points in their learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing moderation</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Years 7 and 9 students undertake a common writing task, which is assessed against NAPLAN writing marking criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing moderation</td>
<td>Cluster</td>
<td>Years 7 and 9 students undertake a common writing task, which is assessed against NAPLAN writing marking criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff surveys</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Surveys provided feedback on future directions to writing target areas to improve student outcomes such as team teaching and scaffolding literacy strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy needs assessment</td>
<td>Cluster</td>
<td>As part of the cluster establishment phase, each participating school undertook a literacy needs assessment to determine the needs of the school and cluster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional learning feedback</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>At the completion of each professional learning session, the teaching staff are given the opportunity to provide feedback on the insightfulness of the workshops and future directions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The literacy audit also identified a discrepancy in the text types taught in each discipline at the appropriate year level. The school adopted Genre Maps (South Australian Department of Education and Child Development, 2014) to provide a framework for whole school and curriculum/faculty planning. For example, at the whole school level, the genre map enabled the school to systematically plan for the sequential development of the genres as students progressed from primary school through to high school. At the faculty level, a genre map supported teachers’ planning for common assessment tasks to ensure key learning area assessment genres were being developed throughout Years 7 to 10.

**Implementing professional learning**

The literacy audit also uncovered a need for teachers’ professional learning in persuasive writing, scaffolding literacy and the development of resources such as the school’s text type handbook. In moving to upskill teachers, teachers self-identified to team-teach with the literacy coordinator who modelled a range of strategies using Scaffolding Literacy (Axford, Harders, & Wise, 2009).

Between 2014 and 2015, the literacy coordinator and academic partner negotiated, planned and led workshops catering for teachers of all disciplines during after-school staff meetings and professional development days. The workshops adopted a functional language approach, expounding the relationship between context and the choices users make from the language system, in particular, the notion of how genres achieve social purpose and the more specific context of a particular situation, that is, register (field, tenor and mode).

The workshops also modelled the four-phase teaching and learning cycle for explicit teaching of relevant genres (Government of South Australia, 2011). The teachers were guided in identifying the suitable genre for a curriculum topic, locating and analysing appropriate texts and identifying challenges presented by the text at all levels of language. In discipline groupings, teachers considered opportunities, existing or prospective, for assessing students’ learning according to Australian Curriculum guidelines.

Following staff feedback requesting focused professional learning around subject-specific literacy, the principal committed the school to Principals as Literacy Leaders, a year-long workshop dedicated to developing content knowledge in the disciplines (Buehl, 2011, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In cross-disciplinary forums led by the literacy coordinator, teachers focused their learning on acquiring a deep knowledge of their discipline supported by literate practices that could be embedded into their teaching.

**Developing a cluster approach for effective transitions**

As a means for gauging writing achievement across the middle years, the high school adopted the *First Steps* writing continuum (Western Australian Department of Education, 1997), which presents a writing progression between primary and middle years of schooling. This resource encouraged an action research approach that stimulated professional discussion about students’ literacy abilities using evidence from NAPLAN data, work samples, assessment tasks and the faculty audit. Using these data, teachers mapped students on to the Western Australian Literacy Continuum and collaborated to moderate the results. Samples of student work were collected for each dimension of the Literacy Continuum to form a standards package for future reference.

As an outgrowth of a whole school approach to writing improvement, the literacy coordinator used a seed grant to establish a middle years cluster (Years 5–9), for the purpose of preparing students for writing discipline-specific texts in the lower secondary school. Using *First Steps* (Western Australian Department of Education, 1997), teachers from five primary schools and the local high school developed a writing continuum for Years 5 through to Year 7. The Year 6 teachers developed and administered an annual writing moderation task for Years 5, 6 and 7 students (e.g., a book/film review). They used a writing rubric geared for Years 5 to 9 and informed by the *First Steps* Writing...
Continuum. This rubric was subsequently modified to include NAPLAN writing marking criteria and to correlate with the achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum.

The moderation task generated useful data for informing planning for writing development across the cluster, in particular, paragraphing and sentence construction. Year 9 students repeated the moderation task they attempted in Year 7. The trends were encouraging. Approximately 70% of students reported growth in writing, 10% were borderline and 20% were below expected growth. These data correlated with the school’s 2016 Year 9 NAPLAN data revealing a narrowing of the gap in Year 9 writing achievement.

Reflection and discussion
As expected, implementing a whole school approach met with teacher reluctance. Some teachers refused to acknowledge their role as a teacher of literacy. There existed reticence amongst some teachers to incorporate literacy in their everyday teaching practice. These teachers argued that the teaching of literacy was the province of the English faculty. Undoubtedly, engaging teachers in dialogue about the school’s NAPLAN data at the school and faculty level delivered a powerful trigger for moving the school to exert efforts to improve students’ writing achievement. Seemingly, the principal, literacy coordinator and critical friend collaborated as change agents to secure teachers’ buy-in to a collective agenda to improve students’ writing achievement. The success of a whole school approach, teachers argue, was due to the dedication, focus and drive of the literacy coordinator and the literacy leadership exhibited by the school’s principal. Committing resources to build teacher capacity for literacy teaching and allocating time for teachers to plan, share and deliberate was clearly valued by the teachers.

As the professional learning gained momentum, there existed a growing appreciation among the high school teachers to familiarise themselves with a model of language that was seemingly alien to their existing beliefs and theoretical understandings about writing and to develop an understanding of how language works. While they struggled with the metalanguage in general, teachers reported that the strategies gained from the professional learning encouraged them to teach writing explicitly, using a shared metalanguage. As these teachers started to dig deep into the professional learning, it became evident that they wanted more focused professional learning specific to their discipline. In transitioning to disciplinary literacy, on the whole, teachers exuded encouraging shifts in their approaches to accommodate thinking about the language, or discourse, of a specific discipline.

It is possible to identify key drivers that moved the school closer to achieving its targets. These are predominantly embedded in data such as NAPLAN and PAT (Progressive Achievement Testing) that informed teaching programs and school-wide foci. Firstly, the imperative of a school-wide writing focus received strong principal leadership and buy in, as part of a broad vision to build teachers’ capacities to identify and teach curriculum literacies. School-resourced initiatives included the funding of a literacy coordinator to lead long-term, sustained and systematic planning for writing improvement informed by a data-driven approach. Although there are distinct benefits to a model that invests resources into one role (or person), the downside is that newly developed expertise and skills may not be distributed across the organisation, thereby begging the issue of sustainability.

Secondly, this study is distinguished by a long-standing school-university collaboration, initiated by the school’s principal, that bought expertise into the school by informing teachers about current literacy research and tapping into opportunities for engaging teachers in professional dialogue to improve practice. As reported by Faulkner et al. (2010), this study echoes the ‘power of productive partnerships in research’ (p. 199). Guided by the academic, the literacy coordinator developed and contextualised professional learning for supporting the teaching of disciplinary writing.

Thirdly, the principal’s initiative to promote communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) with the expectation of cross-discipline teacher collaboration and to allocate time at staff meetings for teachers to plan and implement literacy lessons at the classroom level was a significant driver. This finding
is indicative of research about professional development in educational contexts, suggesting that teachers’ learning is best situated in site-based collaborative environments nurtured by mutual trust and support (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Borko, 2004).

Fourthly, and most significantly, this school’s efforts underscore the value of collecting and using quantitative data that can provide ‘more complex and nuanced understanding of how young people engage with literacy teaching and learning opportunities’ (Honan, 2016, p. 57). In the current climate, as Feinlab (2014) argues, ‘using a data-driven approach can help us teach more effectively’ (p. 174).

A pivotal take-away from this study is the evolving perception of the cluster as an ecosystem, as illustrated in Figure 3, that encompasses all participating educational entities into one entity. Unlike transition points fixed in a progression, wherein teachers are apt to apportion blame, members in the ecosystem are accorded respect and acknowledged for their contribution to the ecosystem in order to build trust and common understandings for the future work ahead. Furthermore, members analyse and use data to guide future practice for curriculum success, developing a common language and repertoire of evidence-based strategies as a cluster, so that ownership is spread throughout the ecosystem.

![Figure 3. The school cluster as an ecosystem](image)

**Enacting effective transitions**

Preparing teachers for integrating ‘literacy as a general capability’ necessitates a school-wide approach that is systematic and can be sustained. It requires a deep commitment and preparedness by teachers to teach curriculum literacies and calls for recognition and rich support of teachers’ efforts. Notwithstanding, some teachers struggle with a change of mindset in transitioning to a teacher of literacy.

Through focused and graduated professional learning, workshopping and discussions, teachers are afforded opportunities to take ownership of modifying their programs to incorporate an appropriate literacy pedagogy that has a good chance to raise the bar for student writing in their discipline. Introducing frameworks, such as *Genre Maps* (South Australian Department of Education and Child Development, 2014), that can be adapted and/or extended to more specifically meet students’ learning needs in or across any context, provides teachers with a means to customise literacy action
plans and/or pedagogical frameworks. Adopting approaches such as disciplinary literacy or a genre-based pedagogy, as opposed to generic approaches, endows teachers with a deeper understanding of curriculum literacy—more specifically ‘the textual structure of curriculum knowledge and understanding’ (Unsworth, 2015, p. 267)—and heightens awareness of discipline-specific literacy capabilities with respect to writing.

In preparing students for effective transitions, teachers might harness cross-school collaborations dedicated to meaningful and often challenging discussions about students’ literacy development. Accordingly, teachers might consider nurturing an ecosystem for shared understandings about educational outcomes as students navigate key points of transition in schooling. Moreover, it seems critical to collect and analyse student data at the point of transition, as this will uncover students’ literacy needs to inform teaching practice and advance student literacy outcomes that are consistent with the achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum and NAPLAN. In addition, within the wider school community, it is helpful to develop, utilise and share resources similar to an online literacy handbook. This might contain tailored, scaffolded strategies for teachers as well as their students, who are expected to write specialist texts to exhibit increasingly complex discipline-specific knowledge.

Concluding remarks
Ongoing professional conversations concerning data are integral to developing a shared understanding across the disciplines so that teachers are able to design and deliver programs capable of raising the bar for all students. Accordingly, teachers will become adept at using data to develop curriculum-specific plans and programs supported by whole school and/or cluster approaches that are committed to improving literacy achievement. The high school reported in this case study is testimony to sustained and targeted efforts to achieve positive growth, no matter how small the gain.

Nonetheless, in spite of the school’s efforts to promote disciplinary writing, the explicit teaching of writing has not been uniformly prioritised within and across the disciplines.

Immediate challenges surround how secondary teachers might mentor students as disciplinary writers (Buehl, 2011) and explicitly teach ‘linguistic forms that constitute the constructed and communicated knowledge’ in specific disciplines (Unsworth, 2015, p. 267). Increasing demands on teachers’ pedagogical content development make it imperative for schools to determine what ‘constitutes appropriate knowledge so that teachers are able to optimise students’ curriculum area literacies for learning in discipline areas’ (Unsworth, 2015, p. 273).

As reported here, efforts to promote disciplinary literacy with respect to writing need to be ongoing, initiated and resourced by the school and also to extend beyond the school. Professional settings (e.g., interschool and professional development clusters, school-university partnerships) afford possibilities for teachers to share examples of practice that work, question and endorse what they do, share and analyse data, and moreover, encourage each other. By utilising research collaborations and targeted school-based professional learning, teachers can assist adolescent students to develop complex repertoires of literacy practices by having a deeper understanding of how linguistic concepts function in the ‘textual construction of curriculum knowledge and understanding’ (Unsworth, 2015, p. 267). As governments and scholars ponder ‘possible futures’ for adolescent students and the future of literacy testing in Australia, this case study reveals the potential of using data such as NAPLAN for informing school planning and ‘evidence informed policy for achieving educational improvement’ (Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016, p. 233).

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References


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