Whole-school Literacy Success
Against the Odds

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Introduction
Greenleaf Girls High School is a Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) school in a particularly disadvantaged area of Sydney. There were 680 students enrolled at the school at the time of undertaking the case study described below. 98% of the students were NESB. The largest cultural groups in the student population were: Arabic (56%), Vietnamese (12%) and Pacific Islanders (7%). There were 49 language groups represented in the school, with significant numbers of refugee children from Sierra Leone, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The school was part of a three-year study into programs and Faculties which had achieved outstanding success in Years 7–10 in NSW DET high schools. The particular area chosen for study at Greenleaf was the school’s literacy program – chosen based on ‘value-added’ data in the state wide English/Literacy tests and HSC English results. Even allowing for the school’s high NESB population (which may gain the school good ‘value-added’ results simply through longer exposure to English between one test and another) the school’s results were outstanding for all of the categories for which the DET keeps such results. In particular, the majority of students in the lowest band of ELLA in Year 7 are almost all removed from this band by Year 8. The school scores above the state average in the School Certificate and, in the year prior to the case study, above-state-average performances were recorded in the Extension 1, Advanced, Standard, and ESL Higher School Certificate English courses (i.e. in every English course offered). Hence, discussion of the school’s literacy program needs to also acknowledge the highly important contribution of the English Faculty who navigate the perennially odd situation of teaching English in a context where state-wide testing is around ‘literacy’ (Years 7 and 8), ‘English/literacy’ (Year 10) and ‘English’ (Year 12).

There was a strong and widespread belief in the school that strong competition from nearby selective and private schools had resulted in increasing proportions of ‘needy’ students in the school’s student profile. At the time of our visit, half of each of the lowest two Year 7 classes were made up of students classified as IM. The school is also the local high school for students in a number of western suburbs IEC programs. Numeracy and Literacy, in particular, have been on-going whole-school priorities. The sense of struggle and of having substantial difficulties to overcome seemed to reinforce the school’s sense of mission and encouraged development and continued commitment to innovation. A strong sense of social justice and equity drives the school.

What contributed to the outstanding performance in literacy in this school?

Early identification of students with literacy difficulties
An established, systematic and rigorous process led by the Support staff to identify and assist students with literacy difficulties is one of the strongest features of the literacy program at Greenleaf. Details are given below in the section on Year 7 Orientation.
**Strong literacy support programs**

The Literacy Support Programs at Greenleaf are based upon an explicit theory enunciated by the Support staff and supported by all other teachers. The first step involves building up a positive attitude to books and reading. In the *Running with Reading* Program (see below), a diverse range of books is presented and students are taught to see books as engaging rather than as simply sites for skills assessment. The second step involves deepening student fluency and automaticity in decoding and comprehension (see the *Reading Time* Program below).

The details of these programs are as follows.

**Year 7 orientation**

Instead of a brief one- or two-day introduction to secondary school, Greenleaf runs a four-week whole-school orientation program for Year 7 students. Primary school reports on students are made available to Secondary teachers. On arrival, Year 7 students are not placed in normal classes for four weeks. They engage in a common program which serves two functions – orientation and diagnosis.

In terms of orientation, Faculties design modules based on four focus areas: literacy, numeracy, communication and higher order thinking and problem-solving.

In terms of assessment, students undertake:

- a piece of sustained writing
- a reading test of paragraph understanding (PUT)
- an oral test of reading for contextual and semantic processing (this also tests students’ reluctance to read)
- two set tasks in Mathematics, including oral mental computation

After the four weeks, all Faculty teachers report on students’ abilities and needs in all focus areas to the Support staff. It is at this point that Year 7 classes are formed. The actual structure of classes varies from year to year according to student ability. During the case study visit, the school’s next targeted project had already begun and this was to map out the Support outcomes for the current Year 7s in communication and social skills.

Teachers soon know the students well and this knowledge informs future team teaching. The Head Teacher Support reports the results of the orientation program to staff as part of a process of continuously identifying the needs and abilities of Year 7 and 8 students. The Support staff drive Year 7, ‘making the key decisions for the cohort’ (Support teacher) in terms of curriculum and class organisation. This centralisation is beneficial in creating a whole-school commonality of practice and philosophy. While the Year 7 orientation program is conducted in all Faculties, its success is dependent on its co-ordination by the Support staff and consensus within the school, which is further discussed below.

As a result of this program, Year 7 students have genuine transition and the common ‘plateauing’ effect of Year 7 is avoided. After the orientation period, the needy classes are targeted, with team teaching and strategic withdrawal of students. There are no ‘split’ classes in Year 7, reducing the number of teachers that students have and thus facilitating transition.

**Running with Reading**

One period of Year 7 and 8 English per week is devoted to *Running with Reading*. Teachers construct their own worksheets related to ‘streamed’ reading boxes and students are directed to the ‘correct’ resources. The program targets positive attitudes by students towards reading. It runs in two stages: at the beginning of Year 7, students work with
common texts to generate enjoyment of, and performance around, text; next book boxes with a range of high interest texts and comprehension activities, such as cloze, prediction, inference, etc., are used. The program is staffed by English teachers, the Librarian and ESL/Support teachers. Teachers work one-on-one with students a number of times during the year to develop a Reading Profile.

The emphasis on performance, with dramatisations and Readers Theatre, is effective in creating a sense that books are to be enjoyed rather than held in awe or seen as threatening. The book boxes contain a diversity of texts ranging from simple picture books to abridged versions of the classics. Structured questions, ranging from factual recall to higher order thinking, are provided with the books.

Reading time
At a set time each day, all students from Years 7 to 9 work their way through units developed by the Support staff. These units are centred on comprehension or numeracy skills, with short, varied texts and supplementary questions. Common activities are: cloze, reciprocal reading, modelled reading, vocabulary building (as well as numeracy topics such as fractions and graphs). The units mainly target literal and inferential comprehension skills. Staff reported that Reading Time enhanced student engagement with, and ability to talk about, text.

Peer tutoring
Needy students in Year 7 are involved in a one-to-one peer tutoring program while all other students have Reading Time. Sessions are held in the library with Year 10 and 11 tutors who gain TAFE accreditation. Peer tutors are thoroughly trained in current reading pedagogy. Tutors are assessed and self-assess as well as evaluating their own student’s progress.

Other
The school also has a program in Thinking Skills for Year 7 and runs a Study Centre with Support staff timetabled each period, and to which individual students can be sent for independent work or tutoring. Intervention programs are designed when necessary. The Study Centre has a very high level of usage. In addition, staff in the Study Centre run a before-school transition program for exiting IEC students, with monitoring and follow-up. The school also runs a Homework Centre for one hour after school three days a week.

Support staff and its leadership
At the time of the case study, the Support staff was made up of three ESL teachers, two STLDs, one IM teacher, one ESL Community Officer, the Careers teacher and the Librarian. There are also three Community Liaison Officers. The Support staff is substantial and central to the school and its operation. In most secondary schools, Support staff are dispersed throughout the school and rarely achieve any sense of corporate identity, but in Greenleaf they operate as the leaders of curriculum innovation and planning. They also provide the full range of in-class support services. They are a central point of reference to staff members. The students also see the Support staff as central to the school. The pivotal, and probably unique, role of the Support staff in curriculum planning, special programs, assessment, evaluation, professional development and team-teaching is widely cited as the main reason for the school’s continued success, despite a perceived gradual decline in the ability of the incoming student clientele. According to the Principal, ‘the dialogue between the Support staff and the rest of the school is continuous’. The vast majority of Support staff have been mainstream teachers in the school and have an understanding of the curriculum.
as well as an expertise in the needs of ESL and learning difficulty students.

On two days a week the Head Teacher Support acts as literacy co-ordinator for the whole school. The Support Staff’s central location makes it easy for other staff to drop in. It also houses student records, allowing staff to track students throughout their schooling, and is used by other staff extensively as a site of curriculum planning and team teaching and information-seeking on students. Virtually every member of staff we interviewed, when asked about the success of the literacy programs in the school, replied with a variation on the phrase, ‘the Support Staff drives it’:

The Support staff are forward thinkers, full of new ideas and able to carry it through to train the staff. (Head Teacher HSIE)

The fact that most of the Support staff are former English teachers ‘is a tremendous advantage’. (Principal)

The consolidation and centralisation of the Support staff and its expansive role in the school began in 1993. The experience of Greenleaf shows how effective the Support staff can be as a consolidated force in NESB and PSFP schools – and how under-utilised this resource is in many other schools.

The Head Teacher Support is an absolutely critical person in school, doing the research, liaising with DET and universities, keeping up-to-date, devising professional development programs for staff (with key staff members), delivering professional development, setting up models for evaluation of school needs and for future planning. She is a participant in curriculum planning for all KLAs. She is the chief data gatherer in the school. She centralises and energises the school’s literacy programs and is genuinely universally admired by teachers and students alike. In a committed and enthusiastic staff, she was invariably singled out as providing the driving force behind the success of most programs in the school. Her leadership style is characterised by her staff as ‘work, knowledge, passion, inspiration’.

Professional development

The Head Teacher Support is given relief from teaching to conduct professional development, to gather and analyse research and to find resources. Her role thus ensures a continuous focus on innovation and the latest thinking. New programs have a considerable gestation period. The Head Teacher Support and one of her colleagues, for example, were given two years to develop programs in higher order thinking for students and in ‘backward mapping’ for staff: the first year to research and write materials and the second year to conduct increasingly intensive workshops with each Faculty. Thus, not only are the professional development programs well thought-out and researched, they are given a local ‘flavour’ and are disseminated and implemented carefully and comprehensively.

PSFP money at Greenleaf is put extensively into professional development. Professional development is school-based, focused on content and the needs of the students. Staff development days are focused on whole-school priorities and whole-school improvement. These programs also reflect a model of curriculum development which is consultative and consensual.

There is nothing haphazard or half-measure about professional development at Greenleaf. There is a strong focus on adapting research and school policy initiatives into Faculty programs. Creative use of time and PSFP money has allowed curriculum staff to be released for professional development within school time. This occurs in cross-Faculty teams rather than within-Faculty teams, thus ensuring that the whole school consensus in relation to the implementation of policies and programs continues. At Greenleaf this ‘in-servicing’ of staff
in whole-school priorities and the professional development process outlined above have both been continuous over a twenty year period. ‘It began in the mid-80s with Reading K–12’, said the Head Teacher HSIE. ‘The cross-curricular approach was the reason we were so successful in reading in the 80s’. This view is reinforced by others and it seems as if the early days of DSP created a culture in this school of adopting whole-school solutions.

Thus the continuity of the staff has been a strength. The proactive role of the Head Teacher Support, a position specially created to meet the needs of this school, has ensured that the school is always aware of educational innovation. The support of the Principal, at whose initiative the Head Teacher Support position was created as additional to the designated executive positions within the school, and who has been insistent upon the whole-school nature of professional development, has also been important.

Perhaps three other factors are also significant in explaining the whole staff support for continuous professional development within the school.

Firstly, the professional development directions reinforce the staff’s understanding of the needs of the students – in other words, professional development never asks teachers to acquiesce in practices which contradict or seem irrelevant to subject-specific practices.

A second factor is a sense of continuity in the school. Programs are not in the hands of the few – succession planning is there because of the sheer extent of professional development. There is a ‘critical mass’ of Head Teachers and teachers ‘on board’, and the staff have ownership of professional development.

Thirdly, the students themselves endorse the methods used and promoted. These methods, with the emphasis on structure, sequence and scaffolding, have become what they expect of schooling.

In short, there has developed a basic ‘fit’ between the expectations and values of the whole school community and the professional development-driven directions of pedagogy.

**Whole-school approaches and genuine whole-school commitment to literacy**

The staff here do see Literacy as basic to their subject area. They do not reject it as irrelevant or tire of it. Greenleaf is the opposite of a ‘Balkanised’ school – across Faculty teams working on student needs-based programs have been the norm. This has contributed to the sense of unity, common purpose and community in the school. The commitment to, and implementation of, literacy as a central concern in the school was not tokenistic, but genuine:

> We saturate the staff here with the idea that the teaching of Literacy is foremost (even including vocab and pronunciation) … This is related to our context and our needs – everybody understands that curriculum content needs to be put aside if the kids are to understand … We always choose the kids over the curriculum. (Head Teacher HSIE)

Faculties created curriculum materials that took account of students’ literacy needs rather than relying on text books. We observed a number of lessons where students were working with resource booklets compiled by teachers, including in *Reading Time*. The booklets were used actively in the classroom, especially to provide scaffolds for students in decoding and comprehending the factual content of the unit, and also for gathering and combining information with a view to producing their own texts.

The consistency of approach to teaching in each Faculty is based on deep awareness, developed over a decade, of the literacy requirements, conventions, and structures in each subject. The emphasis on modelling and scaffolding across all KLAs is the natural result. Explicit teaching at Greenleaf takes the form of providing models of successful performance, with criteria explained in detail and systematic teaching of the steps required to achieve success. That the whole school has endorsed and practised this approach is part of the distinctive identity of the school:
Literacy is the be-all and end-all of this school. The whole school takes it on. The staff’s innate professional ability to teach is increased because they see so much team-teaching. It’s the whole package.

(Support Teacher)

In addition, English and Literacy exist in a relationship of complementarity in this school; they are mutually supportive.

The historical process/staff stability

In Greenleaf, there was a twenty-year tradition of school-based professional development, focused in particular on literacy, which seems to have always had cross-Faculty support. Several of those who had been at the school a long time agreed that in the 1980s, DSP began a tradition of whole-school professional development, consolidated during 1996–7 under NPDP. Ten further years with a strong Support Faculty have co-ordinated and consolidated, especially in literacy.

Such a history works to achieve success because of a second key factor – the stability of staff. Some examples:

- Head Teacher Support – 22 years teaching/14 years at Greenleaf
- Support teacher – 28 years teaching/20 years at Greenleaf
- Support teacher – 18 years teaching/15 years at Greenleaf
- Support teacher – 18 years teaching/18 years at Greenleaf
- ESL/ICT co-ordinator – 22 years at Greenleaf
- Head Teacher Mathematics – almost 30 years at Greenleaf
- Head Teacher Science – 12 years at Greenleaf
- Head Teacher HSIE – 32 years teaching/32 years at Greenleaf
- School Counsellor – 32 years at Greenleaf

We believe that the existence of a stable, experienced, dedicated staff is a key factor in building a successful tradition. Paradoxically, it appears to be stability that enables innovation because with it comes a detailed knowledge of context (Dinham & Sawyer 2004).

A particular attitude to change also permeates this staff. They add at the margins, always refining and developing. Change is in a straight line, not haphazard. Therefore they accept it because they’ve done it since the 80s – modifying, adapting, responding. So, the next step in the pedagogy of literacy is not new and they do not see it as radical change – they feel instead that what they’ve already done is being vindicated. New staff are ‘socialised’ and inducted quite quickly into the culture of the school in a structured and on-going orientation program.

Summary and conclusions

Strong systems support in this area of social disadvantage needs to be acknowledged. The PSFP allowed Support staff both to exist and to have the time to develop and run valuable in-service courses in Greenleaf. Systems support also enabled the employment of CLOs in Greenleaf.

Strong leadership was a key factor. This manifested itself in the role of the Head Teacher Support in Greenleaf and the unusually central role given to this Head Teacher. Interestingly, given that literacy was a whole-school program, the role of the Head Teacher Support in Greenleaf had a whole-school impact, not just an impact on the relevant program group. Principals also played a strong enabling role in Greenleaf. The role of key staff as a driving force was thus a related theme.

Student welfare was intimately tied to teaching and learning. Given that Greenleaf is a site of clear socio-economic disadvantage this welfare orientation took the form of a social
justice imperative driving the school. At the same time, there was a clear culture of high expectations and no sense that students were being ‘taught down to’.

**School culture** was also highly important. The genuine, consistent, whole-school commitment to literacy and particular literacy practices and programs was the clearest example of this. The breadth of consistency and genuine whole-school commitment penetrated deeply in Greenleaf. This depth of penetration was so strong and so sets Greenleaf apart that we have hypothesised that whole-school culture which drives a particular consistent set of practices across the school is absolutely crucial to academic success in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage. It is, we think, instructive that such a successful literacy site in an area of strong socio-economic disadvantage was so clearly a result of whole-school practices and policies.

**Staff stability** was a strong factor in Greenleaf, with staff being at the school for unusually long periods of time – a finding about effective teachers reflected in a similar study of HSC teachers by Ayres, Dinham and Sawyer (1998, 1999). This suggests that – at least – dynamic programs and Faculties can overcome the ennui often associated with staying too long at the same school, or even – more interestingly – that great effectiveness may require a pre-condition of a critical mass of staff who have been in the school a long time, especially in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (Dinham & Sawyer 2004).

Elsewhere we have used Stanley Fish’s (1989) concept of the ‘**interpretive community**’ to explain the effectiveness of the operations of a group such as Greenleaf Girls’ High (Baxter 2001, Baxter Brock & Sawyer, forthcoming). Here, the whole school can justifiably be seen in these terms because of the genuine pervasiveness of beliefs and practices in literacy education. Fish defined an ‘interpretive community’ as ‘sets of institutional practices’ (1989, p. 153) in which ‘assumed distinctions, categories of understanding and stipulations of relevance and irrelevance were the context of consciousness of community members’ (1989, p. 141).

In other words, in an interpretive community there is a remarkable unanimity of values, attitudes, practices, schema for interpreting any practice, event or phenomenon and conventions of behaviour. At the same time, interpretive communities are ‘engines of change’ in that the very professionalism that sustains them results in a continual quest for improvement and questioning of established practices. This last feature is true of Greenleaf as a whole, but of the Support Staff in particular because of its pivotal role in the school. The concept of the interpretive community is helpful in describing why certain professional groups seem to ‘click’. It locates the source of the corporate unanimity of practice not in syllabuses or rules so much as in the work itself and the sense of common enterprise. It also accounts for the dynamism observable in the operation of a school like Greenleaf. The school shares a sense of common mission and participates in the continuous assessment and re-assessment of that mission and the optimal methods for achieving it. It is not a simple matter of translating words in a policy or program into obvious action, but rather an impassioned search for ‘best-fit’ matches between theory, practice and the needs of a group of particularly ‘needy’ students. This process is on-going – a perpetual ‘work-in-progress’.

In terms of **pedagogy and curriculum**, appropriately targeted programs were characteristic of Greenleaf. These included the comprehensive range of literacy programs and the development of resources aimed at literacy issues in the subject departments. The school strongly demonstrated a belief in the notion that each key learning area has a set of literacies (‘curriculum literacies’, Cumming et al., 1998) which are particular to itself. However, while there was adherence to the notion of ‘text types’ (see discussions in Hasan & Williams 1996, Maybin & Mercer 1996, Schirato & Yell 1996, Christie & Misson 1998, Gapper 1998, Gee 1990, Mercer & Swan 1996, Christie & Rothery 1989, Richardson 2004), it
may well be that the concept of ‘best fit’ is the key driving force. Teachers do not allow
their adherence to ‘text types’ to become a straitjacket. On the contrary, they seem to find a
point at which their sense of the subject they teach and the students they teach cohere and
at this point a decision is made to discard, adapt, or veer away from a particular pedagogy
(which has served a highly useful purpose to that point) that no longer sits readily with that
point of coherence, and to adopt another practice which does sit more readily at that point
of coherence. Effective teaching in this view is like a continually evolving set of Kuhnian
scientific revolutions in which both the subject and the student are the normal paradigm
until the concept of ‘best fit’ interrupts to create a revolution.

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Abbreviations
CLO: Community Liaison Officer
DET: NSW Department of Education and Training
DSP: Disadvantaged Schools Program
ELLA: English Language and Literacy Assessment
ESL: English as a Second Language
HSC: Higher School Certificate
HSIE: Human Society and its Environment
HT: Head Teacher
IEC: Intensive English Centre
IM: Intellectually Mild
KLA: Key Learning Areas
NESB: Non-English Speaking Background
NPDP: National Professional Development Program
NSWDET: New South Wales Department of Education and Training
PD: Professional Development
PSFP: Priority Schools Funding Program.
T&D: Training and Development

Glossary
English language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA). A state-wide ‘literacy’ test for Years
7 & 8 – based on highly specific aspects of mechanical skills: structure, spelling, punctuation,
grammar.
Head Teacher. The leader of a subject Faculty (hence, ‘Head Teacher, English’) and
sometimes of a program, such as Welfare.
Higher School Certificate. This is the Year 12 final accreditation. It is based on 50%
external examination and used as the basis for determining a university entrance rank.
Key Learning Areas are groupings of subject disciplines. In NSW high schools these are:
English, Mathematics, Science, Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA), Technology and
Applied Studies (TAS), Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE),
Human Society and its Environment(HSIE) and Languages other than English (LOTE).
The Priority Schools Funding Program replaced the previous Disadvantaged Schools Program.

**School Certificate.** The Year 10 school credential in NSW. Year 10 is the final year of compulsory schooling. There is a School Certificate examination in selected subjects and in English, the examination is titled ‘English/Literacy’.

**Standard, Advanced, Extension and ESL English** English in NSW in Years 11 and 12 is divided into a number of courses: English as a Second Language; Standard English; Advanced English and Extension Courses 1 and 2. Treating ESL separately, the ascending order of difficulty is Standard, Advanced, Extension 1 and Extension 2.

**References**


