

# Building literacy ...outside of the box

*"We're not putting kids in a box anymore."*







In 2021, facing ongoing evidence that what they were doing wasn't getting results, staff at Southland's Winton School acknowledged they were not meeting the needs of today's tamariki (children).

*"Children today are different to 10 years ago. Data showed we had to change our practice and adapt. Instead of challenging the children we needed to challenge ourselves",* says Steve Wadsworth (principal).

Targeting these concerns, the primary school's leadership team sought strategic guidance from CORE Education. Together they created a programme, designed to develop pedagogical content knowledge, with a heavy focus on oral language, emergent literacy and all that underpins later literacy success. To ensure the programme could be implemented and sustained, CORE assisted the school with securing funding, via RAPLD – the Ministry of Education's fund for regionally-allocated professional learning and development.

Strategic performance goals, development of curriculum design processes and documentation, and flexibility were all built into the programme. A key element of the programme was the very deliberate

decision to build capability and understanding before looking at any pedagogical or classroom practice changes. Teachers and support staff attended all the PLD sessions together. The programme design ensured the capability to adjust and refine over time as required. The school staff immediately began implementing their learning and, very quickly, it was obvious the PLD programme was delivering outstanding outcomes for teachers and learners.

*Steve notes, "In 19 years, this is by far the most powerful PLD I've been involved with. It's just been success after success, and we're only half way through."*

According to Greg Carroll (Regional PLD Manager and Accredited Facilitator at CORE), evidence came from various sources, including educators becoming enablers of effective curriculum design through their increasingly in-depth pedagogical content knowledge. Growth in confidence also played a part, as did instilling a growth mindset, and integrating regular self-assessment to help consolidate and evolve the programme.

Maryse Varaine (Junior School and Literacy Lead) agreed.

*“It’s given us another way to solve the problem, so we are not doing the same thing over and over, we look somewhere else. This PLD has made us think that way, asking what can we do to make it better, for literacy but also for students’ wellbeing ...this new way helps students become engaged. They know what they are doing and where they are going, so we have confident ākonga (learners), with aware and happy parents.”*

Regular PLD sessions focused on brain and learning science, and how this is applied to oral language development and later to literacy learning. Initially it was all about understanding why. This led to building teacher and support staff confidence and pedagogical content knowledge, and increased confidence and ability in identifying the specific needs of tamariki. Programmes were then able to be designed and refined to target very specific group and individual needs.

Maryse says she believes a contributing factor to the future success will be to “strengthen partnerships between home and school”, ensuring whānau have opportunity, understanding and ability to support the journey of their tamariki. This is a goal for 2023.

*“Learning is quite different from when they were in school, making our connection even more important. They are very much with us and behind us.”*

She believes the gains for ākonga are life-changing, for them and often for their whānau.

*“Knowing they have help with their journey means learning is not so much of a struggle. They now think ‘I know where I’m going and that*

*you are with me all the way.’ They know we’re all in this together, all staff, teachers, teacher aides, students, parents and whānau.”*

Positive impacts have been felt across the entire school community. The ability to understand the learning journey of all tamariki has been strengthened, with all contributors having clear direction on how they can support it. Resources supporting and documenting progressions of developmental and literacy skills are clear, and information shared with whānau is regular and transparent. A line of sight is visible and accessible that tracks learning and achievement from ākonga and their whānau right through to the Board of Trustees.







Higher levels of engagement and increased opportunities for collaboration have contributed to deepening the understandings around literacy and other areas of the curriculum. Increasingly collaborative approaches are being taken to improving practices and approaches to learning.

Steve has noticed that teaching staff are having professional conversations and sharing more than ever before.

*“Being able to articulate challenges and successes has really grown. Within three terms of starting this PLD, content articulation was incredible. I see the momentum that has been created, the excitement levels that staff share. It’s brought us closer together. No staff member is not on the waka.”*

And, most importantly, the benefits for ākonga have had a noticeable impact on their learning as well as their wellbeing. “We’re now seeing those successes in the data coming through...the graph is heading in the right direction, so we are now genuinely excited about analysing our data.”

Maryse says, *“It’s been amazing for some seniors who were struggling. You could be forgiven for thinking it’s just for juniors, but it will solidify and strengthen both. The current pattern should suggest less senior school problems over the next few years.”*

A driving force for the school was closing the gaps for ākonga – Steve and Maryse couldn’t be more proud of the increased confidence and outcomes they see. “We’re not putting kids in a box anymore, but looking at the progress. Because it’s a new thing, everyone is at the same level, so everyone gains together. No more national standards! We look at where they started and where they are going. No more box, just progress!”

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