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Literacy Teaching Practice in Tasmanian Schools: Stakeholder Report

Phase 2 of the Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice
in Government Schools

Prepared for the Department of Education, Tasmania

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Abbreviations

AC: E	Australian Curriculum: English
ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority
ACER	Australian Council for Educational research
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
BEd	Bachelor of Education
DoE	Department of Education (also referred to as the Department)
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ELC	Early Learning Centre
EPR	Education Performance and Review
HASS	Humanities and Social Sciences
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
ICT	Information Communication Technology
LiFT	Learning in Families Together
LiL	Launching into Learning
LBOTE	Language Background Other Than English
MTeach	Master of Teaching
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

PALL	Principals as Literacy Leaders
PAT	Progressive Achievement Test
PIPS	Performance Indicators in Primary Schools
PL	Professional Learning
PLC	Professional Learning Community
PLI	Professional Learning Institute
PLT	Professional Learning Team
SDR	Severe Disability Register
SWST	Single Word Spelling Test

Codes used to indicate data sources

Schools

CS	Combined School
HS	High School
PS	Primary School

Participants

AP	Assistant Principal
AST	Advanced Skills Teacher
CT	Classroom Teacher
TiC	Teacher in Charge
LS	Literacy-specific practitioner (literacy coaches and specialists) ¹
LT	Literacy (support) Teacher
P	Principal
PSY	Psychologist
PV	Parent / Volunteer
SP	Speech Pathologist
TA	Teacher Assistant

Documentation (year may vary)

AR16	Annual Report 2016
OP17	Operational Plan 2017
OP-Lit17	Operational Plan for English /Literacy 2017
Other17	All other types of documentation
SIP17	School Improvement Plan 2017
SP17	Strategic Plan 2017

¹ At the time the Phase 2 research was conducted, the role of 'Literacy Coach' was being introduced into Tasmanian government schools, and the role of 'Literacy Specialist' teacher was being phased out. Therefore, the sample of participants included both categories of 'literacy-specific' [LS] practitioners.

Executive summary

In 2017, the Department of Education in Tasmania commissioned the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment at the University of Tasmania to undertake the Review of Literacy Teaching, Training and Practice in Government Schools. This report presents the research findings for Phase 2 of the Review, considering current literacy teaching practice in Tasmanian schools. The fieldwork was conducted in terms 3 and 4 of 2017 and involved school documentation and interviews with 184 participants from 28 schools.

Part 1: Understandings and Practices

The first part of the report provides insight into understandings of literacy and literacy teaching practices in Tasmanian government schools.

Conceptualising literacy

Literacy has been defined in different and sometimes contradictory ways, and these various definitions shape what teaching and learning practices are adopted. Overall in this research:

- a broad understanding of literacy prevailed, aligned with the definition of literacy in the Australian Curriculum;
- literacy was valued as a foundational capability essential both for successful learning at school and for flourishing in life beyond the school doors; and
- a strong commitment was evident across all schools to ensure students achieve literacy development milestones and leave school prepared for life as literate and productive community members.

Whole school approaches to literacy

A whole school approach to literacy was widely endorsed. In some schools it was developing, and in others already well embedded. The successful implementation of a whole school approach relied on four main strategies:

- consistency in literacy practices and in language usage about literacy;
- efforts to secure teachers' buy-in;
- fostering a shared responsibility for implementation; and
- commitment among the school leadership team to long-term organisational change.

Classroom practice

Key principles for general good pedagogical practice across Years K–10 also underpin good literacy teaching, including gradual release of responsibility; differentiated instruction; explicit teaching with clear learning intentions and success criteria; setting up students for success, and treating errors as opportunities to learn; and prioritising student engagement.

Staff tended to integrate the key elements of literacy set out in the Department's Good Teaching Literacy Guides; that is, oral language (listening and speaking); reading and viewing; writing and creating; spelling; grammar and punctuation; and vocabulary. The emphasis on these elements shifted as students' literacy capabilities developed.

Literacy programs and resources commonly used include the Department of Education Good Teaching Literacy Guides as well as some commercial literacy programs, and the work of well-established literacy experts. Staff recognised some students need additional support for literacy learning and used Individual Education Plans to tailor such support.

Gauging effectiveness

Schools in the study demonstrated overwhelming support for drawing on multiple data sources to gauge the effectiveness of literacy teaching. This included a range of quantitative and qualitative data, based on both formative and summative assessment, and generated from both formal and informal sources. There is widespread use of 'data walls' to display assessment results and track progress.

Formative data were extensively used and highly valued for gauging student progress across the key elements of literacy, including:

- relatively formal assessment tools, such as running records;
- professional judgement, based on careful observation and ongoing monitoring; and
- feedback between teacher and student, student and student, teacher and parent, and teacher and colleagues.

The two primary sources of summative data about students' literacy development were:

- in-school achievement testing to evaluate progress against the Australian Curriculum Standards, such as through PAT and A-E ratings; and
- standardised testing to measure schools' overall results against similar schools and to check for student growth over time, in particular through NAPLAN.

Overall, participants recognised the purposes, benefits, and drawbacks of different types of assessment.

Part 2: Influencing factors

The second part of the report considers factors that participants said influence literacy teaching practices, including insights into enablers of good practice that supports students' literacy achievements in Tasmania.

Leadership

Participants consistently identified strong leadership as a key factor affecting literacy outcomes. Constructive leadership within schools:

- draws on a repertoire of leadership styles and practices, including instructional, strategic, shared, and relationship-oriented styles, to suit different situations;
- reflects the AITSL Professional Standard for Principals; and
- is characterised by stability of the school leadership team and approach.

At executive and business unit levels of the Department of Education across the state, three factors support literacy teaching and learning:

- fostering state-wide consistency among schools, extending the idea of a 'whole school approach' to a 'whole Department approach';
- providing more support for, as well as greater accountability from, school leaders, including in terms of ongoing access to external literacy expertise for all school leaders to implement the state-wide approach; and
- easing the pressures on teachers by providing useful guidance and promoting positive images of the work of teachers and schools in the media and community.

Capacity-building

There was widespread agreement about the importance of professional pre- and in-service learning to improve literacy teaching and learning. Enabling factors include:

- a strong sense of shared responsibility between school-based staff and the University for preparing pre-service teachers as well as possible for their work as graduate teachers;
- increased support for pre-service teachers in relation to both practical knowledge and skills both for general pedagogical skills such as formative assessment strategies and classroom management and to specific knowledge and skills for teaching literacy, especially for teaching reading and oral language;
- ongoing, in-service professional learning tailored to the learning needs of individual staff and to whole school learning;
- internal, school-based professional learning using an inquiry cycle approach and involving professional learning communities (PLCs) and professional learning teams (PLTs);
- one-to-one coaching, mentoring, and collegial observation and peer feedback;
- targeted external workshops and seminars provided by recognised literacy experts; and
- interschool collaboration to learn from each other's experiences.

The prevalence of self-initiated professional learning highlights the commitment many teachers have to proactively seek out opportunities to meet their own learning needs.

Resources

Human resources were identified as the most valuable resource within a school to enhance its capacity to make a significant difference to literacy outcomes, including:

- more staff to release teachers for professional learning, planning, and mentoring, and to reduce student-staff ratios; and more teacher assistants to work across a whole class;
- enhanced access to appropriately qualified staff, including literacy coaches and non-teaching professional support staff—in particular, speech pathologists and psychologists; and
- reducing staff turnover, especially in hard-to-staff schools.

In addition, valuable material resources include high quality reading books for students; information and communication technologies; and physical learning environments conducive to learning.

Family and community

It is widely recognised that various interconnected factors in students' lives beyond the classroom influence their literacy development. Family and community engagement strategies for literacy that are valuable include:

- building positive partnerships with parents by ensuring parent-teacher discussions are genuinely two-way, hosting conversations in a dedicated parent space, and facilitating celebratory events;
- using effective communication, whether through traditional methods such as information sessions or online resources;
- involving family and community members in literacy, such as through home reading and literacy volunteers in class; and
- embracing formal Department of Education initiatives, in particular the Launching into Learning (LiL) and Learning in Families Together (LiFT) programs.

In conclusion

Across all schools, participants were deeply committed to the effort of facilitating young Tasmanians to become literate and fulfilled members of their communities. Emerging from this rich and multilayered picture of current literacy teaching in Tasmanian government schools, is evidence of exemplary practice—both by particular staff and across whole schools. Importantly, there was a strong desire for ongoing learning and improvement, and for collaboration locally with colleagues, families, and communities—and state-wide for a whole-of-department consistent approach to literacy teaching

1. Introduction

This report is part of the Review of Literacy Teaching, Training and Practice in Government Schools conducted by the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment and commissioned by the Department of Education Tasmania (hereafter also referred to as DoE or Department). The research team is supported by a DoE reference group.

Phase 2 of the Review focuses on practices of teaching literacy in schools and is based on empirical research in Tasmanian government schools. The full three-year review also involves two literature review reports and empirical research on pre-service teacher education in relation to literacy at the University of Tasmania.

1.1 Background and context

The Review of Literacy Teaching, Training and Practice in Government Schools forms part of a state-wide agenda to improve engagement, retention, and outcomes for Tasmanian school students. It links directly to the Department's strategic policy goal that 'learners have the skills and confidence in Literacy and Numeracy to successfully participate in learning, life and work' (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2017a).

The brief for Phase 2 of the Review of Practice in Schools was to undertake research into literacy teaching practice in Tasmanian government schools. Specifically, the research investigated:

- views on and understandings of literacy;
- literacy strategies and practices, at both the whole school level and in individual classrooms;
- how school staff assess the effectiveness of their literacy teaching strategies; and
- factors that influence the teaching of literacy in Tasmanian government schools.

Literacy in this review is understood in terms of the broad definitions in the Australian Curriculum. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) defines literacy as 'the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society' (ACARA, no date-c). ACARA further defines literacy as a general capability in these terms:

students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts (ACARA, no date-c).

In addition, the English learning area in the Australian Curriculum (AC:E) is distinguished from literacy as a general capability and 'is built around the three interrelated strands of language, literature and literacy' (ACARA, no date-a).

1.2 The Phase 2 study

1.2.1 Participating schools and personnel

Phase 2 of the review is based on empirical studies conducted in partnership with schools identified by the Department. The 28 schools that agreed to participate represent diverse characteristics, including:

- 21 primary schools; five high schools (with the study focusing only on Years 7–10); two combined schools (that is, K–10);
- 16 schools in the south of the state; six in the north; and six in the northwest;
- 14 schools had over 300 students (of which three had over 500); eight had 201–300 students; and six had fewer than 200 (of which two had under 100);
- 10 schools had a higher proportion of students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander than the average of 10% of enrolments across Tasmanian government schools (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018b); and a further 11 schools had 6–10% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students;
- eight schools had a higher proportion of students of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) than the average of 6% of enrolments across Tasmanian government schools (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018b). including four with more than 16%; seven schools had less than 1% LBOTE enrolments; and
- 19 schools had an ICSEA value¹ lower than the Australian mean of 1,000, and of these, five schools had an ICSEA value under 900. These 19 schools equate to 68% of the project sample, while in Tasmania 73% schools have an ICSEA value below the national mean (Moritz, 2018, personal communication). On the other hand, nine schools were in more socio-educationally advantaged communities, with ICSEA values of 1,000–1,100 (six schools) or over 1,100 (three schools).

The 184 participants were all associated with the 28 schools. Females (84%) outnumbered males (16%), which compares with the gender profile for the Department: 76% and 24% respectively (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2017b).

Of participants who specified the grades or year levels they taught, almost half (43%) taught in K–2, 35% in Years 3–6 and 22% in Years 7–10. Teaching staff in high schools all worked in English and Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS).

The proportion of participants occupying various positions corresponds broadly to their representation in the Department of Education workforce, except somewhat of an over-representation of principals, assistant principals and speech pathologists, as well as under-representation of teacher assistants (Figure 1).

¹ The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale representing the average level of educational advantage of all students in a school. It is based on parents' occupation and level of education completed, in combination with geographical location and proportion of Indigenous students. ICSEA is not a rating of staff, teaching programs or overall student performance in a school. The mean ICSEA value across Australia is 1,000 (ACARA, 2011). Schools with a value below 1,000 have a relatively disadvantaged parent community, and the lower the value the more disadvantaged the overall parent community in that school is.

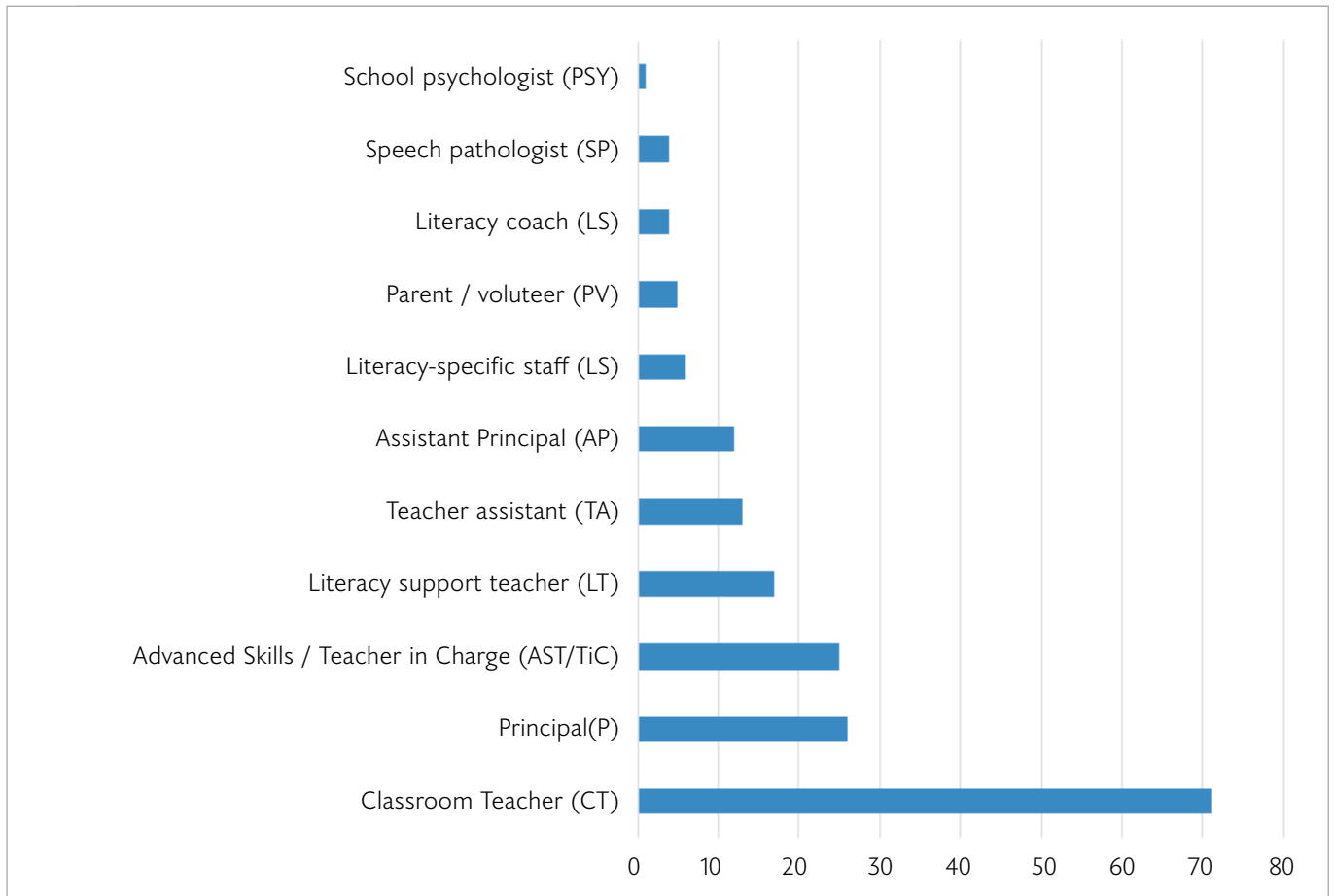


Figure 1. Participant roles (number of participants)

Note that abbreviations here are also used throughout the report when referring to participants.

In addition, while few participants had more than 10 years in their current role, the vast majority (74% or n=110 of those who provided this information) had more than 10 years' experience in teaching in general. Among school leaders, all had six years or more experience in teaching, and 62% (n=29) had 16+ years teaching experience.

1.2.2 Research approach

Qualitative data on which the study is based were drawn from semi-structured interviews with 184 participants as well as school documentation from the 28 participating schools. Documentation included annual reports, strategic plans, improvement plans, and operational and literacy plans as well as teaching resource materials. That documentation was used in interviews to prompt discussion and formed a data source to complement what participants said about literacy teaching practices in their schools.

Five research assistants were employed to assist with data collection, in particular the interviews (see Appendix A), which took place between August and December 2017, once ethics clearances had been secured both from the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Tasmania) Network (H0016589 and H0016615) and the Department of Education Research Committee (File Nos 2017–21

and 2017–23). All interviews were professionally transcribed, and transcripts were sent to participants for respondent validation. Thematic analysis was supported by N-Vivo.²

Mindful of ethical obligations to protect participants' identities, this report uses de-identified codes for participants in order to safeguard their confidentiality. The codes used are listed at the front of the report, as part of the Glossary. Moreover, all participants had the opportunity to check, edit, or withdraw (parts of) the transcript of their interview.

1.3 Structure of the report

The core of this report is presented in two parts:

- Part 1, Understandings and Practices, focuses on participants' understandings of literacy and current instructional approaches to teaching literacy in participating schools; and
- Part 2, Influencing Factors, draws together findings in relation to factors that were perceived to significantly influence literacy outcomes.

² This is a qualitative data analysis computer software package produced by QSR International.

Part 1: Understandings and Practices



2. Conceptualising literacy

Literacy has been defined in many different, sometimes contradictory ways—and these definitions shape the kinds of policies developed and the teaching and learning practices adopted in schools. Therefore, the interviews commenced with asking participants how literacy is understood in their schools. Clarifying understandings of literacy was important in order to support analysis and interpretation of participants' answers to subsequent interview questions.

Participants responded in various ways. Some offered a definition; some spoke about the meaning of literacy in terms of its importance; others reflected on the responsibility of schools in developing literacy. These types of responses are discussed below.

2.1 What is literacy?

All participants provided a response to an initial question asking what is literacy? Just over three quarters (76%) gave responses that reflected a broad scope of literacy. Just under a quarter (24%)—gave responses that indicated more traditional or narrower views which tended to focus on written literacy, often reflecting the NAPLAN literacy domains. The comment by an early years teacher illustrates both:

Well, I guess the automatic response is you think about reading and writing, but it's so much more than that. It's beyond just the knowledge and skills of reading and writing. It's actually allowing the children to make meaning ... and being able to use it in their world [PS-CT].

In general, different responses appeared to relate to participants' professional roles, with school leaders, literacy-specific staff, and classroom teaching staff expressing broader understandings than non-teaching professional support staff.

Four key insights emerged from the analysis of broad-based responses to the question of what literacy is and these align with the definition of literacy provided by ACARA (ACARA, no date-c).

1. Literacy is understood as **multimodal and multifaceted**. These participants highlighted the significance of students being able to draw on a range of linguistic and visual resources to produce and access information, and to make effective choices in consuming and producing text.
2. Literacy is understood as an **all-encompassing cross-curricular capability** that crosses all curriculum areas 'across the whole day's learning' [PS-CT].
3. Literacy involves **using complex sets of skills flexibly and with confidence**. Participants described literacy as gathering and filtering information in ways that were supported by capacities to 'unpack, infer, understand, analyse, and evaluate' [PS-TA].
4. Literacy is **dynamic**, its meaning thus subject to change, evolving to accommodate the changing needs of society and to respond to technological changes.

Literacy enables meaning-making for effective communication both at school and beyond the classroom. As one of the ‘foundation pillars of all learning ... the key for lifelong learning’ [PS-P], literacy is both an education-enabler and a life-enabler.

2.2 What does literacy achieve?

Closely aligned with work defining what literacy is are considerations of its functions. Many participants explained how literacy is understood in their schools in terms of such reflections. In the process, they emphasised the point that literacy enables meaning-making for effective communication both at school and beyond the classroom. This point mirrors the articulation in the Tasmanian Department’s headline goal for developing skills and confidence in literacy, in order to ‘successfully participate in learning, life and work’ (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2017a).

Within schools, many participants regarded literacy as crucial for ‘being able to understand what’s going on in the classroom’ [PS-LT]. They argued literacy is necessary for accessing the whole curriculum: without it ‘other learning just doesn’t happen’ [PS-P].

Beyond schools, being literate was seen as an essential capability to succeed in life. In general terms, participants and their schools focused on students being literate so they can ‘function as a part of the greater world’ [PS-AP] –whether for purely functional purposes such as ‘reading a timetable to go and catch a bus’ [PS-CT], or to ‘access higher level thinking’ [HS-CT].

As one of the ‘foundation pillars of all learning ... the key for lifelong learning’ [PS-P], literacy was seen by participants as both an education-enabler and as a life-enabler.

2.3 The responsibilities of schools for literacy

Conversations about the meanings of literacy often led participants to talk about how they understood schools’ roles and responsibilities in this regard. Many spoke about the process of becoming literate as one starting ‘from when children are born’ [PS-LT] and as occurring outside of the classroom as well as inside.

However, participants were also adamant about the foundational role of schools in “growing” literate citizens able to ‘lead fulfilled and happy lives and ... be productive members of society’ [PS-AST]. Indeed, in ways that parallel Article 26 of the United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, some participants saw literacy as a human right. For many teachers, core to professional identity was the work of ‘preparing children for that lifelong learning and preparing them for adulthood, and the workplace’ [PS-TA].

2.4 Summary

In most schools a broad understanding of literacy prevailed, with participants recognising it as multifaceted, cross-curricular, complex, and dynamic. About a quarter of participants expressed narrower understandings of literacy, focusing principally on reading and writing.

There was a widespread view that literacy is a foundational capability necessary both for learning in school and for functioning successfully in life.

School personnel were committed to fulfilling their responsibilities to ensure that students achieved their literacy development milestones and left school prepared for life as literate and productive community members.

3. Whole school approaches to literacy

Research suggests that high-performing schools have adopted an approach to literacy characterised by minimum variation across classrooms (Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015; Luke, 2017). Most participants were well aware of the importance of a consistent whole school approach to literacy, but their perspectives also highlighted wide variation in the extent to which such an approach was actually in place. Nevertheless, conversations did reveal rich descriptions of whole school practices. In support of that finding, this section explores what a whole school approach to literacy looked like among participating schools and discusses enablers for implementing such an approach.

3.1 What a whole school approach looks like

As a general observation, literacy teaching practices vary at the level of whole schools and across individual classrooms, and that is true of the Tasmanian context too. Tasmania's Literacy and Numeracy Framework 2018 notes several key aspects of a whole school approach (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018d):

- leadership teams lead whole school improvement planning using inquiry cycles;³
- the Good Teaching Literacy and Numeracy Guides form the basis of practice;
- all teachers are responsible for students' growing capacities in literacy and numeracy—in English and mathematics as well as across the curriculum;
- literacy and numeracy are prioritised in school planning; and
- teachers understand and use agreed models and practices to support literacy and numeracy learning.

The first characteristic of a whole school approach is its **focus**. In 75% of schools, participants reported focusing on one aspect of literacy: reading (10/28=36%), spelling (9/28=32%), or writing (2/28=7%, both high schools). Participants in five schools (6/28=21%) named a combined focus on reading and spelling. Those from one high school nominated no specific whole school focus (1/28=4%).

School documents such as annual reports and literacy plans did not always exactly mirror points that staff alluded to during interviews, which may signal different understandings or be due to the time elapsed between the writing of documents and the interviews. In some schools, documents provided specific targets and/or strategies to be adopted; for example, an annual report referred to a goal to 'decrease the percentage of students whose spelling age is six months or more below their chronological age (SWST) from 47% to 40%' [PS AR16].

3 The adoption of the inquiry cycle approach to improvement, evident in many participating schools, is consistent with that advocated by the Department in its 2018–2021 Strategic Plan (Tasmanian Government Department of Education, 2018c). Interestingly, while the Department's Strategic Plan 2018–2021 was released midway through the data collection, the concept and practice of the professional inquiry cycle appeared to be well understood, and indeed on the way to being embedded, in over half of the participating schools.

When asked how specific dimensions of literacy had become the priority, staff referred mainly to NAPLAN results, and occasionally to PIPS data or to 'results in general', all of which suggested area(s) most in need of improvement. Justifying a single focus, a school leader said staff had decided to 'take one thing and try and do it well' [PS-AST].

A whole school focus sometimes changed once data indicated that school results had improved. Commenting on the risks associated with adopting a single focus, a participant highlighted the need to embed practice change before changing focus.

Second, in terms of whole school **structures** for literacy support, by far the most commonly referred to was a scheduled and regular literacy block in the school timetable. Participants in over half the schools visited said that their schools had such a block—if not every day, then several times a week; interestingly, only one of these schools was a secondary school.

In addition, a whole-part-whole workshop structure was in wide use to teach literacy. Many participants identified this structure as core to achieving consistency in their whole school approach for literacy or even across the curriculum.

No matter what area of the curriculum it is, we start off as a whole class or a whole focus group. Then we break into smaller groups ... based on where the students are at in their learning, or [it might] ... just be small group activities, or individual [activities]; and then coming back together as a whole class and sharing our strategies [and] our learning [PS-CT].

A third important element of a whole school approach was the use of **shared resources**. In approximately one quarter of the 28 schools, participants talked about their school-based collections of literacy resources as their literacy folder, file, or handbook. These resources were stored in a centrally accessible location such as a shared drive, but generally teachers had their own hard copies as well.

Three common features emerged in relation to resources: they were highly valued by teaching staff (including induction for new staff), collaboratively developed, and kept current. Indeed, as organic, living documents, they grew and 'changed over time' [PS-P] and were constantly updated to reflect the school's data, new department resources, and research.

Finally, references to **school culture** were frequent in relation to the characteristics of a whole school approach to literacy. In schools where there was a strong whole school approach, the descriptors 'collaborative' and 'collegial' were plentiful, as were allusions to 'teamwork' in which 'everyone is treated equally' [PS-CT]. Where a whole school approach was still gaining traction, the leadership team was generally working hard to 'build in a collaborative culture' [PS-AST]. In addition, stemming from collaboration was a culture of openness and trust that fostered fairness. In schools with a strong whole school approach, teachers were demonstrably 'willing to be open and share their classroom practice' [PS-CT] because there was a 'sense of trust' [PS-P].

3.2 Implementing a whole school approach

Knowing what might constitute a whole school approach and implementing such an approach are related but different challenges. Participants suggested several ways of “making it happen”—ensuring that literacy practices work effectively through a whole school approach.

The first element of implementation participants frequently referred to was **consistency**. Often, they used the word loosely to emphasise the importance of all staff being ‘on the same page’ [PS-CT]. The findings indicate two interwoven strands: consistency in practices and terminology.

Having a whole school focus with everybody [using] a shared common language and consistent practices is the most important thing [PS-P].

Consistent practice was seen by many participants as reflecting a shared understanding of literacy: “It’s just people understanding what literacy should look like—or does look like—in their subject area’ [HS-AST]. Participants referred to consistent use of literacy blocks and the ‘whole-small-whole’ lesson structure mentioned above, and also about consistency in explicit learning intentions and success criteria and in assessment practices to ensure that ‘kids don’t fall through the cracks’ [PS-AP]. Many participants also spoke about the need to clarify ‘non-negotiables’ [CS-AST] so that all staff were aware of expectations regarding consistency.

Consistency was also sought in terms of the language used in relation to literacy teaching. There was a strongly held belief among participants that using the same terminology reflected shared understandings and ‘that if we’re all coming from the same place and using the same terms’ [HS-LS], this consistency would translate into improved outcomes for students.

In several schools, staff were keen to point out that consistency could go hand in hand with flexibility, one noting that ‘it’s around consistency, not conformity, because you’ve got to allow for innovation. Otherwise, you don’t have passionate and motivated teachers’ [PS-P].

Buy-in was a second element needed to implement a whole school approach. Stakeholder engagement was seen as crucial—with the whole school community, and especially with teachers. High on the agenda for school leaders seeking to secure staff buy-in for a whole school approach was ‘shifting the mindset from “this is what I do” to “this is what we do”’ [PS-P]. Participants recognised that, for some teachers, a change to their practice to adopt a whole school approach represented ‘a quantum leap’ [HS-P], and in such contexts school leaders acknowledged the need to provide support for change and to proceed with patience.

In addition, securing buy-in was seen as best achieved by actively facilitating “bottom-up” change that was teacher-driven, because ‘you can’t just walk in and tell people that’s what they should do’ [PS-LT].

A third element, **shared responsibility**, was deemed important when implementing a whole school approach. As one principal describes it: ‘Everybody in the school owns the success of our students, so that collective responsibility is really built-in to our whole school approach and we have high expectations about that’ [PS-P].

The importance of collective responsibility resonates with the understanding of literacy as a cross-curricular concept and is illustrated in the following quotes:

“Everybody in the school owns the success of our students, so that collective responsibility is really built-in to our whole school approach and we have high expectations about that”.

[PS-P]

Because it's a whole school responsibility, I suppose it's basically every single subject area's responsibility to teach language ... that's the gateway to one's engagement or understanding of subject matter [HS-CT].

In some high schools, participants observed that the catchphrase 'literacy is everybody's business' [HS-LS] had accrued more weight with the adoption of a whole school approach to literacy. Although many of the high school staff in this research were from the learning area of English, the data include indications of literacy approaches used across Australian Curriculum learning areas, for example in relation to 'writing-to-learn' and the use of 'word walls' for building vocabulary.

Organisational change was recognised as a fourth important element for implementing a whole school approach. Many participants said that implementation was a slow, complex, and ongoing process of incremental organisational change in which optimism is key. The findings suggest that in approximately one third of participating schools a whole school approach was 'in development' [PS-LT]. Many participants used the metaphor of 'being on a journey' and felt their school was 'only just a few steps in' [CS-LS]. This foundation-building was sometimes referred to as a phase of 'raising awareness' [HS-AP] or a stage for 'planning and gathering data' [PS-LT] to implement a whole school approach.

Participants' observations also suggest that once a critical mass of staff members had tipped the balance in favour of change, the school community tended to move into a phase of consolidating for sustainability. Importantly, even in those schools where a whole school approach was well on the way to being 'second nature' [PS-P], the leadership team was aware of the need to continually revisit and review practice, often using an inquiry cycle approach (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018d).

We're refining and as staff are turning over, we're finding a need to revisit regularly around what our tight practices are here so that they are consistent from each class moving through [CS-AST].

3.3 Summary

In most participating schools, a whole school *approach* translated into a whole school *focus* on one domain of literacy, most commonly reading or spelling. This focus was generally the area deemed most in need of improvement following analysis of school literacy data.

In terms of whole school structures, the timetabled literacy block was common, and, within that, the whole-part-whole lesson structure was often in evidence. A shared literacy folder often supported the whole school approach. The schools in which such an approach seemed well-established were characterised by collaborative and collegial cultures in which there were high levels of openness and trust among staff.

The findings indicate that the successful implementation of a whole school approach relied on four main strategies:

- consistency in literacy practices and in language use;
- securing teachers' buy-in;
- shared responsibility for implementation; and
- organisational change to ensure sustainability.

4. Classroom practice

Literacy teaching at the level of the classroom was more holistic and integrated than might be expected given the dominance of a single whole school focus in most schools. There was considerable diversity in practice between schools. Where a whole school approach was emergent, this diversity was apparent between classrooms within schools as well.

Literacy teaching depends on effective teaching and classroom practices. The 2014 'Good Teaching' guide for literacy by the Department of Education in Tasmania⁴ outlines that effective literacy teachers:

1. Create a classroom culture that nurtures literacy motivation by integrating choice, collaboration, and relevance into literacy tasks.
2. Provide students with opportunities to engage purposefully with texts across a wide range of literary, informative and persuasive genres, including close reading and multiple revisiting of quality texts.
3. Provide students with scaffolded reading instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension strategies to support the development of deep understanding.
4. Provide students with scaffolded writing instruction in text organisation, sentence structure, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation along with the processes of text composing and crafting.
5. Provide opportunities for rich talk and discussion that encourages participation from all learners.
6. Integrate reading, viewing and composing written and multimodal texts to support learning.
7. Teach literacy within and across all learning areas for authentic purposes.
8. Use assessment processes that reflect the complex and dynamic nature of literacy.
9. Promote literacy independence by providing time for self-selected reading and writing.
10. Integrate technologies that link and expand concepts and modes of communication (Department of Education, Tasmania & Derewianka, 2015, p.9).

4.1 Sound pedagogy

In many interviews with participants across all year levels, a common through-line was that evidence-based good teaching practice underpins effective literacy teaching. For one principal, the key question is 'not just how do you teach literacy, but how do you teach effectively?' [PS-P].

The first aspect of general sound pedagogy that most participants were strongly committed to is the **gradual release of responsibility** model. This model involves moving from initial high levels of teacher control to increasing levels of student control over learning activities (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2013).

⁴ In March 2019, the Department released the 2019–2022 Literacy Plan for Action. This was in part informed by the Good Teaching guides and supplements rather than replaces those.

It's the whole 'I do, we do, you do' thing, so it's a gradual release. Teachers are doing that a lot better now because it's an expectation that we have it as a sort of instructional model, that's how you frame up your lessons and it's making a big difference' [PS-P].

Second, **differentiated instructional approaches** are known to be highly effective.

Participants as well as school documents often referred to the zone of proximal development. The whole-small-whole lesson structure was a common way of enacting differentiated instruction. Several participants suggested that differentiated instruction applies both at the whole class level and to individual students.

We're aiming the curriculum at just the right level. It needs to be challenging enough that they've got to push, but not so hard that they give up. ... That's a skill of teaching, really, isn't it? All kids are different, and if you can make sure you're hitting that mark for each child ... that's the challenge [PS-P].

Many participants also emphasised the importance of knowing each of their students in order to differentiate effectively 'because the thing is kids don't fit into boxes neatly' [PS-CT]. For many teachers, a corollary to the Department's "learners first" maxim was the need for adaptability. One literacy coach said that 'there's an inherent danger in being reliant on one way of doing anything because we don't have children that are all thinking one way' [PS-LS].

As a third point, participants highly valued the notion of **explicit teaching**, especially for literacy and "clear learning intentions and success criteria" had become something of a mantra. Staff also connected explicit teaching with metacognitive strategies, which have a strong influence on facilitating learning (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016; Hattie, 2009). As a literacy teacher argued:

Teaching and learning [are] more effective when the intention and the criteria are clear, and students know what they're focusing on and why what they're doing is valuable [PS-LT].

Many participants thought that having **high expectations** of students is crucial to effective teaching because 'no kid's going to want to come to school if there is no element of success' [PS-CT]. Allied to this assertion, some teachers said the classroom should be 'a free-to-fail environment' [PS-AST] in which students feel confident to 'have a go ... and not be scared to make mistakes, because that's how we learn' [PS-CT].

Finally, a connecting thread running throughout all the discussion about good teaching practice was the importance of **student engagement** by maximising student interest. As one teacher observed, 'you've got to make it fun and interesting and engaging for kids. That's half the secret' [PS-CT]. Another said, 'without interest, there's nothing, so use that student interest to really motivate them' [PS-CT].

Various ways in which these generic good pedagogies are used specifically in relation to literacy are illustrated throughout sections 4.2 (K–2 classrooms), 4.3 (3–6 classrooms) and 4.4 (7–10 classrooms), with attention to the key elements of literacy as set out in the Guides: oral language (listening and speaking); reading and viewing; writing and creating; spelling, grammar and punctuation; and vocabulary. While these elements are discussed separately in this section, many teachers were clearly adept at weaving these together in integrated ways. One K–2 teacher observed that 'if you do all of them together really well ... they work together. You need to have all of it for it to work' [PS-CT].

4.2 Literacy teaching in Years K–2 classrooms

All participants from K–2 classrooms were aware of the crucial importance of these early years of schooling in laying the foundations for children’s literacy development in ways that mirror the Department’s Guides (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2015, 2016a).

4.2.1 Oral language

Helping children develop oral language was seen as a priority by most early years teachers interviewed for this study. A focus on listening, speaking, and interacting with others was dominant. Some participants spoke of a need to work on ‘pre-literacy skills’ [PS-AST] in which music, rhyme, and song figured prominently. Strategies included accompanying singing with body movement to enhance letter-sound associations, and developing the skills of conversation, including in very young children, by ‘trying to expand their sentences’ [PS-CT].

4.2.2 Reading and viewing

At a general level, some schools referred to the **Big Six** of oral language, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, phonological awareness, and phonics—especially for Years K–2. Used principally in relation to learning to read, the Big Six recognises the crucial role of oral language, which was not included in the original ‘Fabulous Five’ (Konza, 2014).

Early years teachers generally had an explicit focus on developing an awareness of sounds and understanding the relationship between sounds and letters. There was also an emphasis on recognising common words and learning to read for comprehension (Department of Education, Tasmania & Derewianka, 2015).

Certainly, the teaching of **phonics and phonemic awareness** was evident in early years classrooms, one participant describing these as ‘your cornerstone of reading’ [CS-AST]. In addition, while participants acknowledged alphabet knowledge as fundamental to learning how to read, some were cautious because ‘knowing the alphabet song, for example, doesn’t necessarily teach you about sounds’ [PS-CT]. Many teachers favoured the use of flashcards and repetition to teach the alphabet and high frequency sight words such as the “Magic 100 Words”.

For many participants, teaching young children meant teaching **reading strategies**. One popular approach to teaching decoding skills was to associate animals with specific sounding-out strategies to match graphemes to phonemes, such as Listening Lion, Chunky Monkey, Eagle Eye, and Stretchy the Snake. In addition, many participants spoke about the importance of teaching comprehension strategies, encouraging children to make their thinking visible to ensure that they were not simply ‘barking at the print’ [PS-LT]. Examples include the teacher modelling the use of “think-alouds” and encouraging students to visualise by ‘creating a picture in their head of what we’re reading’ [PS-CT].

Guided reading was commonly used among early years teachers to get students to practise reading strategies. A teacher explained that guided reading was useful for ‘maximising the reading time in my classroom’ and, on that basis, ‘we do it every single day’ [PS-CT]. Some participants said it was important that guided reading sessions have specific foci and were not about ‘sitting there hearing the children

read in a round-robin' [PS-CT]. The "Daily Five" framework and "CAFE system" (Boushey & Moser, 2014) were widely used as approaches to guided reading.

Using this approach, the CAFE menu, in tandem with the Daily Five in my classroom has enabled me to perhaps quadruple the amount of time I get to spend with students helping them learning to read [PS-LT].

4.2.3 Writing and creating

The first aspect of writing many participants emphasised for the early years was **handwriting**. At a fundamental level, handwriting is about how children use their bodies. A K–2 teacher referred to children 'with low muscle tone' who needed help to sit 'up at a desk properly, [since] those sorts of things are a really important foundation for writing' [PS-CT]. The need to explicitly teach the mechanics of writing to young children was emphasised by many staff working in the early years, including literacy support teachers. Participants in five schools also spoke about the importance of developing keyboarding skills, which was recently included in ACARA's (2017) Literacy Learning Progression as part of learning the mechanics of writing.

For many participants, the need to **explicitly teach text structure** and organisation was a second aspect high on the Years K–2 literacy agenda. Reflecting a pedagogical approach that harnesses fun in learning, some teachers used inventive graphic organisers to provide scaffolding for structuring writing and to enhance student learning (see Fisher et al., 2016). An example is the "hamburger model" for writing, which:

allows children to break down each text type, but with a visual picture of how it sits in their brain using a picture of a hamburger. They know that, for example, whatever text type they're actually writing, the top and the bottom bun, so the orientation and the conclusion, need to link. Then all of their little bits and pieces like the lettuce, the cheese, the tomato, are paragraphs [PS-CT].

Beyond mechanics and structures, in terms of the content of writing, participants were keen to give students in the early years opportunities to **write for meaning-making**, following their own interests. For children who struggle with ideas for writing, modelling was a key initial step. As one teacher noted:

I will model writing about the exact story we've read. Then I will take it away and say "your turn now. It's your turn to have a go". At other times, I will provide them with something to write—writing prompts [PS-CT].

Helping children shift to independent writing was often achieved in small group collaborative writing exercises in early years classrooms. Moreover, a valuable point made by some participants was that there was need to foster confidence and creativity in writing at this early stage of literacy development, so that children are 'willing to have a go' [PS-CT].

4.2.4 Spelling, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary

Spelling is tightly integrated with the other elements of literacy. The two main approaches to teaching spelling in Years K–2 classrooms were learning spelling strategies and learning lists of words. Some teachers combined these approaches

to create their own spelling programs. Spelling strategies are intended to build spelling knowledge and:

- focus on the sounds in words (phonological knowledge);
- consider the look of words (orthographic knowledge);
- think about meanings of words (morphological knowledge);
- make connections with other words; and
- make use of other resources to check words.

Word lists for spelling were often used in combination with quick quizzes and tended to be personalised for each student.

Few participants spoke about explicitly teaching **grammar** in Years K–2 classrooms. Those who did referred to using an inquiry-based approach to teaching grammar and ‘looking at the participants and circumstances and [organising the parts of speech] under those labels, rather than nouns and verbs and adjectives’ [PS-CT]. One prep teacher described a kinaesthetic approach that she had found engaging for learning about punctuation, for example: ‘For an exclamation mark, we’d hold our hands up and go “ah!”. For the question mark, we’d put our hands to our chins and go “hmm?”’.

In terms of **vocabulary-building** in the early years in the context of reading and spelling, some participants made the point that the curriculum affords plentiful opportunities to introduce young learners to new words in ways that are relevant to the topic they are learning about. This is an example of the way in which literacy was a clear and specific learning area in K–2 classrooms and was addressed in other learning areas across the curriculum.

4.3 Literacy teaching in Years 3–6 classrooms

Turning to the middle and upper primary school years, the research findings show that literacy tends to be taught in an integrated, cross-curricular way. As one AST said ‘you can’t teach reading without teaching the writing component because they don’t work in isolation’ [PS-AST]. Importantly, participants characterised literacy teaching in the primary years as a process of developing increasing independence in students, encouraging them to take ownership of their learning.

4.3.1 Oral language

Although participants talked relatively less about oral language in Years 3–6 classrooms than in Years K–2 classrooms, learning to speak clearly and confidently was emphasised. This involved both ‘talking among themselves, sharing their ideas’ [PS-CT] and more formal oral presentations. Teachers paid attention not only to speaking but also to listening: ‘We actually went through what a respectful listener looks like, sounds like, feels like’ [PS-CT].

Across all year levels, staff tended to integrate the key elements of literacy set out in the Department’s Good Teaching Literacy Guides and ACARA definition of literacy. The emphasis on various elements shifted as students’ literacy capabilities developed.

4.3.2 Reading and viewing

In terms of reading skills, teachers in Years 3–6 classrooms reinforced and built on the reading strategies introduced in the early years. Moreover, the focus is very much on reading for comprehension and reading-to-learn. As one teacher argued: ‘They can all read—or they should be able to by now—so there has to be a learning activity attached to reading’ [PS-CT]. To assist this, teachers referred to teaching strategies such as visualising, predicting, summarising, and making connections.

Guided reading took several forms in middle and upper primary classrooms and was influenced by whether there was a whole school approach and shaped by teacher preferences and the invariably diverse range of reading levels in each class. Nevertheless, there was a general pattern in guided reading: moving from teacher-directed to student-led practice, which reflects use of the gradual release of responsibility pedagogical model. Reader’s Workshop, incorporating the Reader’s Notebook was widely used to structure guided reading. Teachers saw this as facilitating differentiation and encouraging students in their growth towards independent reading. One suggested that it has a ‘huge impact on students’ engagement with reading: their ability to read more difficult texts as they go along, and interpret and understand, and be able to discuss their ideas about what they’ve read’ [CS-AP].

An approach that gives students more responsibility for their own and their peers’ learning than guided learning is the **literature circle**:

In literature circles, [students] all read the same book, but then they all have a different role. So, one of the kids is the discussion director ... Another one of the roles is a connector ... a vocabulary enricher ... a summariser. They all get a turn in the different roles, which is building their skills. They have to prepare [for] the role and the next day they come back and have a discussion that is led by whoever’s the discussion director that week [PS-CT].

In most participating primary schools, staff had also established some form of **home reading** program, usually stipulating a minimum amount of time per week for that reading and incorporating reward systems for students on reaching certain targets. While the value of students reading at home as well as at school was undisputed, participants reported varying degrees of success with home reading programs.

4.3.3 Writing and creating

Perhaps not surprisingly, **NAPLAN** was a significant influence on writing and creating in Years 3–6 classrooms since children are tested through NAPLAN in Years 3 and 5 (ACARA, 2016, 2018). There was a strong emphasis on teaching both narrative and persuasive genres of writing and understanding the different purposes and audiences for various text types.

Nevertheless, teachers said they tried to avoid the test entirely dictating how they teach writing to middle and upper primary students. For example, one teacher described how they ‘mix that up with some poetry and some other short pieces of writing’ [PS-CT]. Importantly, teachers discussed how **writing genres** are ‘cross-curricular and linked’ [PS-CT] and therefore they wove various genres of writing throughout science and other subjects.

As with the teaching of reading, the teaching of writing tended to unfold according to the gradual release of responsibility. Teachers used **modelling and scaffolding**

because they recognised students still needed ‘heaps and heaps of guidance, about how to structure, how to plan their writing’ [PS-CT]. Like its companion the Reader’s Workshop, the Writer’s Workshop and Writer’s Notebook model was widely used in middle and upper primary classrooms. Recognising the importance of student engagement and enjoyment in learning, participants also stressed the importance of including an element of fun into teaching writing, for example: ‘There’s a poetry slam coming up so that will be cool’ [PS-CT].

4.3.4 Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary

For some participants, **spelling** was a central element of literacy teaching and integrated throughout the curriculum for Years 3–6. In general, the two approaches to spelling that were dominant in Years K–2 classrooms continued in Years 3–6 classrooms: spelling strategies and lists of words. Some teachers used traditional approaches such as “look, say, cover, write, check”, single-word spelling tests, and spelling journals. Some teachers drew on the work of Christine Topfer (2010, 2014, 2015), which they saw as empowering student to “work out” how to spell unfamiliar words, or on work by Misty Adoniou (2016) incorporating etymology as a strategy for teaching spelling.

Many staff tried to enhance student engagement with the tasks involved in learning spelling. As one participant put it, ‘spelling is the most boring thing in the world’ [PS-CT] and therefore, as another teacher said, it was vital to ‘make spelling fun and to develop a love of words for kids’ [PS-CT]. To that end, quizzes and games were popular. Similarly, for teaching grammar and punctuation in Years 3–6 classrooms, some teachers stressed the importance of ‘making things hands-on and a bit fun as well’ [PS-CT].

Overall, the findings demonstrate that there is considerable diversity in teaching **grammar and punctuation** in middle and upper primary school classrooms in Tasmania, and some confusion about whether a “traditional” or “functional” grammar approach is more appropriate. To support struggling students, several participants saw a need to revisit ‘traditional basic grammar rules’ [PS-CT] and one specific strategy was to model good examples, giving students ‘a brilliant sentence, a “mentor sentence”, and getting them to pull it apart’ [PS-AST].

Few participants mentioned explicitly teaching **vocabulary**, but for some teachers expanding children’s vocabulary was key to literacy development. Many teachers emphasised the close connection between vocabulary and spelling and noted the affordances of the curriculum to maximise this connection. Participant teachers used ‘authentic texts that have rich vocab’ [PS-LS], the “Vocab Cycle” workshop model developed by Lukas Van Vyve⁵ and integration with other learning areas: ‘if we were looking at democracy or government, for example, a lot of our vocabulary and spelling would come from those topics’ [PS-CT].

4.4 Literacy teaching in Years 7–10 classrooms

Participants employed in secondary schools represent a small portion of the overall research sample. For this reason, caution is needed in generalising findings about literacy teaching in Years 7–10 classrooms across Tasmania. Despite diversity in

⁵ <https://thepolyglotlife.com/all-our-workshops/>

practice, even in this relatively small sample, a few common themes stand out. At a general level, like staff in Years K–2 and Years 3–6 settings, several participants from Years 7–10 classrooms spoke about the importance of teaching in ways that integrate the elements of literacy. As one AST in literacy notes:

Kids can't read the question if they don't understand the vocab. It's the same with writing. You can't expect kids to improve their writing if they can't use more complex words to express themselves. There is that interconnected link with things [HS-AST].

4.4.1 Oral language

Overall, in the five high schools and two district schools in this study, it seemed that oracy was not a priority in the context of literacy teaching. One literacy support teacher referred to doing 'lots of discussions before we write because that's really important' [HS-LS]. In another school, staff from the English learning area discussed oral language in some detail in relation to developing **public speaking** skills using activities such as oral presentations, debates, and poetry competitions. One particularly enthusiastic English/HASS teacher at that school talked about the importance of 'giving students a choice to talk passionately about something which they find important' [HS-CT].

4.4.2 Reading and viewing

Silent reading was used in several Years 7–10 settings, for 'reading for enjoyment' and 'to broaden their vocabulary' [HS-TiC] but also for non-literacy purposes as 'a behaviour management strategy' [HS-P] and as a 'calmative care tool' [HS-CT]. For differentiation, staff mentioned the use of Reader's Workshop and Notebook, 'tiered texts' [HS-CT], and enabling students to make their own choices rather than the teacher deciding on a set book. In relation to the latter, the Department's Guide for Literacy 7–10 notes that the choice of text should match the nature of the reading activity and students ought not to exclude 'books beyond their current reading level or outside their usual choice of texts' (Department of Education, Tasmania & Derewianka, 2016b, p.43). Reading for comprehension and developing students' critical thinking skills were also highlighted.

While relatively few participants explicitly referred to helping develop visual literacy among their Years 7–10 students, there were some exceptions. Visual texts were used to engage students who might otherwise be disengaged in discussions and also in relation to 'persuasive techniques' [HS-TiC]. Another Teacher in Charge of English highlighted strategies for bringing viewing and writing together:

Getting them to jot down some brief notes while they're viewing teaches them about note taking, how to do dot points, how to really quickly extract just the key points from anything that you're viewing [HS-TiC].

4.4.3 Writing and creating

Participants spoke more about writing in Years 7–10 classrooms than they did about the other elements of literacy, reflecting a traditional bias towards writing in secondary English classes. Writing was often integrated with reading or with visual literacy. **Modelling** was a common strategy, such as a 'think-aloud' strategy 'talking

about the word choices that you're making, your sentence structure and all that sort of stuff, as you're doing it' (HS-AP) and 'examples from novels that I'll read with them so that I can show them that, for example, where an author uses sharp, simple sentences, it speeds up the pace' [HS-TiC].

Many participants spoke about the importance of providing **scaffolds to support** for students' writing, especially for teaching about different genres and text types. The Writer's Workshop model, popular in Years 3–6 classrooms, was also used in some of the secondary schools as a way of teaching how to structure writing and model specific aspects of writing. Participants who used the Writer's Workshop model also saw it as a way of building students' confidence in their own writing abilities, including editing and proofreading.

One high school was implementing the **Writing-To-Learn** approach, developed by William Zinsser (1988) to encourage reluctant writers. Using low-stakes writing activities, many teachers saw this approach as non-threatening to students who might be especially self-conscious about their writing. The literacy-specific teacher explained:

It might be just to stop-to-write about what you already know about this topic. It might be a writing break in the middle of a lesson, where you're just jotting down thoughts about something that's already happening ... It's not high stakes assessments, it's not graded. It used as formative assessment by teachers [HS-LS].

Noteworthy was the fact that the Writing-To-Learn strategies were being introduced across all learning areas in this school and teachers in all subjects were encouraged to use a range of graphic organisers to assist students with their thinking and writing.

4.4.4 Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary

Spelling was spoken about relatively infrequently in the context of literacy in Years 7–10 classrooms. When it was discussed, a pattern of approaches broadly similar to those in earlier years of schooling was apparent. A literacy-specific staff member at one school argued 'spelling is not something you can kind of do in splendid isolation' [HS-LS]. Another school used a contextual approach:

There's that correlation between the curriculum and their spelling words. It's not just a random word ... So, we'll do a word one week, and then the next couple of lessons that word appears in something we're reading or watching or talking about. So, trying to help students make those connections [HS-CT].

Adapting this whole-school approach, an English teacher at the same school used a spelling list 'based on errors in their own work' [HS-CT].

Within the small sample there was no discernibly consistent approach to the teaching of **grammar and punctuation** in Years 7–10 classrooms. This finding is partly due to the traditional autonomy of high school teachers in their own classroom: 'it does lie in the lap of the teacher, to a certain extent' [HS-TiC]. Specific strategies for teaching grammar mentioned by participants include:

- 'effective sentence writing, effective paragraph construction, punctuation, the less common sorts of punctuation' [HS-TiC];

- ‘identifying whole class weaknesses, doing mini-lessons on it, and then doing maybe a little quiz’ [HS-CT];
- ‘using texts that we study, whether it’s from a novel, or story, or a play’ [HS-TiC]; and
- ‘the apostrophe challenge ... [where students had to] take a photo on their iPhone of a misplaced apostrophe ... observing stuff around them in town in everyday life’ [HS-CT].

The contextual approach to teaching grammar, as well as spelling, was favoured by many of the Years 7–10 teachers in this research. One English/HASS teacher summed up a prevalent sentiment: ‘I think you can incorporate grammar into learning without having to walk into a class with a grammar sheet’ [HS-CT].

Most participants recognised the importance of expanding students’ **vocabulary** repertoire in the secondary school years. Strategies include displaying new words on ‘word walls’ in classrooms and game-like activities. In relation to literacy across the curriculum, one AST emphasised that in many subjects there are technical terms that students need to understand in order to progress in their learning.

4.5 Literacy programs and resources in use

Specific resources were often referred to in passing in discussions of classroom practices in Years K–2, 3–6, and 7–10. Few schools used only one resource and instead combined them in ways that suited their students. As one teacher explained: ‘programs don’t teach, teachers teach’ and for this reason the school decided to take ‘parts of what works from different programs ... we’re not going to adopt it wholly and solely, but we have to also do what works for our school and our kids’ [PS-AST].

The **Department of Education Good Teaching Literacy Guides** for Years K–2, 3–6, and 7–10 were widely referenced in school documentation and by participants in 22 participating schools (Department of Education, Tasmania & Derewianka, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Nevertheless, these resources were used more actively in some schools than in others.

The documentation from one primary school and one high school stood out for drawing extensively on the Good Teaching Literacy Guides and ACARA resources rather than on commercial tools or specific literacy experts. Staff in those schools explicitly linked their own literacy framework and strategies to key messages (and even to specific pages) in the relevant Good Teaching Literacy Guide [HS OP-Lit and PS OP-Lit16]. That approach made it easy for teachers to align their work to the advice in the Guides.

Some teachers said that they used the Good Teaching Guides ‘when we’re planning’ [PS-CT] or ‘as a foundation’ [PS-CT] and one viewed it as ‘the only real practical resource I can think of off the top of my head’ [HS-CT]. Others had ‘not found them that useful’ [PS-CT] or thought that in busy school environments the Guides were at times forgotten:

I very much like them, but it is the same as a lot of the publications that come to us. When they first come, they’re great and we use them for a while and then someone reminds you and you get back to them again. That’s the

nature of teaching. You have to be reminded of things again, as part of your professional development [HS-TiC].

Apart from the guides, a wide and sometimes overwhelming range of programs and tools are available to schools to support literacy teaching. Figure 2 shows the **commercial literacy programs** in use in participating schools as mentioned either by participants or in school documentation.

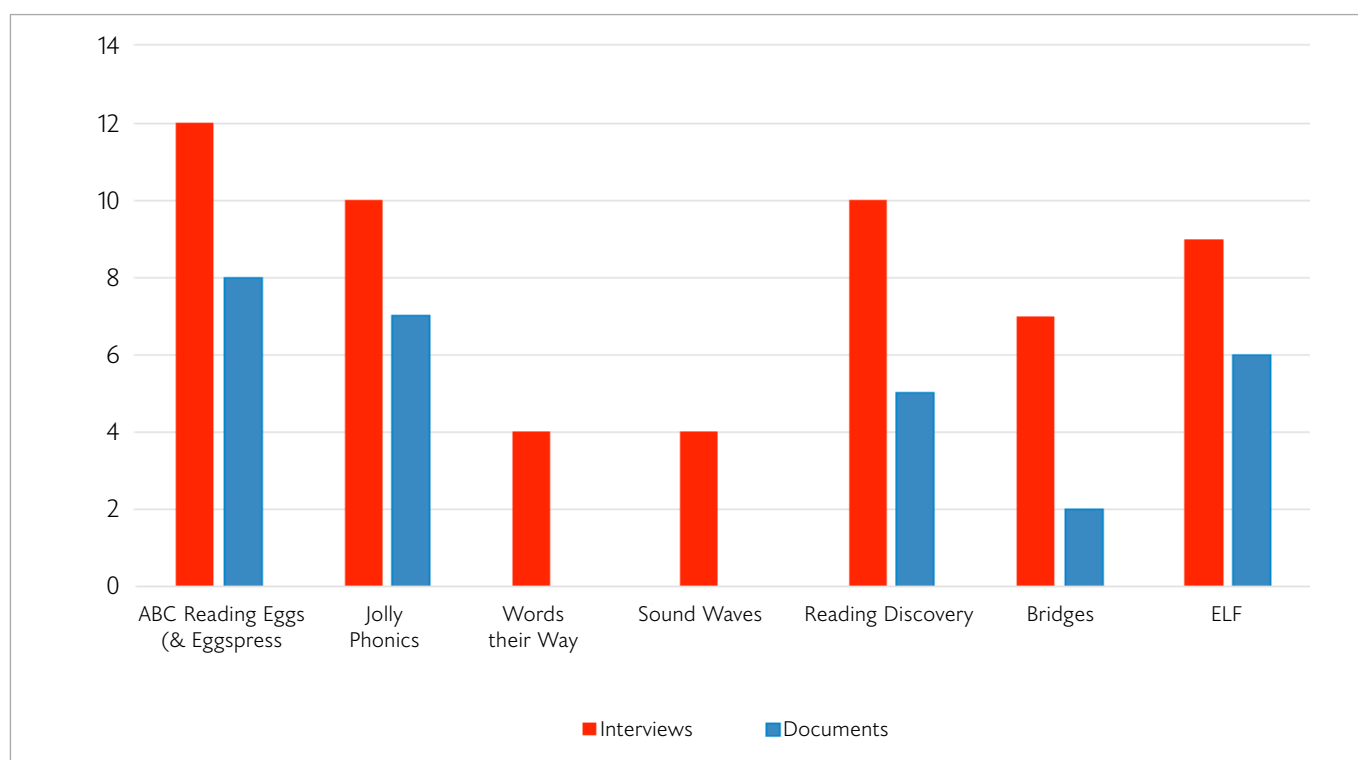


Figure 2. Commercial literacy programs mentioned in interviews and documents (N)

In addition to using commercially packaged literacy teaching programs, most participants drew on the work of well-established literacy experts and scholars, and that was also reflected in a number of schools' documentation (Figure 3).

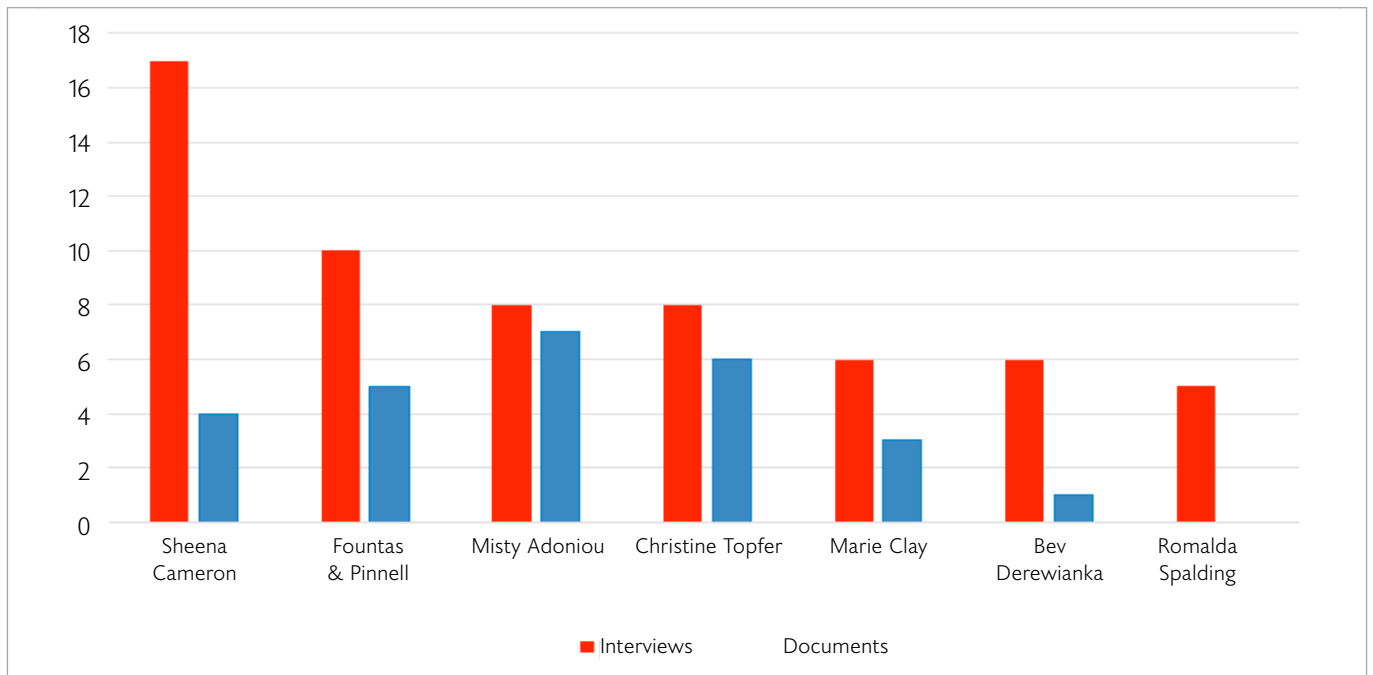


Figure 3. Literacy experts mentioned in interviews and documents (N)

In terms of impact, it may be argued that it is the work, approach, or tool that matters, rather than the person named. Nevertheless, findings show *both* that experts' names were used as a shorthand to a given approach *and* that sometimes the person herself was valued, often because school staff had interacted directly with her as part of professional learning.

There are two exceptions to this general rule. While relatively fewer participants and documents mentioned Marie Clay and Beverly Derewianka in person, the vast majority of schools made use of, respectively, running records (developed initially by Clay) and (as noted above) the Department's Good Teaching Guides for literacy K–2, 3–6 and 7–10 (of which Derewianka was the principal author).

4.6 Targeted interventions

All the interviewed teachers spoke about how they differentiated their literacy teaching to cater to the wide range of abilities that typically exists among students in their classrooms, some of whom required additional and/or different support (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2014a). This last part of the section on classroom practice reports on what participants said about how they identified these students and the types of targeted interventions and support provided to specific cohorts.

4.6.1 Identifying students needing extra literacy support

In general, students needing extra or differentiated literacy support were identified using early diagnostic assessments (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018a), including the Kindergarten Development Check (KDC), as well as continued regular testing, re-testing, and tracking in running records (Clay, 2001) throughout their years of schooling.

Formal investigations were often triggered when keen observation by classroom teachers—coupled with peer discussion and conversations with parents—identified students needing additional support for literacy. School staff are cognisant of the fact that ‘working together to improve student achievement is the responsibility of the whole school community’ (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2013, p.25). Apart from parents, classroom staff worked closely with speech pathologists and school psychologists.

The role of literacy support teachers in early identification was paramount in terms of ‘finding those children who are slipping through the cracks’ [PS-LT] and for intervening early because, ‘if you don’t get a kid by the time they reach the end of prep, then it’s really hard for them to catch up’ [PS-LT]. To such ends, many literacy support teachers in the research were involved in administering ‘obsurveys—a variety of early assessments—when the children come out of kinder and go into prep’ [PS-LT]. The ‘observation survey’, developed first in 1993 by Marie Clay (2016) provides a systematic way to capture early reading and writing behaviours.

4.6.2 Specific groups

Participants spoke about several groups of students needing or benefitting from extra literacy support. Such identification requires a delicate balance between two imperatives to target scarce resources to children who most need extra support and to minimise unintended consequences such as stigmatisation of these students (Te Riele, 2015). The research findings suggest that two schools of thought on this matter generate two different types of practices in Tasmanian government schools: withdrawing students who require additional assistance *versus* keeping them in-class. There is significant divergence of opinion across participating schools about which practice is most apt, a finding that reflects the complexity of the broader debates in policy and scholarship about the relative merits of inclusion and separate provision for students with special needs (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2014a). Generic strategies used include differentiation for all students; allocating specialist support; Individual Education Plans (IEPs); and targeted Teacher Assistant (TA) support.

Interviews and documentation highlighted eight specific groups needing extra support, namely students:

1. who struggle with literacy without having any specific diagnosis or demographic characteristic;
2. who have a learning disability;
3. who are assessed and identified as requiring additional and severe disability support;
4. who are affected by trauma or mental illness;
5. who have English as an Additional Language;
6. who are boys;
7. who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
8. who are identified as gifted and/or talented.

For the first group of **struggling students** several literacy programs were used as remedial intervention in the schools in this research. The most common ones were: Reading Recovery, Bridges and Early Literacy Foundation (ELF). In many of the

Differentiated instructional approaches were widely used to cater for the diversity of students in any classroom, ‘because the thing is kids don’t fit into boxes neatly’ [PS-CT]. This extended to specific interventions for individuals and groups identified as needing extra literacy support.

participating schools, teacher assistants (TAs) held a specific role of working with students who were struggling as well as those with specific **learning disabilities**: the two groups most commonly referred to in interviews and documentation. Many of the latter had Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Unsurprisingly given the focus of this research on literacy, dyslexia was a specific learning disability mentioned by several participants. A TA explained: 'I also have a couple of children who have dyslexia and we're working on their IEP programs' [PS-TA].

Many participants also reported having students in their classes who were included on what was at that time the **Severe Disability Register (SDR)**.⁶ The Department of Education arranged additional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder or with intellectual, physical, or psychiatric disability; health impairment; multiple disability; or vision or hearing impairment (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2016b). Most often, literacy support teachers and/or teacher assistants were assigned to work with students on the SDR. These staff members reinforced the importance of the foundational differentiation strategy of "knowing your students well". One literacy support teacher explained: 'I help put supports in place for them to learn and function within the classroom setting. Then I liaise with family and the teacher aides and the teachers and the students' [PS-LT].

Many participants spoke about increasing numbers of children and young people with backgrounds of **trauma and neglect**, which often manifest in mental health and/or behavioural issues at school. Teachers in particular talked about even very young children displaying signs of trauma and anxiety. One described having a 'student in my class who ... is a humanitarian refugee [with] severe trauma and learning is just the last thing that is on his radar at the moment' [PS-CT]. Staff appreciated access to specialist staff, funding, and departmental guidance and support (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2016b), but some also noted that waiting lists for school psychologists were long with most being 'run off their feet with referrals' [CS-CT].

In some schools, students with **English as an Additional Language (EAL)** were named as a group requiring additional support. Mostly, these were migrant or refugee students whose parents hold working or humanitarian entrant visas. Staff in schools with high levels of refugee intake spoke about being 'on a real learning curve having that many refugee students in the school' [PS-AST]. Participants recognised the benefits of the EAL program, which provides intensive English language support, but also understood that upon finishing the program these students usually need ongoing literacy support. Some participants emphasised the importance of focusing, at least initially, on oral language development with EAL students: 'the vocab and the oral language are probably two areas that we've kind of gone "ooh, this makes a real difference for these kids"' [PS-AST].

Many participants referred to **boys** in general as a group disengaged with literacy in school. There was a strong sense that many boys consider reading 'uncool' [HS-TiC]. Targeted interventions were relatively scarce, but two examples were 'ordering some new, more up-to-date texts suitable for particularly disengaged boys' [HS-TiC] and using 'various games' because 'the boys were very competitive' [PS-LT].

⁶ From 2020 onwards, the Department will use a new Educational Adjustments funding model, based on the National Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD). See: <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/supporting-student-need/educational-adjustments/>

In only three schools did participants and/or documentation specifically mention **Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students** in the context of targeted literacy interventions. In one primary school, staff access Aboriginal Support Services to assist with attendance [PS-OP17]. In another, staff are working to incorporate Aboriginal culture, creating 'opportunities for students to engage with Aboriginal, business, and community organisations' [PS-AR16]. However, in seven schools Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made up more than 10% of the student population. In their analysis of Tasmanian NAPLAN results between 2008-2016, Stone, Walter, and Peacock (2017) demonstrate that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students' educational attainment continues to be low relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Finally, some participants spoke about the need to extend students identified as **gifted or talented**. The Tasmanian Government Department of Education⁷ defines gifted and talented students as those with both abilities and performance in the top 10% of students of like age in one or more of intellectual, physical, creative, or social skills. Some schools aimed to increase the proportion of students achieving A ratings or reaching the high benchmark on NAPLAN. Strategies for differentiation and extension include access to sufficiently challenging texts and extending students' writing through programs such as Writer's Workshop, Writing to Learn, or The Write Road.

4.7 Summary

Examining current literacy teaching in classrooms across a range of Tasmanian government schools revealed there was substantial diversity in practice as well as certain common themes. Several key principles emerged in this context:

- gradual release of responsibility;
- differentiated instruction;
- explicit teaching and clear learning intentions and success criteria;
- setting up for success and treating errors as opportunities to learn; and
- prioritising student engagement.

In reporting the findings on classroom practice, this section drew on the structure set out in the Department's Good Teaching Literacy Guides and used the lens of the key elements of literacy: oral language (listening and speaking); reading and viewing; writing and creating; spelling; grammar and punctuation; and vocabulary. In practice, many teachers integrate these elements in their teaching. Unsurprisingly, the development of oral language and learning to read were priorities in many K-2 classrooms, shifting to reading-to-learn and (increasingly sophisticated) approaches to writing and creating in 3-6 and 7-10 classrooms. Several literacy programs and resources were in use in classrooms across all levels of schooling. Finally, there were varied approaches to targeted interventions for specific groups of students.

Having described the range of practices that were commonly used in the 28 schools leads into the next section, which examines how staff were gauging the effectiveness of their literacy teaching practices, both at the level of the classroom and the whole school.

⁷ <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/parents-carers/parent-fact-sheets/gifted-students/>

5. Gauging effectiveness

This last section of Part 1 presents findings based on the question to participants about how they gauged the effectiveness of their literacy teaching practices. Policy in the Tasmanian Government Department of Education stipulates that principals consult with staff and establish transparent processes in support of regular formative and summative feedback to students and parents that are appropriate, also, for system level reporting against the Australian Curriculum (Department of Education, Tasmania. Educational Performance Services, 2015).

The Department's strategic plan also explicitly incorporates an inquiry cycle approach (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018c). Iterative inquiry cycles are useful in relation to what Gummer and Mandinach (2015) term three interacting domains -'data use for teaching, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge' (n.p.). For participants, knowing whether they were 'making a difference' meant both collecting data and also analysing and understanding it. Many literacy-specific teachers viewed this task as a crucial aspect of their role. Participants typically referred to student assessment data 'because it's factual' [PS-P] and because 'people tend to go straight to student data when they're trying to justify if something's working' [HS-AP].

5.1 Quantitative data

The widespread use of '**data walls**' in staff rooms in participating schools is evidence of the extent to which data collection and analysis have become embedded in 21st century school culture. This practice is supported by the Department's Good Teaching Guide on data literacy (Department of Education Tasmania, 2016).

Documentation from seven schools in the research explicitly referred to the 'faces on the data' method (Sharratt & Fullan 2012), in order to 'identify intervention approaches and differentiation which will see selected students improve testing scores' [CS OP-Lit15] and to 'be at the forefront of planning sessions highlighting progress for all students' [PS AR16].

In participating schools, data walls tended to show NAPLAN percentiles and PAT (Progressive Achievement Test) results as well as A-E ratings and/or benchmarking results (PS AR16). Frequently the walls were referred to as valuable visualisation tools, enabling staff to see trends across the cohort of 'students as a whole' [PS-LT]. Participants reported that having a data wall had 'made a massive difference [because] you need to see the results to know what you're doing is working' [PS-CT]. One participant described the data wall as a way of ensuring that 'nobody falls under the radar' [PS-CT]. These findings are corroborated by the Department's work on data literacy (Department of Education Tasmania, 2016).

Despite the widespread use of standardised, quantitative tests, participants raised two specific **concerns** that reflect broader debates about how to establish the effectiveness of educational strategies.

1. Difficulty of establishing causality (see Bertrand & Marsh, 2015). One school leader noted it is 'a bit tricky gauging effectiveness because how do you know what's responsible for the improvement?' and suggested that it is impossible to 'tease out the impact of one individual literacy practice or strategy' [PS-P].

2. Over-emphasis on standardised quantitative measures (see Johnson, 2017; Mayes & Howell, 2017). Several participants expressed caution about quantitative assessment tools: 'tests are not the be-all-and-end-all because kids have bad days, as we all do' [HS-CT]; and 'I don't think that shows how the whole school approach is going' [PS-CT].

Importantly, staff were not opposed to using such tests but rather saw them as useful but not sufficient to gauge whether their teaching approaches are working.

I would hate to think we'd got to the time where it was just data, just numbers, that count as evidence of success ... There's all of the other data that we collect as teachers. Now, some of that's really hard to record and so it's hard to provide evidence for and that's the problem. It is hard to measure [PS-LS].

In practice, staff in participating schools used a wide range of data to gauge effectiveness of teaching and student progress. Rather than distinguishing quantitative and qualitative data, the remainder of this section considers how participants spoke about their use of formative and summative assessment strategies. DuFour and Reason (2016, p. 135) distinguish these as follows:

A summative assessment gives the student the opportunity to prove what he or she has learned by a certain deadline and results in a dichotomy—pass or fail, proficient or not proficient. A formative assessment gives the student the opportunity to improve on his or her learning because it informs both the teacher and the student as to the appropriate next steps in the learning process.

While this distinction makes clear the purpose of these two types of assessment, in responding to the question about how they gauge the effectiveness of their literacy teaching, there was some slippage in participants' use of these terms—in part because some tasks may serve both purposes.

5.2 Formative assessment

Stiggins (2005, p.326) provides a succinct description of formative assessment as 'the label used for assessments conducted during learning to promote, not merely judge or grade, student success'. Black and Wiliam's (1998) seminal work 'Inside the Black Box' found that improving formative assessment raises standards. They assert four steps to effectively implement formative assessment practices: learn from development; disseminate findings; reduce obstacles to formative assessment; and value and engage in research.

Formative data are highly valued in Tasmanian government schools and, on balance, participants spoke more about formative assessment practices than they did about summative assessment. The Department's resource on formative assessment (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2014b, p.11) points out that proficient teachers:

- make judgements about stages of student learning using pre-assessment strategies and ongoing assessment tasks;
- identify both correct understandings and misconceptions on the part of students;
- use evidence about student learning to adjust instruction to meet student needs more effectively; and
- anticipate what kinds of learning are likely to help students improve their understanding, knowledge, and skills.

Formative assessment was generally considered central to practice because 'assessment is for teaching. It is the starting point for learning and the beginning of change' [HS OP-Lit]. Regarded as 'the cornerstone of assessment' [PS-CT] and a 'mark of good quality teaching' [PS-AST], formative data enabled educators to 'really engage with students' work and [think about] where to go next with it, rather than just leaving a grade on it' [HS-P].

Three types of formative gauging strategies were evident and are discussed below: relatively formal assessment tools to test for progress, staff professional judgement, and gaining feedback. They were often used concurrently to track student progress; to gauge the effectiveness of teaching approaches; and to inform lesson planning.

5.2.1 Assessing progress

Some tools were used across various literacy domains. In particular, across several schools participants mentioned the use of Guttman charts (Stouffer et al., 1950) to help teachers identify each student's zone of proximal development. In addition, participants frequently mentioned tools and measures that were used for specific aspects of literacy.

To assess progress in **reading**, schools used the following tools:

- The online ACER Performance Achievement Testing (PAT) (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018). Although PAT can be seen as a summative test, in many schools, teachers used this as part of formative assessment. PAT was the most widely named tool across both primary and secondary schools.
- PM benchmarking was also widely used to assess and grade the reading comprehension of early years and primary students, and even 'up to grade 7, grade 8 in some cases' [CS-AST].
- Running records (Clay, 2001) were also very common, with one teacher describing this as 'the front door which opens up to all the other rooms' [PS-AP]. Many teachers stressed the importance of doing the running records on an ongoing basis 'so you can map out where your teaching practice needs to go to help each child improve' [PS-LT] and to ensure that students were always 'working at their level' [PS-AST].
- The ACER Probe 2 structured interview assessment tool (Australian Council for Educational Research 2011⁸), was used in some schools to gauge the reading comprehension of upper primary and lower secondary school students. One participant suggested 'there's a lot more detail that goes into the questioning. It extends ... comprehension ... so that we can ask what specifically do they need to work on' [PS-AST].

The most commonly used tests to assess **spelling and word knowledge** in primary schools were the:

- Single Word Spelling Test [SWST: <https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/products/single-word-spelling-test-swst/>];
- Astronaut Invented Spelling Test, a phonological awareness program and assessment for specific intervention [<https://shop.acer.edu.au/astronaut-invented-spelling-test-2-aist-2/>]; and
- the Oxford Word List [OWL: <https://www.oxfordowl.com.au/welcome>].

8 <https://www.acer.org/probe2>

The results of such measures provide insights in student progress and were used to shape the teaching of letters and sounds to children in the early years and inform the content and structure of differentiated lessons.

Formal formative assessment of **writing** included the following:

- Writing-to-Learn strategies, which gauged both writing development and general comprehension of lesson content.
- Portfolios of student work samples: 'the evidence is in their portfolio task, the evidence is there, day to day and I can just see it in their written work' [PS-CT]. Teachers also used these portfolios to ascertain the effect of their feedback to students: 'see here where she's had her first go, then I've given her some little feedback and suggested a couple of things, and she's added that in and she's gone back and produced something a little bit better, so that's progress' [PS-P].

5.2.2 Professional judgement

While formal assessments generated substantial diagnostic and formative data, the findings indicate that teachers tend to supplement this with many less formal, but equally rich, sources of data drawn from their day-to-day experience in the classroom (Bruniges, 2007; Wyatt-Smith, 2005). Two specific components of teacher professional judgement that staff discussed are observing student engagement and monitoring of learning.

A secondary school staff member suggested **observing** students' confidence and willingness 'to have a go' as important indicators, acknowledging that 'I'm not sure we can necessarily always capture that in a formalised testing situation' [HS-LS]. Many educators agreed and attributed their knowledge of students to careful observation of their engagement. A teacher explained 'I gauge effectiveness by the way the students are engaged in their learning. If they're engaged in their learning, then I figure that must be working [PS-CT]. A parent/volunteer agreed: 'You can tell if it's working just by the enthusiasm and the confidence of the child, if they're prepared to have a go at it' [PS-PV].

Participants also used various in-class **monitoring** strategies to check for understanding and learning such as 'tiny tests and worksheets' [PS-TA]. Many teachers stressed that 'watching and listening' [PS-CT] were integral to monitoring children's progress in literacy and use of literacy strategies. Many said that they could 'just see the progress happening' [PS-CT] and others stressed that ongoing monitoring was what many teachers do almost instinctively and was 'just intuitive' [HS-CT]. Such intuition is only possible when teachers have a deep knowledge both of the subject matter and of their own students.

With time and experience, teachers benefit from a virtuous loop of accessing information to get to know their students well and this knowledge in turn enabling them to notice more and respond accordingly (Roche, 2015).

5.2.3 Feedback

The third component of formative assessment in relation to literacy teaching that many participants spoke about was the importance of a 'feedback culture' [PS-P]. Staff typically framed their comments on this matter in terms of conversations between teachers and students, as well as between students and sometimes in

In addition to using formal diagnostic tools, many teachers stressed that 'watching and listening' [PS-CT] were integral to monitoring children's progress in literacy. Staff also highlighted the value of a 'feedback culture' [PS-P]: welcoming feedback from colleagues, parents, and – most importantly – from students themselves.

terms of teacher/parent dialogue. Also noted in this context was feedback to teachers from colleagues.

Many participants spoke about the value of actively **engaging students in dialogue** to gauge the effectiveness of their literacy teaching: 'One of the greatest formative assessment strategies you can ever have is a daily or a regular conversation between a teacher and student' [HS-P].

Receiving feedback from students, as well as providing feedback to them, was held in high regard as a way of gauging teaching effectiveness and student learning. Participants referred to the value of 'doing a lot more work with student voice' [PS-AST]. One example was 'I just do that quick thumbs-up, thumbs-down partway through a lesson, or at the end of the lesson' [HS-TiC].

Moreover, many schools referred to the use of 'Bump it Up' walls to 'motivate literacy learning, student achievement and promote feedback among students' [PS OP-Lit17]. While data walls are usually in the staff room to maintain confidentiality (see 5.1), Bump it Up walls are in the classroom for use by and with children (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2015, 2016a).

Involving students in giving **peer feedback** was common in many classrooms and seen as key to creating a climate of collaborative learning. One principal described such practices as follows: 'in upper Primary ... they do group feedback so that each student brings a piece of writing, and they sit around a table, and the presenter shares their piece of writing. And then the students give feedback based on ... the success criteria'. Another approach was to mark written work as a class, setting a non-threatening tone about marking, while at the same time giving the teacher valuable insights into individual students' progress.

Some teachers spoke about their **interaction** with parents as another source of formative assessment data, particularly with respect to students who may have difficulties with their literacy. This engagement could be initiated by teachers who say they 'interact a lot with parents' [PS-LT] or by 'parents coming to see you personally about things that are going on in the classroom [and] whether their child's learning needs are being met' [PS-AP]. Many participants valued the 'parent voice' alongside the 'student voice' in assessing success. Teacher/parent partnerships are discussed in more detail in section 9.

Participants also spoke about the value of feedback from **colleagues**. Such engagement generally took the form of collegial conversations and feedback from other teachers, literacy-specific staff, and members of the leadership team. A more structured form of collegial feedback is the practice of 'learning walks'—called 'walk-throughs' in some schools (Lemons & Helsing, 2009). This feedback entailed senior staff or fellow colleagues walking into classrooms and talking with random samples of students to gauge their learning. In one school this process was systematic:

We have embarked on a 3-week cycle of senior staff 'walk-throughs' and reflective conversations. Teachers were released for 90-minute sessions to undertake the reflective conversations [PS AR16].

The approach enables school leaders to see at first hand 'what the students are doing and why they're doing it, and how they know when they're doing it right' [PS-P]. While this practice had an element of teachers being 'very accountable' [PS-CT] overall the practice was intended to be non-judgmental and 'very relaxed'

[PS-CT], normalising that 'all of the classes are very visible and open' [HS-P]. This open classroom environment was most evident in the schools where there was an embedded whole school approach to literacy.

5.3 Summative assessment

Summative assessment focuses on reporting on learning achievements at particular points in time, drawing 'inference about an individual's or a group's current level of attainment against established standards using evidence of student learning' (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2014b, p.23).

All participants clearly recognised the importance of collecting summative data, but there seemed to be greater emphasis on this method of assessment in some schools than in others. For some participants, especially in secondary schools, summative data were the ultimate gauge of literacy teaching effectiveness. For one school leader:

the only thing that matters in this place is if you can measure student growth at the individual level, and if you can measure cohort growth using annual achievement testing ... We've got to measure outputs. Results matter; that's all that matters [HS-P].

A high school teacher explained that 'usually we gauge effectiveness just from student results from summative testing ... If the students aren't getting the results, then what you did didn't work' [HS-CT]. Equating summative data with quantifiable results, some participants were passionately 'show-me-the-numbers people' [HS-P] who put a lot of store in statistical testing.

Participants in this study used two primary sources of summative data about students' literacy development. These were in-school achievement testing to evaluate progress against the Australian Curriculum Standards, and standardised testing to measure schools' overall results against similar schools.

5.3.1 Achievement testing

As part of the Australian Curriculum, teachers award A– E ratings across all learning areas, and in Tasmanian government schools these are recorded in the Student Assessment and Reporting Information System (SARIS). Masters (2013) argues that reporting should provide both real time feedback on what students 'know, understand and can do' at any given time (p. 13); and a sense of progress between two periods of time. The latter can be tricky with A–E ratings because they are relative, as follows:

- A performing well above the standard expected
- B performing above the standard expected
- C performing at the standard expected
- D approaching the standard expected
- E performing below the standard expected.

Unsurprisingly, several participants suggested that ‘the A to E ratings on SARIS will be a measure of how we’re doing’ [PS-AP]. Most participants agreed that ‘the achievement standards are a really good guideline about what your students should be able to do by the end of the year’ [PS-CT], and that learning intentions and success criteria need to be linked to the standards on assessment rubrics. However, as a way to gauge the effectiveness of literacy teaching, most participants also agreed that the A–E scoring system was a blunt instrument that fails to capture incremental student growth: ‘the A to E system, I think a lot of us find that it’s very broad, and it’s quite difficult often to show kids their progress because they might have gone from here to here, but it’s still a C’ [HS-CT].

There seemed to be some variation among participating schools as to how A–E grading was used. Documentation from many schools referred to the use of moderation in relation to A–E ratings together with other schools (also see the section on interschool collaboration under 7.3.2) as well as within a school. Reflecting a desire among several schools to ensure that data and summative assessment results were reliable, this annual report noted its intention for ‘Scrutiny of in school moderation as the A–E ratings still do not consistently reflect NAPLAN scores’ [HS AR16].

As a supplement to A–E ratings, most participants used PAT results not only for formative assessment (see section 5.2) but also as summative data to measure students’ proficiency in specific literacy skills (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018). In addition, one school used the TORCH–3 ACER test of reading comprehension (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2013) to test students at the end of Years 6 to 10 to ‘determine whether they actually have made any significant progress’ [HS-TiC]. They then compared these data to PAT reading comprehension data.

5.3.2 Standardised testing

By far the most frequently noted form of standardised test in relation to literacy was NAPLAN, advocated at times as a diagnostic (formative) tool to support teaching (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2013). However, NAPLAN has taken on a more summative purpose partly attributable to the time lag between test and result, and the provision of student results to parents and the publication of school results on the MySchool website.

Participants overwhelmingly recognised NAPLAN as high stakes testing. For some, NAPLAN results were the litmus test of overall school performance: ‘How do I know we’ve been successful? Well, we get pretty good NAPLAN results’ [PS-CT]. Several schools were described by staff as ‘fully NAPLAN driven’ [PS-P], using their NAPLAN results to gauge the effectiveness of their literacy programs:

- at a school level: ‘We look at our NAPLAN results to ascertain whether certain programs are useful. For example, our literacy program is running beautifully, so that’s become quite evident now in our NAPLAN results’ [PS-AST]; and
- at the level of individual teachers: ‘In the years that I’ve been here, our grade 3s came from being on the bottom of the rung to moving up significantly ... So, I know I did make a difference because the results were in the NAPLAN data’ [PS-CT].

For one teacher, the value in NAPLAN lay in the view it provides beyond one's own school to achievement across the country:

I think NAPLAN's a really good test because it's a national test. It shows you where your children are pegging compared to the rest of Australia when you're working in a little backwater, in a place like this, right? It gives parents that feedback and it gives us a chance to backward map what's happening. [CS-CT].

A common view was that 'data collection needs to be much broader than simply NAPLAN' [HS-P] because:

- NAPLAN 'is every two years and there are too many variables around it' [HS-LS].
- NAPLAN results mean 'you don't actually know what the kid's brain process is to get to their answer. You [just] know if they've got it right or wrong' [PS-CT].
- 'Children don't always work best under test situations; they can get very anxious and just bomb out' [PS-CT].
- NAPLAN may be pitched too low: 'when I'm teaching my kids essay writing, I don't use the NAPLAN essay writing strategy or the NAPLAN rubric because that's too simple for what I want my kids writing. I want them to write better than that' [PS-AST].

Overall, for many participants NAPLAN has become an established aspect of summative assessment that is useful as 'one part of the bigger picture' [PS-AST] of gauging the effectiveness of literacy teaching practices, but not the only part.

5.4 Summary

Most schools in the study were engaged in a substantial, ongoing schedule of literacy assessment, collecting a diverse range of quantitative and qualitative as well as formative and summative assessment data, generated from more and less formal sources. The growing use of 'data walls' in schools exemplifies a marked trend to collect, record, analyse and use data to inform practice.

The findings suggest that formative data are highly valued by school leaders and teachers, and participants spoke volubly about its importance at key points throughout the school year as they seek to gauge student progress across the key elements of literacy. Educators' own professional judgements, careful and close observations of students' engagement levels, and day-to-day monitoring of student progress are of incalculable value in gauging teaching effectiveness. Giving and receiving feedback were paramount in this context. Participants spoke about the value of conversations between teachers and students, among students, and with parents, colleagues and senior staff.

While participants generally spoke less about summative data in interviews than they did about formative data, they recognised the importance of achievement testing against the ACARA standards and the role of standardised testing. Some participants were passionate about quantifiable data, others were less enthusiastic. There was overwhelmingly support for drawing on multiple data sources to gauge the effectiveness of literacy teaching in schools.

Part 2: Influencing Factors



6. Leadership

Participants consistently identified strong leadership as a key factor affecting literacy outcomes. However, leadership is a contested term with no universally agreed definition or accepted meaning, and there is now a burgeoning literature on the range of leadership styles used in educational settings (Bush, 2007; Dimmock & Walker, 2002; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2017). Leithwood et al. (2008, pp. 27–8) posit the existence of what they call seven strong claims about educational leadership:

1. School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.
2. Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
3. The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices—not the practices themselves—demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.
4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.
5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.
6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.
7. A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.

In relation to leadership specifically in the context of literacy teaching, participants generally spoke about leadership at the school level as well as about leadership from (business units in) the Tasmanian Department of Education and, more broadly, the Tasmanian Government. These are discussed under the headings of internal school leadership and departmental leadership below.

6.1 Internal school leadership

Participants left no doubt about the importance of strong school leadership to achieve improved literacy outcomes for students, declaring both that ‘having really great leaders is crucial’ [PS-CT] and that ‘nothing happens unless you’ve got a principal who’s actually supporting and leading the process’ [PS-CT].

A key thread running through the leadership narratives was the importance of stability. Conversely, frequent changes in school leadership were seen to impede a school’s progress in lifting literacy outcomes for students.

We’ve had quite a bit of change. The most recent long-term principal we had was very big on literacy but when she left, and some other teachers that she worked closely with also left, it just fell apart a bit. That stability in leadership is really important [PS-AST].

To understand better what participants meant by strong leadership, we grouped their comments into coherent groups of characteristics. On this basis, we identified four styles of leadership: instructional; strategic; shared; and relationship-oriented.

These types of school-level leadership emerged from the data and at times were named as such by participants. They also reflect scholarly discussion of educational leadership (see Anderson & Sun, 2015) and largely align with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Australian Professional Standard for Principals (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2015).

Although each of these four styles of school leadership is discussed separately below, importantly they often form a repertoire of leadership practices used by a leader to suit different situations.

6.1.1 Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is an important construct in its own right, a subset of educational leadership more broadly, and seen as significant for improvements in student achievement (Brandon, Hollweck, Donlevy, & Whalen, 2018; Farwell, 2016; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017). In this research, instructional leaders were described as focusing on improving the quality of teaching and reducing variability between and across classrooms. The annual report from one school described this as follows:

Leadership team works with teaching staff to facilitate learning, draw on collective skills and knowledge to further improve student outcomes—targeting individuals and groups, applying resources where **required** and ensuring whole of school approach is known and followed for consistency' [PS AR16].

Instructional leadership entailed 'working alongside people' [PS-P], providing support to teachers, so that they could 'feel more empowered about what they're doing in their classrooms' [PS-AP]. Instructional leaders were directly involved in (literacy) teaching in their schools. One literacy-specific teacher noted:

Our principal is a really good instructional leader so she knows and understands what senior staff are trying to do, and she can go into a classroom and know for herself what is and isn't working [PS-LS].

Mentoring and coaching are integral to the role of instructional leadership (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Houchens, Stewart, & Jennings, 2017). Leaders described their mentoring role in terms of 'opening [people's] eyes to different ways of doing things' [PS-AST] and 'trying to get a balance between pushing our teams outside of their comfort zones a little bit and also making sure that they're safe, and happy as well' [CS-AST]. For literacy, unsurprisingly, the literacy-specific teachers and coaches played a particularly important role as leaders who can 'share good practice across the school and ... go in and model and they can watch me' [CS-LS].

6.1.2 Strategic leadership

Participants tended to use the phrase 'strategic leadership' in reference to school leaders who had clear visions for their schools and were able to motivate staff to share those visions—essential for implementing a whole school approach. In this sense, strategic leadership aligns with what is sometimes called 'transformational leadership' (Davies, 2005).

Emerging from the business sector, this type of leadership incorporates a style of management focused on implementing organisational change and requires an 'understanding of change processes and change theory' [HS-AP]. A school review noted that 'teachers spoke of a highly supportive, skilled and knowledgeable

leadership team who keep them focussed and draw them back to the School Improvement Plan' [PS Other17]. Participants praised leaders for having 'a very strong vision' [HS-TiC]; having the 'big picture in mind' [PS-LT]; and applying a 'strategic lens' [HS-AP]. One principal said:

As a leader, you've got to sift through what's really important and then make sure when you do implement it, that you do that preplanning and support the staff [PS-P].

As part of prioritising actions related to literacy, such leadership also entails 'being strategic with the allocation of resources' [HS-AP], including 'delivering the time that's needed' [PS-CT] for staff to collaborate and plan together, which is a hallmark of a whole school approach. In return, these leaders typically communicated clear expectations to staff regarding what was required of them. One principal explained accountability in terms of a collective responsibility to support literacy: 'I often say "Make sure your planning is handy. If you're not at school, we need to be able to look at it"' [PS-P].

6.1.3 Shared leadership

Shared leadership, also known as 'distributed leadership' (see Silcox, Boyd, & MacNeill, 2015) signals a move away from a top-down approach, expanding the number of people involved in making important decisions and engaging the group in implementing change. Rather than focus on characteristics of individual leaders, those adopting this style foreground a more participative arrangement in which power is 'not vested solely in one person' [PS-P]. In one school:

Our principal has always said that the principal is not the leadership. They are the final go-to person, if you've gone through all the other channels, then obviously they're at the top, but the actual leadership should be shared [PS-AST].

This staff member described a democratic and collegial system for allocating tasks: 'at the start of the year, we all sit down and say "Okay, who wants to take this on?" It's at the point now that people will put up their hand' [PS-AST]. As a classroom teacher pointed out: 'we all, sometimes, have more experience in some things than [senior] people, we're all experts in something' [PS-CT].

Some school documentation referred to 'dispersed leadership' (PS AR15) and opportunities for staff to join 'a voluntary and professional team of highly skilled teachers who take an active leadership role beyond the classroom' [PS Other17].

In schools where a whole school approach to literacy was in place, principals, assistant principals, ASTs, and literacy coaches all played significant, complementary, and mutually supportive leadership roles. Aligning with a culture of learning together (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2013), leaders used the metaphor of travelling together: 'as I've gone into my leadership journey, it's been about collaboration ... someone to walk and talk with' [CS-P], emphasising that 'I'm learning alongside you, and we're learning together' [PS-P].

Such shared leadership also served a practical function in many schools, reducing the school's dependency on a single key person. As one principal underscored: 'We have to delegate, because you can't do everything for everyone' [PS-P].

Stable, consistent and supportive leadership both within schools and state-wide across the Department is a key enabler of literacy teaching and learning.

6.1.4 Relationship-oriented leadership

Relationship-oriented leadership centres on people and is often contrasted to 'task-oriented leadership' (Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002). While one does not automatically preclude the other, and one is not always more effective than the other, participants tended to speak more favourably about people-oriented leaders than about those who were more task-oriented. For example, one participant described how:

our principal is extremely engaged and involved with the whole school community. Our cleaners and everyone who's on staff, who's on site, understands the importance of those positive relationships, and I think that really enables more successful teaching all through the school [PS-AST].

A staff member new to a school enthused that: 'I feel totally supported by this team, and I feel really valued and I love what they're trying to achieve with literacy, and I love being a part of that' [PS-LS]. Relationship-oriented leaders tended to be positive and encouraging, good listeners, and attentive to people's emotional needs. Importantly, these leaders directed their relation-orientation both to students and to their colleagues: 'listening to the teachers' voice, as well as the students' voice' [PS-P]. They build trust, so that 'if any leader in the school was to come in and ask "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?" I think I'd feel confident answering that because there's that trust' [PS-CT]. Such trust is both an outcome of relationship-oriented leadership and a form of social and spiritual capital at leaders' disposal (Harris, Caldwell, & Longmuir, 2013).

6.2 Departmental leadership

School-based staff are, of course, part of the Department of Education. However, in the research interviews staff referred to 'departmental leadership' to indicate executive level policy makers and staff in central business units such as Curriculum Services and Learning Services. Many participants expressed the view that 'more leadership' was needed from those parts of the Department. While this may sound like a request for increased 'quantity', often participants indicated that—just as for internal leadership—stability was key, both in terms of who is leading and in terms of giving new initiatives sufficient time to succeed.

Raising the Bar is a good example. Raising the Bar is a really sound strategy. But it's had a large turnover in leadership, and in fact, for a period of time, it's had no leadership. When it did have leadership, it was making really good gains and it was early days, but it was going to have an impact. Remember, the bigger the wheel, the longer it takes to turn, and so that larger strategy will take seven years or more to really get in place, but you'll see pockets of practice improving, and the way it was led initially was sensational [HS-P].

The findings highlight three areas of departmental leadership relevant to literacy and about which there was general agreement: the need to promote state-wide consistency in literacy teaching practice; to provide more support and accountability for schools in implementing a state-wide approach to literacy; and to ease the increasing pressures on teachers. These three aspects are discussed below.

6.2.1 State-wide consistency

There was widespread consensus that teachers need time to embed practice change and schools need time to build sustainability. Teachers reported experiencing a sense of ‘going around in circles, wondering what the next big thing in literacy is going to be’ [PS-LT]. The desire for **stability and consistency** was articulated clearly by this AST:

The Department needs to give a really clear message around what they value in literacy and then not change it ... have time to actually embed what we’re saying we’re valuing rather than moving on to something else ... The Good Teaching Guides are fantastic. They’re really good resources. Now we just need to make sure that the Department doesn’t change tack ... We just need consistency [PS-AST].

Many participants were in favour of a ‘unified approach that’s going to bring everybody along’ [PS-PB] to ensure ‘consistency across the state in literacy practice’ [PS-TA]. A common theme was the idea of extending the ‘whole school approach’ to a **‘whole department approach’**:

The research says that whole school approaches are the most beneficial, right? So there has to be something about a whole Department approach as well, because if whole school approaches create better outcomes, then surely whole Department approaches create better outcomes as well [PS-P].

At the most extreme end of the call for consistency it was suggested that the Department should ‘bring back more non-negotiables that need to be taught across the grade levels in every school’ [PS-CT]. Advocates of that position were calling for a much more prescriptive leadership approach from the Department, suggesting that schools need to be accountable to the Good Teaching Guides ‘because if they’re saying this is best practice, then it should be that all schools are using them to do their teaching’ [PS-AST].

I think it’s now time for our Department to say “this is the best way to do it” ... There are proven techniques out there ... It’s about implementation. It’s about leadership from the top. To say from our centre, from our curriculum centre, to say “this is the best way to do it. Here’s the program you need to use. These programs work for these particular kids. This works for the general cohort. Get into it”. And just invest in it heavily [HS-P].

However, opinions differed about the right balance of tight and loose practices. In contrast to the principal referred to above, another participant suggested that consistency was more like ‘having a company policy—we all tie in to the company’s policy, but we’ve still got our own individual ways of working’ [PS-CT]. In this respect, participants acknowledged the challenge of finding the pivot point between ‘system-ness and autonomy’ [PS-LT].

Participants also suggested departmental leadership to promote state-wide consistency by **facilitating greater levels of interschool networking** and sharing good practice. This strategy would reduce instances of ‘reinventing the wheel’ [PS-LS] and provide small and outer regional schools with ‘the advantage of leveraging other people’s resources’ [PS-P]. It was suggested that the Department could play a more proactive leadership role in enabling staff to meet together more regularly, using videoconferencing technologies.

6.2.2 Accountability alongside support

Participants wanted Departmental leaders to require greater accountability from schools and to provide greater support so schools could demonstrate such accountability. A high school principal said school leaders 'have to have a system that is going to stand beside them' and suggested:

The Department needs to say, "We'll offer you support but there are accountabilities that go with that" and those accountabilities aren't necessarily just about outcomes, they're about the process and we need to get clearer on those [HS-P].

In terms of accountability, the suggestion was made that all school leaders, not just principals, be required to participate in the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL). School leaders who had attended PALL were enthusiastic about the way it had 'facilitated a lot of our thinking' [PS-AP] and provided 'the framework around creating that whole school vision around literacy' [PS-P]. In addition, participants wanted 'some departmental follow-up as to how we are implementing PALL ... some measures of effectiveness of the program in the schools' [HS-LS].

Departmental support was also conceived of as providing access to experts from the central office. Specifically, it was suggested that the Department 'might reinstate or recreate a position of a leader within the Department who we can call upon to help us' [HS-TiC].

They could appoint someone to go around the local or the hub-type schools and see what they can do and share resources or be a conduit for all of that so you're building up that expertise, as well, especially for the isolated people that are out there [CS-P].

Noting that at the time there were relatively few school-based literacy coaches, many participants called for 'a few more highly-skilled curriculum people at that higher level that can actually guide those literacy coaches because they're spread so thinly' [PS-CT].

The Department's Literacy Coaching Strategy was launched in 2019 and consists of literacy coaches working directly in schools supported by lead literacy instructional coaches. In order to enhance agency-wide support and consistency, Lead Literacy Instructional Coaches collaborate with Early Years Network Leaders School Improvement Leaders, and Curriculum Services (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2019a).

6.2.3 Easing increasing pressure on teachers

Participants indicated they would like to see more leadership from the Department to ease pressure on teachers. This aspiration related to two aspects of teachers' work.

First, participants suggested the Department could recalibrate the **relationship between pedagogy and the curriculum** and reduce the sense of 'pressure to cover this expansive curriculum content' [PS-P]. There was a clear call from participants for the Department to acknowledge that 'the crowded curriculum is becoming a huge problem' for teachers [PS-CT] and is compromising the quality of teaching and learning.

Noting that ‘the Australian Curriculum is far too open to interpretation’ [PS-AST], many participants called for the Department to develop **universal resources** ‘to go along with the curriculum’ [PS-P], including clear guidelines, rubrics, and a ‘toolkit about what works and how to assemble it’ [HS-P]. Such resources would be ‘a huge bonus for schools and teachers and enable them to concentrate a bit more on their literacy stuff’ [PS-P] and ultimately ‘improve literacy teaching and learning in the schools’ [HS-CT].

Participants also suggested the Department should **reduce the emphasis on content** and focus more on **enabling teaching of general capabilities** in the Australian Curriculum, which includes literacy as well as, for example, “critical and creative thinking” and “personal and social capability” (ACARA, no date-b).

I think maybe we’ve tried to cover so much content that we’re forgetting about the skills that our students need. Communicating, critical thinking, the 21st century skills which are going to be needed ... So, I think there’s something there about needing some acknowledgement from the Department that we want to give our students these transferable literacy skills [and] there’s a need to take the pressure off the teachers, which I think leads to better outcomes for our kids [PS-P].

Second, participants suggested that departmental (and government) leadership could ease pressure on teachers by actively **promoting positive images of teachers**. School staff would like the Department to take on more of a public relations (PR) function, promoting positive images of teachers in the media and in the community.

For many participants, such leadership would demonstrate to the public that the Department ‘really values teaching and its social impact ... and this would make it easier for teachers to do their jobs’ [PS-LS]. Importantly, this kind of support could address what were perceived as unfounded critiques levelled against teachers.

We need to have more PR ... from the Department ... [about] teaching phonics, for example ... because I really take this personally every time it comes up in the news. I’m like “But we are doing it. Come in and have a look at my practice, see what I’m doing”. Why does this keep being flagged? So, I think, perhaps more PR out there in the community and more positive messages sent out into the media about what actually really is going on at schools. Because I actually think we’re doing a pretty good job [PS-CT].

6.3 Summary

Section 6 has focused on leadership, the first of five factors that this research has identified as having significant impact on literacy outcomes in Tasmanian schools. Participants spoke about two levels of leadership being important: internal leadership at the school level as well as leadership at the executive and business unit level of the Department of Education (and, though less directly, the Tasmanian Government). A common thread binding these two levels was the need for stability.

Four dominant styles of leadership operate at the level of the individual in schools: instructional, strategic, shared, and relationship-oriented. These styles were not seen as mutually exclusive and, consistent with the extensive literature around educational leadership, effective school leaders drew on a repertoire of leadership styles and practices. Importantly, participants’ descriptions of effective leadership

largely reflected the leadership profiles as outlined in the AITSL Professional Standard for Principals.

Participants also expressed their wish for more departmental leadership in three key areas: state-wide consistency and a whole-of-Department approach to literacy teaching practice; enhanced accountability alongside support for schools in implementing such a state-wide literacy approach to literacy; and easing the pressures on teachers by providing guidelines and toolkits, reducing expectations to 'cover' content, and actively promoting positive images of teachers and schools in Tasmania.

7. Capacity-building

Among staff working in Tasmanian Government schools, there is wide variation in experiences of and skills in literacy teaching. To some extent, this difference is due to changes over past decades in the education received by pre-service teachers. It is also a result of teachers' variable access to and engagement with ongoing professional learning and development opportunities throughout their careers.

As established in Section 1, teachers have different understandings of literacy and use varied classroom practices. The Department cites research by the Grattan Institute that highlights how 'teacher effectiveness has a greater impact on student performance than any other government school reform' and asks 'how can we assist in the ongoing development of all teachers to raise their effectiveness?' (Department of Education, Tasmania, no date-b, p.2). Similarly, a principal participating in the research explained:

The challenge, then, is to bring all teachers up to the level of the high-performing teachers. We know the teacher makes the biggest impact on students' learning. If we can get a model that supports building the capacity of staff to that high level, then our student outcomes will improve [PS-P].

Section 7 reports on research findings regarding staff capacity-building for teaching literacy. This work draws on participants' responses to questions about what enables good literacy teaching and, subsequently, improved student outcomes. Comments by participants about capacity-building are discussed below first in relation to pre-service teacher preparation and then in the context of in-service professional learning.

7.1 Pre-service capacity-building

The significance of high-quality teacher education is undisputed and is evident in the standards set by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) for the accreditation of pre-service teacher education programs. Ensuring that new teachers 'come out equipped to be teaching' [PS-AST] is a cornerstone of federal and state education policies. Nevertheless, the extent to which new teachers are 'classroom ready' [PS-P] and prepared for their inevitable 'baptism of fire' [PS-CT] continues to be questioned in public debate as well as within the teaching profession. Importantly, as Brown (2015) demonstrates, "classroom readiness" is not just about a teacher's own knowledge and dispositions, but also involves their professional experience and the school context.

7.1.1 Perceived strengths and weaknesses

Overall, participants indicated that new graduates have a sound grasp of educational theory and are 'quite switched on with the curriculum' [PS-AST]. Both experienced staff and new teachers themselves commented on relevant knowledge developed through Initial Teacher Education:

We're really impressed that the new grads understand about the curriculum. Our current new grad was all over ACARA [PS-P].

The new grads seem quite well informed and have way more knowledge of literacy than my generation of teachers did [HS-LS].

Some of the theories are so valid and so helpful in what you do, like, I mean, the zone of proximal development, Piaget, and all those sort of things [PS-CT, new graduate].

Nevertheless, there was also a widespread concern that while such knowledge was useful and important, 'when it comes to the practical pedagogy of working in a class of 30 students, we seem to be missing the mark a bit' [PS-P]. Many participants thought there was a 'mismatch between what's happening in uni and then what's happening when people get out into schools' [PS-LS]. In this context, there was some discussion about raising the required score for entry into initial teacher education, ensuring graduates personal literacy skills are high⁹ and of the responsibility of teachers who supervised pre-service teachers on their professional experience for ensuring that 'underperforming' students do not pass.

In terms of general teaching knowledge and skills in pre-service learning, participants would like more attention paid to:

- formative assessment strategies, specifically in relation to administering running records: 'they're coming out without having done one running record and then they're expected to just sort of know how to do it' [PS-AST];
- classroom management: 'everything about managing your classroom' [PS-CT]; and
- structuring lessons for differentiation, 'what you need to do to cater for all your students' [PS-CT].

Many participants also wanted to see specific knowledge and skills to teach literacy developed for the benefit of pre-service teachers, including:

- teaching reading, using reading strategies and guided reading, and 'how to start children off with their writing and reading' [PS-LT]; and
- oral language and phonological awareness: 'knowing how important oral language is and how it relates to other areas of literacy' [PS-SP].

7.1.2 Suggested changes to pre-service teacher education

Participants recognised that university courses could not be expected to provide all the skills and knowledge that teachers need: 'uni, obviously, can only teach so much' [PS-CT]. Several staff pointed to the importance of pre-service teachers having time in schools to learn from observation:

They actually need to have practice and exposure to quality literacy practices and what it actually looks like in a classroom and in a school context [PS-AST].

Nevertheless, participants also made several recommendations for changes in pre-service teacher education. These suggestions were grounded in daily practices in schools rather than in detailed knowledge of university courses. Understandably, on the whole staff were not aware of relatively recent changes in the regulatory environment for initial teacher education, including the AITSL accreditation requirements and external tests such as the Non-Academic Capability Assessment Tool (administered before enrolment), Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (administered in the final year) and Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (administered prior to graduation as a teacher).

⁹ Of relevance here is the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE), introduced in 2016; see <https://teacheredtest.acer.edu.au/>.

Specific suggestions include the following:

- Pay explicit attention to the question of how to teach literacy for pre-service teachers in secondary education learning areas outside English: 'Literacy training should be part of all teachers' teacher training, across all the learning areas and school levels [HS-TiC]. At the University of Tasmania, all students in preparing to be secondary teachers, in both the Bachelor of Education and the Master of Teaching, must complete a unit focused on literacy as a general capability across the Australian Curriculum.
- Embed the Department's Good Teaching Literacy Guides into the BEd and MTeach curricula: 'If the uni could introduce the Good Teaching Guides to students that would be very, very useful' [PS-P].
- Engage more actively to involve practising teachers in course delivery, for example by seconding 'grassroots people for a semester' [PS-LS] and by having 'actual teachers to actually model lessons' [PS-CT].
- Strengthen professional experience components: 'being in there and being able to view exemplary teachers modelling best practice' [PS-LS].
- More carefully select colleague teachers to ensure pre-service teachers are paired with exemplary experienced teachers as mentors, so 'that those people who are modelling are the best possible people for the job' [PS-AST].

The last three of these suggestions highlight the sense of shared responsibility many staff feel for preparing pre-service teachers as well as possible for their work as graduate teachers.

7.2 In-service capacity-building

Learning to teach does not stop upon graduation—rather, 'teaching is a continuous-learning profession' (Gonski et al., 2018). As school leaders expressed it, 'even more experienced teachers have to make sure they stay up to date with current best practice' [PS-AST] and have to recognise that they 'need refreshers from time to time' [PS-P]. Notwithstanding the onus on all educators to continually upskill, participants recognised that 'some people are more skilled than others, and the less skilled ones need to be skilled up' [PS-CT]. Participants also perceived a need for in-service capacity building in relation to:

- personal literacy skills of staff: 'teachers need to have a high standard of literacy themselves [because they] are working with kids and they're supposed to be their role models [PS-CT]; and
- knowledge about teaching literacy for students who struggle: 'the majority of teachers—up to 80% I'd say—are not well equipped to teach literacy to children who are experiencing difficulty' [PS-LT].

On the whole, participants indicated that staff who needed to develop additional skills lack confidence and 'only have a limited kit bag' [HS-P] but often this was 'through no fault of their own' [PS-SP]. Importantly, participants thought these staff members were generally aware of their knowledge and skill gaps and were open and receptive to learning and change, given the opportunity.

I know there are people here, for instance, who would feel that they lack, I'm going to say skills for want of a better word. So, they feel like they don't do a good job with literacy ... I did an English language learners' course a couple of

years ago, and that was really great to focus, for me to suddenly go “Oh, you know what? I’ve been struggling with this forever”. And it just kind of made more sense of things. And so, I guess it’s that there are some teachers who feel that their knowledge isn’t where they’d like it to be to be able to teach it effectively [HS-AP].

7.2.1 In-service needs of specific cohorts

Participants identified capacity-building needs related to four specific cohorts of educators: early career teachers, mid-career teachers, late-career teachers, and teacher assistants.

In doing so, they indicated that most **early career teachers** found themselves on a steep learning curve in their first few years of teaching, with ‘gaping holes in their learning for literacy teaching’ [PS-CT]. There was a strong sense that unrealistic and unfair expectations meant that ‘it’s sometimes very overwhelming for young teachers’ [PS-CT]. At the same time, these early career teachers were highly motivated and eager to learn, and many experienced teachers were keen to support them:

I find that the younger teachers [who] are coming in are like sponges. They’re keen as mustard. They’re always asking questions: “How do I do this? What resources would you suggest for any sort of literacy area?” And yes, that’s really refreshing. It keeps me enthusiastic as well [PS-LT].

Specific strategies used include:

- self-directed professional learning: ‘I just read and read and read and read and read and talked to colleague teachers’ [PS-CT]; and
- peer learning: ‘work alongside experienced teachers, or go and visit and look in other classrooms, and see what practices are in place’ [PS-CT].

With time, teachers develop a broad skill set and deep knowledge for teaching literacy. Nevertheless, the research indicates that experienced **mid-career teachers** were at times also aware of the gaps in their own or their colleagues’ literacy skills and knowledge.

When I went through uni you weren’t taught much about grammar. I went to a PL on grammar and I’d say about 80% of the teachers that were there had the same experience [PS-CT].

For years, especially the older teachers, for years, there was nothing said about literacy, for instance in Health and Phys Ed. And so maybe, we’re feeling like we haven’t really ever had that real opportunity to know and understand it, and become a bit more of an expert in it [HS-AP].

Teachers in this cohort tended to be keen to build their capacity for literacy teaching. If professional learning was not available, they proceeded as best they could, at times resorting to outdated methods: ‘the way that they remember it from when they were at school’ [PS-CT].

As a group, **late career teachers** (within five years of retirement) were most often perceived as in need of upskilling, in part because their initial teacher education had occurred several decades earlier: ‘for a number of our teachers, some of this stuff is brand new. They’ve been teaching for 20 years or more’ [HS-LS]. More specifically, a primary school principal explained:

Many of our teachers probably have been trained during a ‘whole language’ type approach to literacy, and I think that where we’re possibly not as effective as we might be is around consistent teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness ... many of our older teachers would be quite open about saying that when they studied, particularly people who maybe did a Dip Ed, there probably wasn’t a lot of focus on literacy teaching [PS-P].

While some late career teachers were characterised as tenaciously ‘holding on to outdated practices from the 70s and 80s’ [PS-P], more commonly participants indicated that end-of-career teachers are feeling just as overwhelmed as their early career counterparts. One literacy-specific staff member stated that those teachers are:

In an ageing workforce of teachers ... feeling overwhelmed by curriculum that has such breadth—that promised depth but has just breadth now instead—teachers are feeling put upon. They’re feeling undervalued and they’re feeling like they can’t do their jobs. So, there’s an incredible sense of frustration [PS-LS].

Often participants felt sympathy for change-weary older teachers, while looking for ways to support the renewal and quality of their teaching because ‘our kids get one crack at this’ [HS-LS].

Finally, **Teacher Assistants** (TAs) play a vital role in classrooms and their assistance is generally highly valued (Chaseling, Preston, Brown, & Boyd, 2013; Gibson, Paatsch, & Toe, 2016). Participants shared many stories about excellent, dedicated TAs, and about their indispensability in the classroom. On the other hand, some participants also expressed concerns that TAs were not always engaged appropriately. One literacy support teacher argued against a common approach where TAs work individually with students with special needs: ‘using aides to help students who are struggling is counterproductive’ [PS-LT]; and a teacher asked: ‘why do our most needy children have our least trained people working with them?’ [PS-CT].

Importantly, other school staff did not blame TAs. They recognised that funding arrangements meant that at times a TA rather than a teacher was the employee ‘that the school can afford’ [PS-CT]. Moreover, training for TAs has changed over time (Australian Association of Special Education, 2007; Butt & Lowe, 2012), with a principal commenting on such change in this way: ‘We’ve got one lady here at the moment who’s just finished her Cert III and there’s a big difference between her training and the training of our other two older ladies’ [PS-P].

TAs who took part in this research themselves reported that because they were ‘separate from teachers, [they] don’t actually get literacy or PL information’ [HS-TA]. A teacher noted that ‘no matter how [well] intentioned an aide is or how brilliant they are, they don’t always have the understanding behind why I’m asking them to do something’ and that this is partly because ‘we’re never allocated time to sit and have a chat with our aide’.

School leaders are trying to remedy this situation, building the capacities of their TAs by including them in more ‘preloading professional learning at the very start of the year’ [CS-P]. In one school, documentation noted specific literacy professional learning (PL) for TAs and explicitly stated: ‘Dedicated co-planning and PL weekly team sessions—Wednesday, including Teacher Assistants’ [PS OP17].

“The challenge is to bring all teachers up to the level of the high-performing teachers. We know the teacher makes the biggest impact on students’ learning. If we can get a model that supports building the capacity of staff to that high level, then our student outcomes will improve”.

[PS-P]

7.3 Experiences of in-service professional learning

Participants spoke at length about professional learning and development as the key to building staff capacity to teach literacy (see Sangster, Stone, & Anderson, 2013; Timperley, 2011). A significant enabler:

is having those professional discussions and professional learning together to actually build teachers’ capacity and upskill our teachers because, without that, our kids aren’t going to move [PS-AST].

A major theme that emerged from these discussions was the need for new professional learning models to build capacity. Many participants in participating schools reported that they were ‘moving away from the traditional style of professional learning ... towards more of an in-house inquiry-style process’ [HS-CT]. This shift reflects the inquiry cycle approach in the 2018–2021 Tasmanian Department of Education strategic plan (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016; Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018c). Participants made the point that the ideal situation is ‘a nice balance between in-school PL and external PL people to draw on’ [PS-AST].

7.3.1 Internal professional learning

There appear to be both philosophical and pragmatic drivers underpinning the trend to emphasise internal professional learning. Moves to an inquiry-based approach, coupled with reduced access to external professional learning, have led many schools to rely on their own in-house expertise to build staff capacity.

Many participants were convinced that ‘some of the best professional learning happens in situ rather than externally’ [HS-LS] because then ‘the PL is embedded in classroom practice’ [PS-P]. Moreover, a ‘wealth of expertise’ in some schools meant the only support needed was time to ‘tap into those people’s resources’ [PS-AST] and to ‘allow teachers to see other teachers teaching in practice and to have those discussions around what’s really effective’ [PS-AP].

Some staff expressed an explicit preference for in-house professional learning because that meant they could build a skill set tailored to their school’s needs:

What’s in our control is the skill set that we can build, and the professional learning that we can build for staff that are at our school. As much as we’d love the Department to fund us, extra funding for a literacy coach in our school, which would be awesome, we can’t rely on that. What would bring the results is the improved teacher practice across every teacher in every classroom ... it’s actually about us building the capacity of every person in the school to do their role to the best of their ability [CS-P].

In-school capacity-building in which staff learn with and from each other is occurring in several ways. Participants differentiated between strategies that focus on group capacity-building and those to build the capacity of individual teachers, noting that both help advance a whole school agenda for literacy improvement.

Many schools were engaged in a program to **build the capacity of the staff as a group**. The most commonly spoken about structures of small group professional learning were professional learning communities (PLCs) and professional learning teams (PLTs).

The work we do is really heavily based on the work of DuFour (see DuFour & Reason, 2016) for professional learning communities, but we also have PLTs, which is the Patrick Griffin model (see Griffin, Murray, Care, Thomas, & Perri, 2010) of disciplined dialogue around student work. [CS-P].

Despite the different origins of PLTs and PLCs, for both these structures participants emphasised the process of 'doing professional inquiry together, making the time to actually sit down and unpack what our data actually means, and having those discussions' [PS-AST] and 'challenging thinking, but also offering learning opportunities for teachers by taking them out of their comfort zone sometimes' [HS-P]. For some participants, the PLC or PLT structure was *the* most effective capacity-building strategy for teaching literacy 'because it provides accountability within the group, is data driven, and has facilitated teachers in becoming more data literate' [PS-P].

We start with data, we look at the student needs, we then look at teacher needs. So what do I need to know if I'm going to teach that? We implement, we review and assess and we're constantly doing that cycle ... and what that means is that—because they're working together in a group—they're not confined by their own knowledge. There's collective knowledge [PS-P].

Often staff meetings were used for whole staff professional learning: 'Our staff meetings are less about administrative issues and more about professional learning ... the bulk of the time is on new learning or collaborating with each other' [PS-P]. As illustrated by school documentation, whole school professional learning often was used to reinforce the whole school focus on a particular element of literacy: 'a school wide strategic approach to spelling has been initiated through the inquiry cycle to build teacher capacity' [PS AR16].

In addition to building the capacities of their staff as a group, participating schools engaged in processes to **build individual capacity**. The following practices were common:

- One-on-one coaching and mentoring, by literacy coaches and school leaders. As one literacy coach explained, their role is about: 'predominantly being a coach and actually trying to move them from wherever they're at so that they can embrace and feel confident in implementing our school improvement agenda' [PS-LS]. Staff who benefitted from coaching were unstinting in their praise, referring to coaches as having a 'wealth of knowledge [PS-CT]. One was described as being an 'awesome go-to person to run ideas by' [HS-CT] and as 'modelling different strategies so that you can actually see what it looks like' [HS-CT].
- Collegial observation. In some schools beginning teachers were 'highly encouraged to go and sit with expert teachers, to have a look at their lessons' [PS-CT]. Peer observation was highly valued because 'watching how it works is more powerful than sitting in an English meeting and sharing units' [HS-TiC]. Importantly, such observation was intended to be 'about watching someone and learning from them and learning from each other' [PS-AST] rather than being judgemental.
- Observation by school leaders. 'Learning walks' or 'walk-throughs', and the "Watching Teachers Teach" strategy, all involve members of a leadership team visiting teachers' classrooms to observe (see section 5.2). In one school this process would prompt leaders to provide teachers with constructive critical feedback 'about the language that [they] used, the questions [they] asked the children, other things they noticed, or further questions they had' [PS-CT].

- Informal collegial conversations. Such ‘behind-the-scenes support’ [PS-CT] and ‘coffee and chat sessions’ [PS-AST] offer serendipitous learning opportunities throughout the school day in corridors and lunch rooms and were highly valued.

7.3.2 External professional learning

Participants spoke about two types of externally-sourced professional learning that supplemented their internal capacity-building efforts. The first type usually involved staff going ‘offsite’ to attend conferences, workshops and seminars, often delivered by recognised visiting literacy experts. The second type involved interschool collaborative learning.

Access to **literacy experts** was usually achieved by working with the Department’s own Professional Learning Institute (PLI), with the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA), and occasionally with experts brought directly into a school. Such professional learning was commonly referred to in school documentation, for example in annual reports listing which staff members had accessed specific workshops.

Participants who had had the opportunity to participate in professional learning sessions conducted by experts valued such experience enormously: ‘being able to talk to these people and learn from them is crucial’ [PS-CT]. Making such expert professional learning useful is supported by:

- providing opportunities to apply new knowledge, not just ‘information sharing, but it’s also about the practical application’ [PS-AST]; and
- ensuring learning is intensive and sustained over a period, rather than a once-only exposure: ‘we funded three teachers at a time to go and over the course of two years, most of our staff went and we’re now seeing the benefits’ [PS-P].

Formal courses and workshops are commonly used formats for professional learning. Participants said they were encouraged to seek external professional learning opportunities to address identified gaps in their Performance and Development Plans (PDPs); however, actual access was variable, in part because of availability.

Some schools had budgets to pay staff to attend external professional development (PD) seminars, so that ‘in literacy, if you’re really passionate about something and you find a PD out there ... our principal always supports that and lets you go [PS-CT]. More often, however, cost was a barrier; for example, ‘a lot of the times when I ask to attend a PL it is often denied, and the reason given is lack of money’ [PS-P]. This situation reflects national research indicating that 39% of Australian lower secondary education teachers perceived cost to be a barrier to their participation in professional development (Freeman, O’Malley, & Eveleigh, 2014). In this context, and especially in smaller schools and in outer regional areas, participants argued:

I would like all teachers to have access to high-quality professional learning around literacy teaching ... we really need consistent equitable access for all teachers [PS-P].

To mitigate costs and get the most out of staff attending workshops with literacy experts, the expectation was that they ‘share back’ what they had learned to the rest of the staff ‘to gain maximum value across the school’ [PS-P] and ‘spread the word’ [PS-LT].

The second form of external professional learning that participants valued was **interschool collaborative learning**, which occurred in various settings and contexts. The Operational Plan for Literacy in one school named another school that shared its whole school focus on spelling, noting its intention to 'liaise and collaborate ... include shared PL, staff meetings, moderation' [PS OP-Lit15]. Participants spoke about the benefits of 'inter-school moderation' [PS-CT], 'collaborating on making resources' [PS-AST], and 'professional learning groups within our cluster that are made up of teachers from various schools' [PS-CT].

Participants also talked about observation visits across schools, including between feeder primary schools and high schools in order to enhance to vertical alignment (Towns, 2017).

We're looking at writing and looking at what pedagogy the feeder schools are using, what practices they're using, and what the high school is using ... We have observations by grade seven teachers coming in to look at our grade six teachers and grade six teachers going out and looking at how the grade seven teachers are teaching writing [PS-LS].

7.3.3 Self-initiated professional development

Many resourceful teachers in the Tasmanian school system routinely engage in self-initiated professional development, drawing on their networks and proactively seeking opportunities to meet their learning needs. Several teachers said that they dedicate regular time to professional reading to stay current with emerging ideas and practices. The following is representative of that mindset:

I do my own reading, as well, in areas that I feel that we need to pursue or that interests me, and I feel that I might be able to bump my learning up to help my staff and the flow-on effect is to help students [PS-P].

In addition, participants turned to 21st Century technologies such as webinars and YouTube clips, and navigated through the "Twittersphere" to meet their self-identified professional learning needs. As one teacher pointed out: 'Everything is online these days!' [PS-CT].

7.4 Summary

The focus in section 7 has been on staff capacity-building for teaching literacy. In relation to pre-service teachers, participants suggested that student-teachers have a solid grasp on theory and curriculum knowledge but need more support to embed practical knowledge and skills both for general teaching strategies (such as formative assessment) and for literacy (especially in relation to reading and oral literacy). Many staff showed a strong sense of shared responsibility together with the University to prepare pre-service teachers as well as possible for their work as graduate teachers.

Participants valued ongoing professional development and discussed the need for in-service professional learning. Their comments in this respect focused especially on staff members' personal literacy skills and on knowledge about teaching literacy for students who struggle. Importantly, participants suggested staff members were generally aware of their knowledge and skill gaps and were open and receptive

to learning and change. Four specific cohorts of educators were thought to have different experiences and needs for in-service capacity building: early career, mid-career, and late-career teachers, and teacher assistants.

On the whole, participants are very positive about internal, school-based provision of professional learning, often referring to the inquiry cycle approach. Professional learning communities and professional learning teams, as well as individual coaching and peer observation, were all considered useful approaches. In terms of externally provided professional learning, participants appreciate being able to attend expert workshops and experience interschool collaboration. Finally, many teachers engage in independent professional learning, doing their own reading or accessing online resources.

8. Resources

This section considers how participants perceive the influence of school resources on students' literacy outcomes. Few said they were completely satisfied with the levels of resourcing provided. Overall, most were 'trying to work smarter with what we've got' [PS-CT]. Many praised school leaders for displaying impressive 'budget-juggling' skills [PS-SP] and strategic fund-stretching.

Participants identified people as the most valuable resource supporting schools' efforts to make a significant difference to literacy outcomes. In addition, they pointed to the need for relevant, evidence-informed teaching materials and resources and physical environments conducive to teaching and learning. Outlined below are findings about the impact of human resources and of material resources on literacy outcomes, and these are followed by a discussion about perceived resource inequities.

8.1 Human resources

Section 7 referred to workforce capacity-building as an aspect of human resource management. Here, attention turns to related issues relevant to staffing: how various aspects of human resources were thought to influence literacy teaching and learning, and what participants suggested is needed to address concerns.

8.1.1 Staffing levels and class sizes

Recurring refrains in many interviews were that 'you can't teach literacy without people' [PS-CT] and that many schools simply do not have enough 'people on the ground' [PS-CT], 'in the classroom helping' [PS-CT]. Specifically, participants raised the importance of access to relief staff 'to release teachers off-class to spend time planning together' [PS-CT] and 'to release those experienced teachers, who would then coach and mentor' [PS-P].

In general terms, levels of staffing correlate with the time teachers have available, in particular in the context of large class sizes. Not surprisingly, then, when asked what would enable better literacy outcomes, almost every participant prioritised staffing: 'an extra set of hands, an extra set of eyes, an extra set of ears in the classroom' [PS-LT]. A parent/volunteer acknowledged that 'there's lots of research that says things like class size don't matter' and contrasted that conclusion with their observation that 'more support ... in the classrooms from different people—parents, teacher aides—is actually impacting a lot on the kids' because extra people enable the use of 'smaller groups that are really specifically focused' [PS-PV].

In relation to class size, Killian (2017) recalls Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis of 250 factors affecting student achievement, which shows that it has a positive but relatively small effect size or impact of 0.21—Hattie considering factors with effect sizes over 0.40 useful. However, other research suggests that class size *is* important, especially for students needing extra help (Zyngier, 2014). Moreover, differences in effect size for different cohorts or contexts tend not to be visible in meta-analyses, as Hattie (2009) has acknowledged.

Participants identified people as the most valuable resource supporting schools' efforts to make a significant difference to literacy outcomes: not just the quantity of staff (although some argued for the benefits of smaller class sizes) but especially the quality: staff with specific literacy expertise, qualified Teacher Assistants, and allied professionals such as speech pathologists and psychologists.

Among participants there was widespread agreement that high student-to-teacher ratios make it more difficult to differentiate effectively, such that students at 'both ends of the spectrum, the gifted and the struggling' [PS-CT] tend to miss out on quality teaching time. Concerns about large classes were also raised in relation to the early years and to students with backgrounds of trauma since, in both cases high quality, individual attention from staff was considered essential.

More generally, participants thought that large class sizes make behaviour management more challenging when 'it's just the teacher trying to do everything in that room' [PS-CT]. Recent research on Australian teachers' priorities for classroom change leading to improvements in their psychological well-being similarly highlights the importance of smaller class sizes (Garrick et al., 2017)

8.1.2 Staff turnover

Concerns about inadequate staffing levels may be exacerbated by high levels of staff turnover, which can create instability in school communities (Holme, Jabbar, Germain, & Dinning, 2017). Combined with early career teacher attrition and retirements among an ageing workforce, staff turnover makes the smooth implementation of whole school approaches to literacy especially challenging. As one participant reported:

We've had a really big staff turnover in the last couple of years, including ... a whole new senior-staff team. So that's had a really big impact on all our school-wide systems, literacy being one of those [PS-CT].

High levels of staff turnover also erode in-school capacity-building efforts, negatively influencing literacy outcomes: 'We do a whole heap of PL one year and then we lose however many teachers and then the new ones come in the next year' [CS-CT].

To attract and retain high quality practitioners, participants suggest that the Department creates 'more permanent positions instead of the fixed term position' [PS-CT] and offers incentives to retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools:

In disadvantaged communities, basically we need teachers to stay for stability. Because [otherwise] we're always going back to square one ... We need teachers that stay for the distance. So that's around providing some incentives to stay [PS-P].

As another kind of incentive, some participants suggested placing more value on literacy expertise when assessing promotion opportunities: 'let teachers know that the literacy part of their job is really important, and you value it. So, when they go for a promotion, why not put that in there and make it important?' [HS-LS].

8.1.3 Staffing qualifications

For many staff, simply 'having an extra body in the classroom helps a huge amount' [PS-CT] and some suggested that 'it doesn't have to be an adult trained in literacy' [PS-CT]. However, others were adamant that 'they've got to be the right bodies ... the body has got to come suitably qualified' [CS-TA].

Participants made specific suggestions for the kinds of extra personnel needed. They highly valued **expert literacy staff** (such as literacy coaches) and were clear that they had made 'a huge difference' [PS-P] to literacy outcomes. Many participants

recommended 'a nominated literacy leader in every school' [HS-AP] 'to provide that literacy support, the professional learning, the side-by-side coaching' [PS-P] and 'instructional time with teachers to build capacity' [PS-P].

Since data collection in late 2017, the Tasmanian Government has rolled out access to literacy coaches in all schools (Tasmanian Government, 2018–2019, pp.62 and 66) and the Literacy Coaching Strategy commenced in 2019. Coaches work to support the professional learning of teachers and are central to many of the actions in the 2019-2022 Department of Education Literacy Implementation Plan (Department of Education Tasmania 2019b, pp.8, 17, 18) released in May 2019:

Provide the time for Literacy Coaches and teachers to collaborate in order to analyse, reflect and improve their practice.

Use Literacy and Lead Coaches to share effective practices across schools, deepen teacher understanding and build capacity of teachers to include opportunities for communication.

Access the support of Literacy Coaches to identify student and teacher learning needs and to plan for strategic and targeted professional learning.

Participants were unanimous in supporting and calling for more **teacher assistants** in schools. One school leader suggested that 'you could not run a school without TAs' [PS-AST] and many participants strongly recommended that TAs be assigned to all classrooms rather than to specific students:

A quality teacher's aide in each room ... not just put beside a child as funded for that child but funded for that one classroom [PS-CT].

I dream that if every classroom in Tasmania had a permanent teacher assistant for the year, they could make magic happen for literacy [PS-AST].

Additional teacher assistants would be especially welcome in the early years because 'you just cannot give the little ones what they need without that extra support in the classroom' [PS-P]. Research in Western Australia shows that teaching assistants trained to 'provide a daily half-hour emergent literacy program to pre-primary students with low oral language skills' led to significant gains on early language and literacy measures among students (Moore & Hammond, 2011, p. 85).

In many schools, a large portion of the budget was allocated to teaching assistants to fund such extra support, particularly in classes with younger students. In some schools, this commitment required considerable effort in creative budgeting, detailed planning, and 'jiggling things quite a bit' [PS-P].

Finally, participants highlighted the value of **specialist support from non-teaching professionals**—such as speech pathologists, psychologists, and social workers. Ideally, staff with diverse expertise work together to support student learning, as one annual report describes:

There is an effective coordinated senior staff and support team (support teachers, TAs, school psychologist, speech and language pathologist, social worker) who work with teachers to differentiate for all students [PS-AR15]

In relation to literacy, there is high demand for the expertise brought to literacy teaching by speech pathologists. As Snow (2015) notes, the relationship of oral language competence to written literacy—and the transition from one to the other—

greatly affects long-term academic achievement and capacity to thrive over the life-course. In one participating school, staff planned to ask a ‘speech pathologist to speak to parents’ on the basis that ‘many kindergarten children are failing to meet the KDC [kindergarten development check] marker re speech and language’ [PS-SIP16]. On the whole, however, participants talked about long waiting lists, with staff saying speech pathologists ‘are only able to visit a kid one or two times a year’ [PS-TA] because ‘there are not enough of them’ [PS-CT].

Similar experiences were shared in relation to access to school psychologists. While one principal said ‘we don’t have a huge psychologist caseload and they don’t sit on the list for a long time’ [PS-P], more commonly participants talked of the ‘overwhelming workload of school psychologists that prevents them from doing the number of assessments needed’ [HS-LS]. Increased access to both speech pathologists and psychologists therefore is seen as a key enabler of improved literacy outcomes.

8.2 Material resources

Overall, participants spoke less about material resources than they did about human resources. The two main aspects mentioned as relevant for literacy outcomes are access to educators’ necessary ‘tools of trade’ and the physical environments in schools.

8.2.1 Access to literacy ‘tools of trade’

Schools have discretion to invest some of their budget in purchasing resources that support staff professional learning and literacy teaching. The Department also provides a range of resources free of charge. Documentation from schools refers to a wide range of high quality books and resources purchased to support literacy teaching and learning, including fiction and non-fiction texts, and resources by various literacy experts.

In addition, participants commented that staff ‘spend a lot of time making resources’ [PS-CT] and that, like many other professionals, teachers often ‘have their own personal libraries’ [PS-AST] to support literacy teaching. Across Australia, the “State of our schools survey” administered by the Australian Education Union (2017) also shows that it is common for teachers to buy and make their own teaching resources.

Participants pointed specifically to two “tools of the trade” as being vital for literacy teaching and learning:

- Books for students to read that are ‘engaging, nice to look at, and nice to handle’ [PS-TA] and ‘with really interesting, exciting characters’ [PS-LT]. Staff commented on the prohibitive expense for schools to ‘constantly refresh [their] home reader collection’ [PS-CT], or wistfully stated that ‘it’d be just so lovely to have beautiful, quality books that kids could take home as home readers but we just don’t have them’ because ‘books are so expensive’ [PS-LT].
- Information and communication technologies—both hardware and software—to ‘add to the excitement of learning. I think that you can really use them in such a diverse way to support a literacy program’ [PS-CT]. In some schools ‘each class has access to a caddy of tablets ... and programs to complement the literacy work’ [PS-P] but, in others, staff said that ‘If I had twice as many working

computers, that would make my life a lot more easy [PS-AST]. In addition, participants pointed to the need for IT support, maintenance and upgrades, and reliable (broadband) internet access as enabling teachers to use ICT for literacy learning,

8.2.2 The physical environment

In relation to material resources, participants also explained how their literacy work with students was both negatively and positively affected by school and classroom design (see Byers, Mahat, Liu, Knock, & Imms, 2018). Some schools have created attractive and highly functional learning spaces, conducive to teaching and learning:

Our revitalised library has become a hub and is used by all classes. It can accommodate up to four classes at once and there are spaces for teachers to meet for their PLC groups [PS-CT].

Many teachers prioritised efforts to make their classrooms 'feel like a place the children want to come to' [PS-LT] and where students 'feel safe when they come in here, safe to do their learning' [PS-LT].

Consistent with narratives about large class sizes (see section 8.1), in relation to class environments the main concern was about a lack of space. One classroom teacher vividly described having '29 students in my classroom. We can't move around the room without having to stand up and push chairs in ... Having places for students to work quietly is almost impossible' [PS-CT]. The same teacher also said:

I think that physical classrooms that can accommodate to 21st-century students are much needed. We seem to have a 19th-century model, but our kids are living in 2017, so it doesn't fit [PS-CT].

The importance of appropriate spaces, especially for play-based inquiry learning, was highlighted by several early years teachers (see Wohlwend, 2008). One was delighted with space she had access to:

My Year 1 classroom has a deck leading off the room, which I utilise a lot. We have a reading nook—a large box, painted by the students, Lego and other building materials, games, paper with stencils, hoops and beanbags, and a tea set with an easel where all the 'café orders' are written down, and I have students working out there regularly [PS-CT].

Some participants were also experimenting and innovating with classroom furniture, and flexible seating arrangements, such as 'three round tables two at a normal table height and one is higher, so you sit on stools or you can stand at it. [PS-CT] and 'turned small cupboards over and covered them in things, so children can kneel' [PS-TA].

In addition to suitable classrooms, high on the agenda in many participating schools were efforts to provide welcoming spaces for parents and family members, because 'we want parents to come in and be engaged in their children' learning' [PS-LT] (see Stratford, Kilpatrick, Katersky-Barnes, Burns, & Fischer, 2020). However, such engagement efforts were often also constrained by space limitations. One principal described having '30 families in there on our Launching into Learning days. Then you've got little babies, toddlers, prams, mums, dads, nans—but we just don't have the space to do it effectively' [PS-P].

8.3 Resource allocation

Differences in funding allocated to schools are explained by the Department of Education in relation to different components of funding (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2018b, p.3):

All schools are provided with a core allocation of funding based on the things all schools have in common. Fairer Funding incorporates aspects such as how many students are enrolled at the school, whether the school offers primary, secondary, combined or senior secondary education, as well as the fact that some schools have students with greater needs than others and require extra funding to ensure that these students get the same opportunities as others. Because of this, the Department looks at each school and considers factors such as the socioeconomic status of the school, the location of the school, and the number of high or special needs students at the school.

The appropriate allocation of resources is complex and findings in relation to human and material resources above suggest there are differences between schools. Participants also explicitly spoke about several considerations for the Department to take into account, to enhance fairness and better support students' literacy learning.

- Struggling students without a recognised diagnosis. Staff appreciated additional resourcing for students with recognised special needs but argued that many students who cannot 'tick the box' [PS-CT] would also benefit from extra support. Specific suggestions were 'to see the same kind of attention paid to supporting students with literacy learning difficulties as there is to supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorders' [HS-LS] and to 'move to a model where kids who need loads of differentiation might attract more funding' [PS-PSY]¹⁰.
- Rural and regional schools. Participants pointed to the additional costs they incurred for attending moderation days and professional learning events: 'We pay for staff to go to moderation out of our school resource package—travel, overnight accommodation and meals' [CS-P]¹¹.
- Small schools. Many leaders of small schools, which tend to be in regional areas, (see Lamb & Glover, 2014) said that a small student population creates particular insecurities in relation to resources. A principal explained the disproportionate impact of changes in enrolment numbers in a small school: 'we've just lost 29 students going out of grade 6, and only have 20 coming in to prep ... that means that I don't know if I can put literacy support into the early childhood classes next year' [PS-P].

For school staff, the level of resourcing available impacts on their work satisfaction and wellbeing. Mostly, however, participants pointed to the impact of scarcity on students and expressed their wish for specific human and material resources so they could support all their students to reach optimum literacy levels.

¹⁰ The new Educational Adjustments funding model, to commence in 2020, is intended to do exactly that. See: <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/supporting-student-need/educational-adjustments/>

¹¹ The Fairer Funding Model which is used to calculate the Schools Resource Packages takes into consideration distance.

8.4 Summary

School resources undoubtedly influence literacy teaching and student outcomes.

In relation to human resources, participants pointed to the benefits of more, and more appropriately qualified, staff as well as of addressing staff turnover. Specific suggestions include:

- allocating funding for relief staff to release teachers for collaborative planning and for mentoring;
- reducing class sizes or reduced student-staff ratios;
- providing dedicated literacy leaders or coaches in every school;
- reducing staff turnover, especially in hard-to-staff schools by providing permanent positions and incentives;
- securing funding for expert literacy staff in every school¹²;
- providing more teacher assistants to work with whole class groups rather than specific students; and
- increasing access to non-teaching professional support staff, in particular speech therapists and psychologists.

Although material resources were considered less often than human resources, participants pointed to the support for literacy teaching and learning from:

- high quality reading books for students, including readers to take home;
- information and communication technologies, both hardware and software; and
- physical learning environments conducive to learning, included play-based learning.

The availability of human and material resourcing affects staff work satisfaction and wellbeing but, most of all, and as participants emphasised, it affects students' literacy learning.

¹² Since the fieldwork in 2017, in the 2018-2019 budget the Tasmanian government announced an expansion of the number of literacy coaches. Commencing at the start of 2019, every school has access to a literacy coach. See: <https://www.treasury.tas.gov.au/Documents/2018-19-Budget-Paper-No-2-Volume-1.pdf>

9. Family and community

A range of out-of-school factors may influence literacy outcomes, many of which can be understood in relation to family and community. This section outlines the main factors identified by participants, explores how these are seen to affect literacy teaching and learning, and highlights why family and community engagement is important. Next, the section examines family and community engagement initiatives that schools are involved in, and report on what participants said about the positive impacts on literacy of these efforts.

9.1 Out-of-school factors that influence literacy outcomes

Schools play a key role in ensuring all children achieve the literacy capabilities needed in contemporary society. At the same time, it is widely recognised that various interconnected factors associated with students' lives beyond the classroom also influence their literacy development (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). A participant summarised this insight as follows:

Even before students come to school or once they come to school, before we can even attempt to support them in their literacy learning, we're faced with a lot of other challenges [DS-AST].

It is important to note that the association between out-of-school factors and literacy development is about *correlation*, not causality. In other words, it is possible for schools to achieve positive literacy outcomes for children in the face of challenging out-of-school circumstances (Hayes et al., 2017). Participants pointed to three out-of-school factors they considered most relevant.

First, levels of **parental literacy** vary between communities. Participants recognised the advantages children reaped from growing up in 'households which are literacy-rich places, where there are books around and there's a lot of talking and listening going on at home' [PS-P]. In contrast, when parents struggle with their own literacy, children are 'on the back foot in terms of literacy development and accessing the curriculum' [PS-CT]. As one teacher pointed out:

We know it is not a level playing field when those students enter their first year of schooling. They are behind their counterparts who come from advantaged and language-enriched home lives [PS-CT].

In the context of family literacy, oral language competence was emphasised as an essential foundation for the development of other literacy capabilities (see Snow, 2014), leading to concern when: 'students arrive in school and they don't have basic oral language skills; they can't speak in sentences' [PS-CT].

Second, **family socio-economic status** is closely associated with family literacy levels and parental educational experiences. Many of the schools participating in the study were located in areas of high social disadvantage: 19 had an ICSEA value below the Australian mean of 1,000, including five schools with values under 900 (ACARA, 2011). For some schools that means having 'roughly 50% of students whose families are all on government benefits' [DS-CT]. Some participants linked poverty with hunger, pointing out the challenge of learning for a child who 'hasn't been fed

properly' [PS-AP]. Teachers in a study by Foodbank (2015), for example, reported that on average a student who comes to school hungry loses more than two hours a day of learning time.

Participants suggested that high levels of socioeconomic need, combined with isolation in rural communities, also presented particular educational challenges.

I really do think that more real-world experience for children, particularly in isolated areas would be beneficial for literacy learning, but not just literacy, but also recognising personal potential. Because some kids in these areas, they don't know what a uni even is. They don't know that there's a potential to even go to a place like that. They've never known anyone to go to a place like that. [PS-CT].

Apart from the benefit of educational cultural capital (see Fischer, Barnes, & Kilpatrick, 2017), research by Watson et al. (2016) with over 3,000 Tasmanian Years 4–10 students found the key influences on students' aspirations were friends, followed by English ability, Maths ability, and teacher support. This point reinforces the importance of the work teachers do.

Participants also linked low socio-economic status with 'chronic attendance issues' [CS-AST], saying that 'there are families where it's just not possible for their child to come to school every day' [PS-AP]. Despite understanding the difficulties some families face, few would disagree with this high school principal;

We have to change attendance rates because that has a big impact on all of our schools ... We can't teach them if they're not here, so that's a real concern [HS-P].

Lamb et al. (2015, p. 30) note that many 'schools serving highly disadvantaged communities are achieving attendance rates comparable to the most highly-advantaged schools.' They also know the importance of endeavours to increase attendance for improving literacy outcomes, showing that attendance rates provide the strongest signal of school performance in NAPLAN, and account for 40 per cent variation in overall NAPLAN performance.

Third, over and above the impacts of low levels of parental literacy and social disadvantage, participants spoke about the effects on learning of students' **mental and emotional wellbeing**. Children and young people may experience traumatising events in school environments, for example as a result of bullying. In this research, however, participants spoke principally about the negative effects of adverse life experiences occurring outside of school. In some schools, staff said that an increasing number of students 'with trauma backgrounds' was leading to 'an absolutely overflowing list of students and families who need to see psychologists and social workers' [CS-AST].

Certainly, 'all sorts of things happen to kids, in families' [HS-LS] and the causes of trauma are varied (see Datta, Stratford, Julian, & Shelley, 2019), and participants referred specifically to families experiencing 'domestic violence, and the level of drug use, and the incarceration' [HS-P] and to refugee experiences for children from families who have arrived in Tasmania under the Commonwealth Government's Humanitarian Settlement Program.

Participants were united in a belief that ‘the earlier you can get to families and work with the children the better’ [PS-CT]. They aimed to foster a ‘sense of we’re a team’ [PS-CT], ensure that parent-teacher discussions are ‘a two-way thing’ [PS-P]. Families and community members were invited into the life of the school in general, as well as for literacy outcomes in particular.

The effects of trauma on the developing brain are well documented (Tobin, 2016) and are reflected in observations by participants:

When you walk into a classroom with 25 kids in an area like this, you’re walking into a classroom filled with children with trauma. You cannot even begin to teach literacy to these students until they feel that that they’re in a calm, safe, and supported environment [PS-AP].

I have another student in my class who is a humanitarian refugee. He has severe trauma and learning is just the last thing that is on his radar at the moment [PS-CT].

I’ve worked with quite a few kids with trauma backgrounds—one in particular at the moment. I would say she’s smart, but she is so busy just surviving and coping, that the parts in her brain that she needs to switch on to learn are not switched on [PS-CT].

In addition to focusing on trauma, participants referred to effects of mental illness on children’s learning, among them, according to one teacher, ‘anxiety and depression in early childhood, which is something new, in the last ten years’ [PS-CT]. That teacher went on to express concern that ‘more and more we are trying to be counsellors and psychologists, and it’s not our area of expertise and I think we’re letting children down’. Overall, the teacher reflected concerns many participants expressed for ‘the health and well-being of the children’ [PS-CT].

9.2 Family and community engagement initiatives

This research indicates that staff in schools are generally well aware of the relationship between out-of-school factors and literacy teaching and learning and are committed to strengthening home/school connections (see Gonski et al., 2018). To that end, many schools were engaged in purposeful programs to extend a ‘whole community approach’ to literacy [PS-CT].

Participants cited several reasons for keeping parents ‘in the loop’ [CS-AST], the primary one being that ‘they’re the first educators of their children’ [PS-LT] and ‘know their child better than anyone else’ [PS-CT]. For some participants, working in partnership with families opened up ‘a big space of exciting learning opportunities to actually work with parents so that we’re all on the same page’ because ‘the research says that a child will achieve the best possible outcomes that they can if school and home are working together in a positive manner’ [PS-CT]. There is widespread agreement in research that engaging parents in learning, beyond simply involving parents in schooling has substantial benefits for students’ learning and academic attainment (see Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 2016; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012).

Many participants also agreed that ‘it’s challenging ... to develop a culture of really working together and progressing together’ [PS-LT]. They recognised barriers to home-school partnerships for parents who ‘have had bad schooling experiences themselves’ [CS-SP] or who ‘are frightened of coming into schools because they think they’re going to be asked to do something that’s out of their depth’ [PS-PV]. In addition, some teachers are ‘a bit intimidated about having parents involved’ [PS-

CT]. Despite these challenges, various family and community engagement initiatives reportedly show positive effects on literacy outcomes; these are discussed below.

9.2.1 Positive relationships with families

There was widespread agreement among participants that positive relationships with parents form the foundation of sustainable family and community engagement, and therefore 'I work on those really hard, right from the beginning of the year' [PS-CT]. Linking parental engagement with the AITSL standard (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) to "know students and how they learn", one classroom teacher said:

We have to get to know our children, but we have to get to know our parents as well and it's not until they trust you that they might start opening up and they'll tell you things that you think, "Oh, I get that. That explains why he's been a little bit like that". But they're not going to tell you that until they trust you, so you really have to have that open, trusting relationship, and that takes time [PS-CT].

Staff aimed to foster a 'sense of we're a team' [PS-CT], ensure that parent-teacher discussions are 'a two-way thing' [PS-P], and engage parents in 'co-constructing learning goals for their kids' [PS-P]. They recognised that parents and school staff each have important expertise to contribute.

I would like to see families and schools working collaboratively, for the best results for children. Teachers might be the experts on how to actually teach reading, but we're never going to be the expert on that child. The parent is the expert on that child. They're the ones that come with that insight, so we need to work together [PS-CT].

Three specific, useful strategies to build positive relationships with families emerged from the findings:

- Inviting parents' input. Some schools had explicit strategies for inviting parents' expertise about their children. For example, one school improvement plan includes the action that all teachers would contact 'all parents in their classroom with the question: what do I need to know about your child that will help me with managing his learning?' [PS SIP17].
- Welcoming spaces. Ensuring that parents feel welcome at school is crucial to establishing fruitful home-school partnerships (Newman, Arthur, Staples, & Woodrow, 2016; Stratford et al., forthcoming; Tran, 2014). In one school, the School Association ran the Early Learning Centre (ELC) and had 'opened up their parent room to the wider community' [PS-PV] to encourage parents to get involved before their children started school. In another school the parent room made parents 'feel more welcome in the school', especially since many 'live 50 minutes away' (PS-PV). The operational plan for that school mentioned that the parent room would also have 'a computer with internet access' in recognition that 'not all our parents have access to the internet at home' [PS OP17].
- Celebrating literacy. In addition to the common practice of inviting families and community members to events (such as careers nights, art exhibitions, Book Week parades, performances, and excursions) some schools had a focus on celebrating students' reading and writing successes. One school used regular communication with families 'to highlight the successes that occur every day at

school' [PS AR16]. The goal of another school was to 'raise the profile of literacy and the curriculum through celebrations and scheduled promotional events' [PS OP17]. A teacher spoke enthusiastically about their school's 'awesome winter festival, where every class displayed their writing and it was after school so parents could come along and have some food and some hot chocolate and look around' [PS-CT].

9.2.2 Communication

Once a sound foundation has been established, effective channels of communication are necessary if parents are to be active partners in their children's learning and literacy development. Two types of communication were considered useful for supporting home-school partnerships in relation to literacy:

- Information sessions and newsletters. Parent newsletters were much-used tools for information dissemination: 'It might be, "Did you know that our school has Reading Eggs and everyone can use it? If you need any help with the app, come and see us, or ask your class teacher," and stuff like that' [PS-PV]. Parent information sessions were used to support parents to help their children's literacy, for example: 'at the beginning of prep because parents don't know how to support their children in reading' [PS-CT] and 'sessions about NAPLAN and PAT testing and different reading strategies' [CS-AP].
- Online communication tools. The most commonly used digital applications among participating schools were 'Seesaw' (<https://web.seesaw.me/about/>), and then Class Dojo (<https://www.classdojo.com/en-gb/about/>). Participants pointed to a wide range of benefits of such online tools:

If a parent doesn't feel comfortable coming into the school, or can't, they're connecting that way [PS-AST].

To upload the students' writing, their reflections, their ideas, and then share that with parents ... so they can see how their child is progressing and give positive feedback to that student over the year [PS-CT].

Teachers can send videos, pictures to parents of the happenings that are occurring in the classroom [and parents can] see that and hopefully then, apply that at home as well [PS-P].

There's two-way communication ... "Just letting you know that he's sick today." "Yep. No worries." It actually saves teachers time too, rather than having to do the old phone call [PS-P].

The overarching purpose of both traditional and online communication with parents is summarised in one school's annual report:

Now communications avenues are established, the next step is to use these to empower parents to support their child at home. Communicating classroom learning intentions, filming instructional phases of a lesson, providing useful tips to support students reading and spelling will be undertaken in 2017 [PS AR16].

9.2.3 Community engagement programs for literacy

Schools were involved in several engagement programs designed to invite and integrate families and community members into the life of their school in general, as well as for literacy outcomes in particular. At times, programs were informal, and used an 'open door' policy to provide 'education opportunities for parents who might have struggled themselves in the literacy area' [PS-P] in ways that are tailored to parents' and children's needs, as they arise. This approach is illustrated by a school leader:

I had a meeting with a parent last Tuesday of a grade 5 boy who came in and wanted some support with how to improve his reading skills and the challenges that she had because he only liked to read on an iPad. She didn't know what to do, so I gave her some strategies and she's actually coming back in tomorrow to see me, to go over what worked, what didn't work, and what she can do next [DS-AP].

A literacy support teacher reinforced that idea:

My door's open. I have the knowledge and resources and I'm really happy to share them. We've got the same goal. We want the best for the child [PS-LT].

In addition, schools implemented two more formal literacy engagement programs:

- Home reading. A teacher clarified that home reading is used 'to ensure they're reading as much as they can but also it's to involve their parents. So it's not just about getting the children to read more; it's about sharing that time with their parents' [PS-CT]. Some schools supplemented their home reading program with a before-school reading program. Combining that with a breakfast offering resulted in a high take-up by families and kept 'that relationship thing happening with parents' [PS-LT]. Another participant was pleased that 'we have lots of parent support for our before-school reading club ... We're really proud of it and we see lots of progress being made in there every day' [PS-LT].
- Family and community volunteers. Many schools are reaching out to families and community members as volunteer tutors so that 'during our guided reading time, we have an adult to every group' [PS-TA]. Some participants expressed that they 'would struggle to achieve things [without] parent help coming to lead and rotate through the home reading' [PS-CT]. Staff use personal contacts and even 'a sign on the Highway to say, "Reading tutors needed"' [PS-P] to attract volunteers, many of whom are retired and who feel 'that they've got something to contribute to these young ones' [CS-TA]. Participants were very aware of their duty of care, both for students and for the volunteers, with schools providing a training/induction program so that volunteers 'know whatever they're doing with students is exactly the same as what we need them to be doing' [PS-P].

9.2.4 Formal Department of Education initiatives

Participants were united in a belief that 'the earlier you can get to families and work with the children the better' [PS-CT]. Consequently, pre-school engagement programs were highly valued as opportunities to 'start all those reading habits really early with our little ones' [PS-CT]. Two formal initiatives by the Tasmanian Department of Education were a focus for comments from participants:

- Launching into Learning (LiL). This program engages families with children from birth to four years of age and is available at all Tasmanian Government schools

and Child and Family Centres (Department of Education, Tasmania, no date-a). LiL is commonly used to support literacy, as one teacher exemplified: 'I might have puppets out for nursery rhymes and encourage them to say the nursery rhymes' [PS-CT]. In another school, LiL was used to attend 'to the needs of families for whom English is not the first language' [PS AR15]. LiL is less formal than school, and this facilitates staff 'not talking to them, but talking with them, about literacy in a very comfortable—not I'm lecturing you—kind of way' [PS-CT].

- Learning in Families Together (LiFT). This program is funded in selected schools for K–2 students, and aims to 'encourage collaboration between home, school and the community to help lift the literacy and numeracy learning outcomes for all children' (Department of Education, Tasmania, no date-c). LiFT was used to actively involve parents and 'come together as a team and work out what we're doing for the family learning challenges' [PS-CT]. One school made the commitment that a 'Minimum [of] two new ideas from parent LiFT group will be implemented' [DS OP17] each year. As part of LiFT, schools used 'open literacy classrooms' to provide parents and carers with 'ideas for how they can engage their kids at home with literacy activities' [PS-CT] and provided take-home resources such as 'little bookmarks with all the reading strategies on them' [PS-LT]. LiFT funding was used to purchase extra time for specialist non-teaching staff—for example an extra 0.1FTE for the speech pathologist 'to undertake assessments and work with families on a needs basis' [PS OP-LIFT17]. Participants in LiFT schools noted the benefit of the sustained engagement it supports.

9.3 Summary

There is broad agreement in research that parental engagement in learning has a substantial positive impact on student learning and educational attainment. On that basis, family and community engagement strategies for literacy are likely to pay dividends. Out-of-school factors such as low parental literacy, low socio-economic backgrounds, and children experiencing trauma and mental illness make the work schools do in relation to families both more challenging and more important. This insight was well-recognised by participants and schools and demonstrated by their commitment to a strong suite of engagement initiatives, among them the following:

- Build positive relationships with families, for example by explicitly inviting parents' expertise about their children, creating welcoming spaces, and celebrating literacy successes.
- Use effective channels of communication, including traditional information sessions and newsletters as well as online communication tools, to empower parents to support their children's literacy.
- Engage parents and community members with literacy, both informally by using an 'open door' policy and more formally by using home reading, and by recruiting family and community volunteers to help with reading in class.
- Embrace formal Department of Education initiatives: Launching into Learning (LiL) and Learning in Families Together (LiFT).

10. Conclusion

Phase 2 of the *Review of Literacy, Teaching, Training and Practice in Tasmanian Government Schools* has provided findings about current literacy teaching practice in Tasmanian Government schools for students from kindergarten to Year 10.

Empirical research conducted in 28 diverse schools nominated by the Department of Education generated a rich qualitative dataset, including semi-structured interviews with 184 participants and relevant documentation from all schools selected. Drawing on in-depth data analysis, in Part 1 the report outlined understandings and practices school staff have regarding literacy teaching, and, in Part 2, considered a range of factors perceived to affect literacy teaching.

The findings in Part 1 established the following insights:

- Among most schools and most staff, a broad and multidimensional understanding of literacy prevailed, and it mirrors the ACARA definition of literacy. There was a widespread view that literacy is a foundational capability necessary both for learning in school and for functioning successfully in life.
- Most participating schools endorsed a whole school approach to literacy; in practice, this was more embedded in some schools than in others.
- Successful implementation of a whole school approach relied on four main strategies: consistency in literacy practices and in language usage; securing teachers' buy-in; fostering shared responsibility; and broad organisational change.
- General sound pedagogy practices were seen as the foundation for good literacy teaching practice: gradual release of responsibility; differentiated instruction; explicit teaching; setting high expectations; and generating student engagement.
- On the whole, staff tended to integrate the key elements of literacy set out in the Department's Good Teaching Literacy Guides: that is, oral language—listening and speaking; reading and viewing; writing and creating; spelling; grammar and punctuation; and vocabulary.
- A wide variety of literacy programs and resources were used in classrooms across all levels of schooling, among them the Department of Education Good Teaching Literacy Guides for K–2, 3–6, and 7–10; some commercial literacy programs; and works by well-established literacy experts and scholars.
- Participants used and recommended various targeted interventions for specific groups of students, including Individual Education Plans.
- There was overwhelmingly support for the efficacy of drawing on multiple data sources to gauge the effectiveness of literacy teaching and most schools in this study were engaged in a substantial, ongoing, and diverse schedule of literacy assessments.
- Formative data were extensively used and highly valued for helping staff gauge student progress across the key elements of literacy. Educators used their own professional judgements, careful and close observations of students' engagement levels, and day-to-day monitoring of student progress.
- Participants recognised the importance of achievement testing against the ACARA standards and the role of standardised testing.

Part 2 established that there are several factors thought to facilitate literacy teaching practice and students' literacy achievement:

- Strong literacy leadership in schools, characterised by the presence of effective school leaders who draw on a repertoire of leadership practices from across instructional, strategic, shared and relationship-oriented styles.
- Departmental leadership that enables state-wide consistency in literacy teaching practice, balances enhanced accountability alongside support for schools, and eases current pressures on teachers.
- Stability both in school leadership and Departmental directions.
- Capacity-building for literacy teaching, with pre-service, early career, mid-career, and late-career teachers, and teacher assistants needing different kinds of professional learning.
- Internal, school-based provision of professional learning, especially by means of Professional Learning Communities, Professional Learning Teams, individual coaching, and peer observation.
- Externally provided professional learning, especially in workshops by literacy experts as well as in interschool collaboration.
- Human resources, including more staff to reduce student-staff ratios and in particular more appropriately qualified staff, among them literacy staff, teacher assistants, speech pathologists, and psychologists.
- Reducing staff turnover, especially in hard-to-staff schools.
- Material resources, in particular high-quality reading books for students, information and communication technologies, and physical learning environments conducive to learning.
- Engaging parents and the community with school and with literacy by building positive relationships with families and using effective channels of communication.
- Literacy engagement programs for families and community members by supporting home reading, recruiting volunteers to help with reading in class, and in formal Department of Education initiatives Launching into Learning (LiL) and Learning in Families Together (LiFT).

Across all schools, participants were committed to fulfilling their responsibilities to ensure that students achieved their literacy development milestones and left school prepared for life as literate and productive community members. Participants spoke eloquently about what enables their work and were keen to contribute to the study both to share knowledge with colleagues around the state, and to inform Departmental policy.

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Appendix A.

Interview Schedule (Phase 2)

Background / introduction

1. Please briefly explain to me the meaning of literacy as it is understood in your school.
2. How do you see your role in relation to the teaching of literacy in your school?

Literacy teaching strategies in your school

3. Could you briefly tell me what happens at a whole-of-school level here in relation to literacy?
4. Can you tell me a bit more about one of these school wide strategies that you think is particularly effective?
 - a. How long has this strategy been used?
 - b. Why is this strategy used?
 - c. How does the school gauge how well it is working?
- d. Would it be possible to for us to see your evidence of the effectiveness of this strategy?
5. What supports staff here to implement this strategy or other whole-of-school strategies?

Literacy teaching practices in your classroom

6. What specific literacy teaching practices do you use in your classroom?
7. Which one of these practices do you think is most effective?
 - a. How long have you been using this particular practice?
 - b. Why are you using it?
 - c. Can you give me an example of how you use this teaching practice in your classroom?
 - d. How do you gauge how well it's working?
 - e. Can you share any evidence of effectiveness of this particular practice?
 - f. What supports you to implement this practice in your classroom?

Blue Sky / forward thinking

8. What would you recommend to the department as the one or two most important action(s) it can take to support literacy success in schools across Tasmania? Why?
9. Are there any approaches or specific strategies for teaching literacy that you've read about or seen used elsewhere that you'd like to see in your school?
 - a. What is it about this approach/strategy that attracts you?
 - b. What do you think it would take for this to be tried at your school?
10. Is there anything else you think would be useful for us to know about literacy teaching in Tasmanian schools?



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