



Marginalised adolescent literacy learner



School resources

It is never too late to improve literacy outcomes. No matter what the starting point, intervening and responding to a student's literacy needs can result in improved outcomes, and may be the key to higher levels of engagement and motivation for that student across the curriculum. Adolescents are more likely to succeed when they see themselves as able and agentic members of learning communities where their voice is valued, and their culture and identity are acknowledged¹. It is critical, therefore, that the adolescent learner is involved in the decisions made about the design of any literacy intervention including how and when it will occur, what the intended outcomes are, and how progress towards those outcomes will be charted.

Literacy learning is situated within social and cultural practices and is deeply connected to the identity of adolescent learners. The learner brings their own experiences of the world, their ways of interacting and their existing knowledge and skills to construct meaning from new texts and experiences that they encounter. Students who find their secondary school curriculum experiences un motivating and the work overly challenging have often been subjected to labels such as 'remedial', 'struggling' or 'target' students, which can have detrimental and damaging effects on the student and their identity. A more useful term is marginalisation, which has been used to refer to those learners who are not yet engaged in the reading and writing carried out in school². Thinking of these learners as marginalised suggests that responsibility rests with the school to find ways to engage, to motivate, and to support their learning pathway. So how can this be done?

Know your learners

Having robust systems and processes for data collection and analysis supports schools to design and implement effective responses for students who are not yet engaged in literacy practices that support their learning at secondary school. Secondary schools carry out their own initial literacy assessments, and they are provided with a range of different types of data about students as they transition from primary schools. Results from standardised tests, curriculum level judgements, and information from previous schools help teachers to learn more about those students who are marginalised.

Further information can then be gathered in relation to the individual student, which may include more detailed diagnostic assessments by specialists if required. There are a number of factors that might influence literacy achievement, including speech and communication, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, visual and spatial awareness, physical abilities, motivation, and previous literacy learning experiences. It is important to have all this information in order to respond appropriately. Critical to this initial data-gathering phase is the involvement of the student and their family or whānau. Getting to know the student's strengths, cultural connections, ambitions, out-of-school and in-school interests and ways of working all contribute to designing an effective response, tailored to their individual needs. For those students who have high or very high additional learning needs, there are likely to be specialists (such as communication, vision, mobility, cognitive specialists) involved in the planning and implementation of their learning programme, which will include addressing literacy needs.

Consider grouping information about each learner under the headings of 'Identity' (including culture, language, interests, strengths, ways of working) and 'Academic' (including achievement data and

information from previous teachers). If the information is available, drill down into the detail of achievement data to identify where learners have strengths and where they need support. For example, the Curriculum Progress Tools³ PaCT component produces individual reports that show levels of progression across seven aspects of reading and seven aspects of writing, as well as indicating the trajectory of progress that the learner has made over time. The data may reveal, for example, that a student is at the expected curriculum level for reading but their writing is not at the expected level, and that components such as text structure and vocabulary are lower than other aspects of writing. When the achievement information is considered alongside the student's interests and strengths, those aspects needing attention can be addressed in contexts that are more likely to motivate the student, such as reading and writing about favourite sports or music, or working in a small group on a targeted project.

Responding to the needs of the student

In New Zealand, the evidence about the transition to secondary school and the patterns of progress and achievement after that transition suggest that a rigorous Response to Intervention (RTI) process should be in place⁴. RTI commonly involves three tiers of support, and is often present in primary schools. The first tier represents quality instruction available to all learners at the classroom level. The second tier targets short-term instruction for small groups of students, and the third tier represents the most intensive level of instruction, usually in a one-to-one context. While the notion of providing different levels of literacy support according to need is feasible, consideration should be given to the fact that this is occurring within a secondary school context⁵. There are challenges in providing Tier 2 or Tier 3 support when that involves decisions about students coming out of other scheduled classes to work with specialists. Rather than withdrawing students from regular instruction, consider providing Tier 2 support within class. Collaboration between the classroom teacher and literacy specialists can result in a change in student outcomes by designing literacy interventions that occur during class time⁶.

Another consideration is that adolescent learners may not want to be identified as requiring support, nor want to miss other classes to receive that support, which is why it is critically important to involve the student in the decision-making and design of any intervention in order to support engagement and motivation. If in-class support is provided, the additional support person may work with a group of students or move around the class and work with several students, so as to minimise any attention placed on a single student. Students may also be involved in planning where and when support is provided. For example, if a student chooses to participate in additional out-of-class support, they could be consulted about the preferred time and place for that to happen – alongside consideration of resources, timetables and other constraints.

Effective practice to support adolescent learners

Supporting marginalised learners requires strategies and actions at the school-wide and individual classroom level.

Whole school approaches

A multi-layered approach to improving literacy outcomes is more likely to succeed than single isolated actions. Within a secondary school, this means developing a cohesive school-wide plan that includes building teacher capability in effective literacy practice, developing literacy leadership within the school, identifying the roles and responsibilities of literacy specialists, and establishing systems and processes that support assessment and intervention design for marginalised learners. This work is often carried out by a team, led by a senior leader, with the overall aim of building a culture of literacy learning across the school. For example, a lead team may meet with each learning area to examine the disciplinary literacy practices embedded in each subject and support teachers to develop effective strategies appropriate to

each context, as well as providing opportunities for the whole staff to share effective practice in cross-curricular meetings. Teachers may also be invited to visit other classes in order to view effective practice, such as observing how a teacher supports students to read a challenging piece of text.

In-class approaches

While there are students who will receive additional support from literacy specialists within a secondary school, there are often many more students who do not qualify for special assistance. These are the students who are not yet working at the expected literacy levels for their year group, and may be having difficulty with subject requirements. Effective literacy practice in the classroom enables all students to participate and actively contribute, and allows marginalised learners to find connection to the learning that is taking place. There are a number of ways for all classroom teachers to support these students.

Create a safe and supportive community of learners. Establishing a safe community that values the experiences, knowledge and skills that adolescent learners bring to the classroom enables students to discuss literacy practices. It is important for students to feel comfortable surfacing their questions, confusions, disagreement or disengagement with learning experiences such as reading particular texts, so that teachers can provide appropriate support. Adolescent learners enjoy success when they are part of a community that sees them all as competent learners, and where the community works together to investigate, solve problems and learn. With support and repeated opportunities to experience success, students come to see themselves as capable of developing a sense of agency and taking control of their literacy learning⁷.

Make a plan. Use the comprehensive data you have gathered about your students to choose one or two aspects of literacy that you will focus on and develop. For example, if your students' vocabulary is not at the expected level, you may choose to focus on increasing vocabulary instruction. Set a time period (such as six weeks), and monitor the effects of your changed practice. You may work with the whole class on increased vocabulary instruction (which has benefits for all students), while specifically monitoring the effects on your group of students. Consider what you will be looking for. For example, are the students able to talk with others in a small group and use the key vocabulary you expect? Are they using that vocabulary in their writing? Gather feedback from your students to discover what is working and for whom, and consider what you may need to modify.

Collaborate with other staff. Consider any opportunities you have to work with other teachers and literacy specialists to support literacy development. You may be teaching the same class, or the same year level as another teacher, and therefore have an opportunity to work together to share ideas, trial approaches, and monitor the outcomes for your students. For example, a mathematics teacher and a science teacher might teach the same junior class and decide to work on close reading and interpretation of graphs, sharing strategies and approaches which are modified for each context. Similarly, an English teacher and a social studies teacher might identify the need to work on persuasive writing, sharing quality texts for students to use as examples, and developing the language of argument and persuasion in each subject.

Make connections between in-school and out-of-school learning. Adolescent learners engage in many purposeful literacy experiences outside of school and there is a growing recognition that, when teachers foster the links to school-based practices, they have a better chance of engaging students in their learning⁸. Knowing about the interests and strengths of students provides opportunities to use authentic contexts in which literacy practices can be developed, such as writing a script for a YouTube video about a game, reading an article about a well-known sportsperson, or preparing for a part-time job interview.

Work with challenging texts. When students appear unwilling to engage with subject material, or find it challenging, teachers may be tempted to avoid using more challenging texts. They may do this by reading

most of the material to the students, summarising key points and presenting them to the students, or substituting reading tasks with video. However, the practice of reducing or removing what students are asked to read becomes self-defeating, as the students remain dependent on the teacher to provide content, and they never practise the skills associated with reading higher-level texts. Expectations are lowered, and that has an ongoing effect in terms of marginalising learners. An alternative response is to work towards literacy-rich instruction.

Literacy-rich instruction. In literacy-rich classrooms, students have multiple opportunities to read, write and talk about subject content. There are benefits for all students in a literacy-rich classroom, but this approach is essential for marginalised learners who may be feeling disconnected from learning. In literacy-rich classrooms, students have the opportunity to read a wide range of texts, and to talk about both the subject content and the ways in which they make sense of the texts and learning materials. It is useful for teachers to create 'text sets' (including digital sources) related to the topics being studied, so that there is always a range of material available to read.

Literacy-rich instruction builds students literacy skills at the same time as building subject knowledge and skills. For example, in a mathematics class, students may be presented with a written problem to solve. They practise a routine of independently reading through the whole problem and identifying the key words and symbols. They are encouraged to annotate the text, underlining key parts and adding any relevant drawings or visual representation of the problem. Then they work with another student to talk about the problem, what they have identified, and how they will approach the problem to be solved. Any questions that arise from this discussion are noted on the whiteboard, and the teacher spends time with the class or individuals in responding to these, before the students attempt to solve the problem.

It is important to introduce students to strategies that support making sense of difficult, new or challenging texts such as:

- Scanning the text to gain the big picture first
- Breaking down the text into manageable parts
- 'Thinking aloud' (modelled by the teacher first, and then practised by students)
- Annotating texts to surface thinking and understanding
- Visualising what is described in the text
- Re-reading sections of the text
- Making graphic representations of content
- Talking to another person about the text
- Writing about parts of the text individually or as a group (for example: 'I think paragraph one is about...!', 'I liked the part when...!', 'I think this diagram shows...')

Utilise quality talk. Improving the quality of talk in the classroom is another way that literacy learning can be improved, and marginalised learners may be more motivated to participate. The quality of talk in the classroom is more important than the quantity, and merely putting students into discussion groups without direction may not achieve improved engagement or outcomes. Deliberately planning for talk activities alongside reading and writing gives students the opportunity to practise using new vocabulary, or to discuss ways in which they might approach a task. Some examples of high-quality talk include:

- Putting students in pairs to discuss the equipment they will need for an experiment.

- Putting students in small groups and giving them different pieces of information (pictures and words) about a topic that need to be put together in order to solve a puzzle
- Giving students cards with one question and one answer about a topic. They then talk to others in the group or class to locate who has the answer to their question
- Giving students sentence starters to use in their discussion

Further features of effective literacy-rich instruction are outlined in '[Literacy across the curriculum at secondary school](#)'.

Endnotes

- 1 Sturtevant, E.G., Boyd, F.B., Brozo, W.G., Hinchman, K.A., Moore, D.W., & Alvermann, D.E. (2006). Principled practices for adolescent literacy. A framework for instruction and policy. Mahwah, N.J: Erlbaum.
- 2 Moje, E.B., Young, J.P., Readance, J.E., & Moore, D.W. (2000). Reinventing adolescent literacy for new times: Perennial and millennial issues. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 400-410.
- 3 Curriculum Progress Tools <https://curriculumprogressools.education.govt.nz/>
- 4 McNaughton, S. (2020). The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand: What we know, what needs fixing and what we should prioritise. Office of the Prime Minister's Science Advisory Committee. Auckland, New Zealand.
- 5 Brozo, W.G. (2009). Response to intervention or responsive instruction? Challenges and possibilities of response to intervention for adolescent literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53(4), 277-281.
- 6 Hitchcock, D., Braddock, C., & Nelson-Latu, M. (2017). Collaborative literacy practice at secondary level. *Set: Research Information for Teachers* (1), 23-28.
- 7 Schoenbach, R., Greenleaf, C., & Murphy, L. (2012). Reading for understanding: How reading apprenticeship improves disciplinary learning in secondary and college classrooms. San Francisco: West-Ed.
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