

Chapter 1

The research

Students' needs change as they grow towards adulthood. In order to respond to these changing needs, primary and secondary schools are structurally and culturally different in many ways, including the ways teaching is constructed. These differences, when purposeful and positive, are necessary and to be valued.

The issue for students is how schools can ensure their literacy development while continuing to give them the best of what the primary or secondary school culture has to offer. Teachers of Years 5 to 8 need to be constantly aware that this transition is marked by environmental changes which are more far-reaching and dynamic than a simple shift of location.

The most obvious change is in the way students' work is structured and organised: a shift from having one main generalist teacher and being in a consistent class group in a home room, working from a mainly integrated curriculum, to having several specialist teachers teaching defined areas of the curriculum in a number of rooms each day.

Another change, often less evident, is their position in the hierarchy of the student population. They change from being students at the "top" of a school, the biggest, brightest and best, to finding themselves at the "bottom".

A further change, central to the business of their schooling, is the type of work students engage in, work that makes many new demands on them. One crucial aspect of this is the change that takes place in their literacy learning and in the new demands that are made upon their literacy competencies.

As noted in *Focus on literacy: A position paper on the teaching of literacy* (NSW Department of School Education, 1997):

The upper years of primary school and the early years of secondary school, the middle years, are characterised by the separation of areas of knowledge into school subjects which make distinctive reading and writing demands upon students. Each subject uses specific text types with particular written, spoken and symbolic forms to present its knowledge.

In the secondary school, students continue to need assistance in gaining control over the kinds of literacy demands they meet. All subjects have literacy demands that are specific to the reading and writing needed by students to participate in that subject.

Primary and secondary schools share responsibility for preparing students for the new learning challenges they meet during the transition years. Some initiatives, including exchanging relevant information between schools, are straightforward and readily achievable. Others take longer and require greater will, effort and time, and are essential if students are to make a successful transition from Year 6 to Year 7.

The State Literacy Strategy offers ways of teaching and of teaching literacy that have equal relevance for both primary and secondary schools. When teachers incorporate these philosophies and strategies, they enrich their students' learning in the key learning areas, and they also ease students' transition from primary to secondary education.

Variations in literacy teaching and learning

Variations in literacy demands and related literacy teaching and learning practices throughout the final years of primary schooling and the early years of secondary schooling have been described in several Australian studies.

Literacy in transition (Cairney et al., 1994) examined literacy activities in a number of NSW secondary schools and their associated feeder primary schools. An earlier Tasmanian study by Homer and Moore (1981) was conducted into reading across this transitional phase. This latter study investigated the reading activities of Year 6 students in a range of primary schools in 1980 and tracked those students into Year 7 to determine any variation in the reading demands placed on them. A study (Keford, 1981) of the writing demands of Year 6 and Year 7 students in NSW occurred at the same time as Homer and Moore's study.

Even though drawn from evidence separated in time by more than a decade, the summary findings of these studies are generally consistent. Following are some of the most salient of the findings.

Reading



1.1

- In Year 6, reading for research was the most prevalent form of observed reading, representing one-third of all observed reading. In contrast, in Year 7 reading for research purposes occupied only one-eighth of observed reading. (Cairney et al, 1994).
- Year 7 students were commonly required to use unsuitable (inaccessible) reference texts. Homer and Moore noted that "many more children than we realise experience great difficulty in making their own information gathered from text or reference books." (Homer & Moore, 1981; Keford, 1981)
- In Year 6, oral reading was most often in small groups from literary texts; in Year 7, oral reading was most often in whole-class situations from factual material, such as text books or blackline masters, and from the board. (Cairney et al, 1994)
- Year 7 students' ability to read literary texts did not predict their ability to read and write factual texts which were technical and expository based. (Homer & Moore, 1981)
- Students' ability to read aloud fluently did not necessarily indicate their ability to comprehend or make meaning out of the text. (Homer & Moore, 1981)

Writing



1.2

- Year 7 students were expected to work more independently than Year 6 students. They undertook fewer projects but were given less support and guidance in completing them. (Cairney et al, 1994)
- Year 6 writing generally went through a process of drafting and editing before completion. About 30% of Year 7 teachers usually expected students to produce their extended written work without this process. (Cairney et al, 1994; Keford's study also notes this difference.)

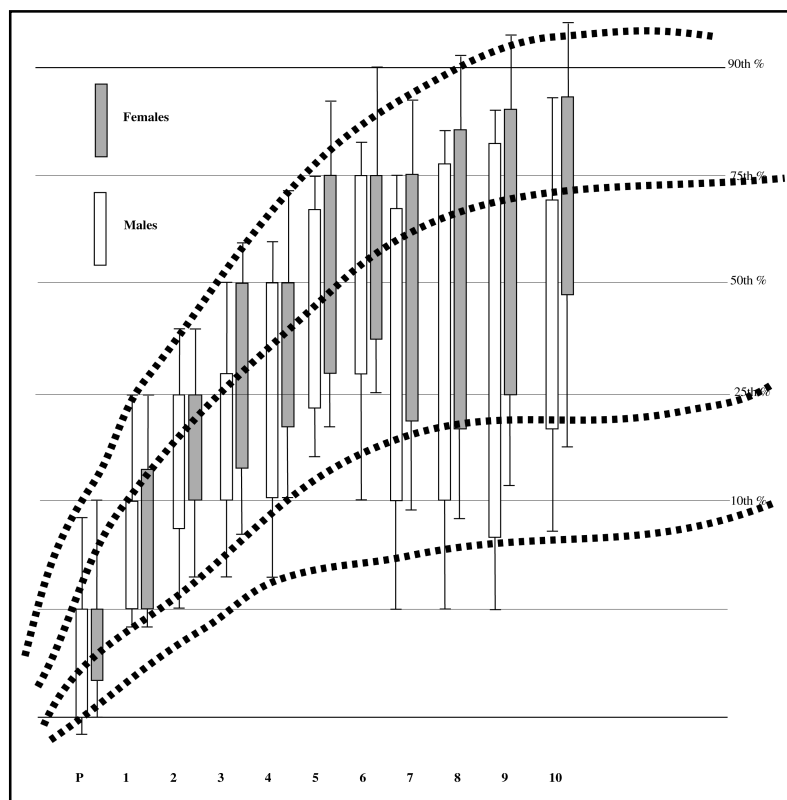
- Year 6 students wrote more pieces of extended discourse than did Year 7 students; around 40% of all observed writing in primary schools was extended discourse compared with just under 30% in secondary schools. Extended discourse in both Year 6 and Year 7 tended to be narrative or recount. (Cairney et al, 1994)
- Year 7 students wrote more “shot answer pieces” (45%) than did Year 6 (33%). This writing mainly involved the production of lists of spelling words or definitions, literal comprehension exercises and notes, or as part of an assessment process. (Cairney et al, 1994)

Each of these studies commented on the variation in the specific literacy practices in the adjoining years of education, noted the significantly changing demands from Year 6 to Year 7, and affirmed the value and importance of explicit teaching of the required skills, including teaching literacy for learning in both primary and secondary schools.

The impact of transition on students' literacy development

Two recent major studies have tracked progress in literacy development across the primary and secondary years. The Victorian Quality Schools Project (Hill, Holmes-Smith and Rowe, 1993) and the Hundred Schools Project: Literacy Programs Study (Rowe, 1995) both provide clear evidence of a significant discontinuity of progress in literacy development as a result of students' transition from primary to secondary school.

Rowe's results with relation to reading achievement, drawn from 5092 students attending 92 schools, appear in the following figure. This figure uses a “box and whisker” method to present data. The boxes show the performance of the middle 50 % of male and female students; the top “whisker” is where the average performance of the top 10 % falls, the bottom “whisker”, the average performance of the bottom 10 %. The dotted line reflects the trend of student performance according to their end of Year “P” assessment.



The development of reading skills in Years P (for "Preparatory", equivalent to the Kindergarten Year in NSW) to Year 10 in a sample of Victorian Schools. Source: Rowe, 1995



1.4

The study indicates that:

- there is consistent growth in reading achievement until Year 5. Rowe suggests that this growth coincides with the period during which students are being explicitly taught basic literacy skills
- those students who are in the lowest 10% of reading achievement make minimal progress between Year 4 and Year 9
- there is an actual decline in the levels of reading achievement for a substantial proportion of students during Year 7 and Year 8.

The findings from the earlier Victorian Quality Schools Project, with a larger sample of nearly 14,000 students, reiterate these findings.

The evidence shows that it is essential that students in the middle years continue to be explicitly taught literacy skills, knowledge and understandings. It is equally essential that teachers know and value students' prior learning and experiences, and provide a challenging curriculum which moves students purposefully along the learning continuum.

References

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