

Language Literacy Program

By Briar Jensen

“While the appearance of the classroom may not be much different from thousands around the country, the buzz of the atmosphere is something special.”



Ann Morrice (left) discussing children's progress with teacher Jenny Middleton.

The environment is relaxed and happy, the sound of laughter can be heard, the result of sharing a funny moment. The walls are covered with self-portraits, pictures and words. Words are everywhere: words on the blackboard, word banks on charts, sentences on the white board, stories on the walls.

While the appearance of the classroom may not be much different from thousands around the country, the buzz of the atmosphere is something special. The focus is on language; it is everywhere.

The children work at tables in small groups and each table has an adult present, either a teacher, parent or community helper. Questions are discussed between children and adults. Comments and quips are shared

between the adults, and the children enjoy the banter, often sharing the joke – all the while listening to, and learning from, language of a higher level but focused around the task at hand.

This is the environment fostered by the Language Literacy Program which was launched in 1995, and has now been adopted in over 300 schools across Australia. The program was designed by Ann Morrice, Assistant Principal at Hornsby Heights Public School, while doing her PhD and draws on her 25 years teaching experience, including six years as a special language support teacher.

Ann says the importance of a child's first year at school is enormous because it is when they develop an attitude of themselves as a learner. If children start to fail in their first year, the problem will

be compounded as they move through the grades. Therefore, her program commences at kindergarten level.

Learning through Language

The program focuses heavily on language. Children learn through speaking before they come to school, but when they reach school they are expected to learn through reading and writing. According to Ann, lots of children can't make this big leap, “I'm saying, lets keep the talking going, but the talk is around what you need to know.”

Anne notes, “A lot of research, particularly by Gordon Wells, talks about how important constant positive feedback is, how important meaningful

interactions are around what you need to know. He also felt, like many educators, when children come to school all the valuable things that parents are involved in, in terms of children's language development, change and are not valued any more. So I said, “Why can't we value those people again in the classroom?”

Parent Participation

Therefore, the program relies on the involvement of parents, grandparents, or other adult volunteers, as language facilitators in the classroom for a short period each day. While the teacher is ultimately in charge and responsible for setting the activities and outcomes, the parents work as equals in the classroom. This drops the teacher-child ratio from 1:30 to as low as 1:5, depending on the number of volunteers used at one time. Consequently, all children are actively

engaged in the learning process, hence the quality of learning improves. Individual children don't have to wait so long for attention and more time can be devoted to each child, which is particularly important for children who require greater assistance.

The program fosters humour to be shared and enjoyed, not on the children's level, but on an adult level, for them to rise to. Time is also spent talking to and with the children about stories, events, and issues that arise in the normal course of the day – as a mother would. This not only develops a close understanding between teacher and pupil, but creates a family atmosphere in the classroom. With the hectic lifestyle of many families, with one or both parents at work, or because they come from single parent families, some children are not exposed to this relaxed, informal language around the home.

Focus on Writing

While many kindergarten programs focus very strongly on oral language and reading, Ann's program focuses on bringing children right through that to writing all the time.

“Language development is the key to the program, with a strong emphasis on language development leading to writing,” explains Ann. “It's in the writing process that you bring together all the things you need to know to be literate: you start to learn letter names, sounds, how to syllabify, look at your grammar, tense and punctuation. All these very important things, that are the grounding of future literacy, get practised over and over again. Parents are there to support that, so you can never fail. That's the important issue.”

The major elements of the program are:

- Children move from kindergarten to year one with the same teacher, if possible.
- Parents, community volunteers or older students for a 1 to 2 hour period each day as language facilitators in the classroom.
- Literature becomes the focus for language development.
- Linking of speaking, listening, reading, writing and spelling. (Conventional, not invented spelling.)

Year 1 team-teachers Jenny Middleton and Trisha Scott, from Winston Hills Public School in Sydney, are now in their third year on the program and have found it thoroughly rewarding, saying their classes developed a spirit of cooperative learning with all children actively involved the learning process.



Volunteer assisting with story writing.



Implementation

A typical lesson for Jenny and Trisha starts with a whole-group input session. A story is read, followed by a discussion and the recording of words, provided by the children, for the word bank; often 40 – 50 words are recorded which can be used in the writing process. The children then move off into smaller groups, with a volunteer, to begin writing.

As the children write their stories they seek assistance from the volunteers for spelling, punctuation and grammar, all the time learning to communicate with higher language users. Children record unfamiliar words in their personal dictionaries for future reference.

Jenny and Trisha use this system for reading, writing, spelling, language, number, news, and craft and say the children work well in the small groups and respond positively to the variety of work.

Results

Their report on the program notes, "Parent helpers were essential to this program and they were a fantastic asset to the quality of learning taking place in the classroom. Verbal language skills are definitely enhanced due to the emphasis on talking and listening. The interaction of students and adults has been very beneficial to all involved. This relationship has encouraged the children to achieve their best results. The praise from the adults has positively reinforced the children's efforts."

They also point out that as there is no invented spelling, children learn how to present their work correctly from the start. As dictionary use is encouraged and expected from the beginning, children become proficient in dictionary and alphabet skills, so they no longer have to be taught separately.

They are thrilled with the results of the program saying, "Presentation of work is outstanding – as children have been expected to write, spell and punctuate

correctly all year the finished product is of a very high standard."

Trish McKendrick, a volunteer whose fourth child at the school is on the program says, "I can see with Stuart how much further he has progressed at the same stage comparing him to my other three children. The way the literacy program is now I think the children are benefiting much more, they're further ahead for the stage they're at."

Principal, Brian Powyer, concurs and is very pleased with the results so far. He says, "The kindergarten and year 1 children that took part in the program last year are writing to a higher level and the program lifts all levels of children in the class. A larger number of children are reaching independent reader level earlier or on time."

Open to Change

While Jenny and Trisha found the program easy to implement in their team-teaching situation, Ann admits it can be hard work for some teachers due to the constant interaction with the children. It also requires an expectation that children can learn at a more advanced level than is traditionally expected, so teachers need to be open to change and have a positive attitude. "If you expect kids to do it, they will," says Ann.

Jenny agrees that having volunteers in the classroom does mean a little more preparation, but thinks the benefits are well worth the effort. She says, "Volunteers bring with them into the classroom their patience, their interest, their humour,

their warmth and their energy; all of these things are important in a classroom full of children."

As well as the help they receive, teachers often enjoy the companionship of other adults. The friendly rapport which can develop between teacher and volunteers creates a relaxed and happy atmosphere in the classroom. Teachers also appreciate others having a greater understanding of the literacy process. Volunteers often take that information and explain it to the wider community, further broadening understanding of the process.

Broad Application

The program is designed to run from kindergarten onwards, but Ann says it can benefit children at all levels. She has

used the techniques to bring a child with a six year development problem up to normal level within 18 months. To date the program has been implemented in preschools right through to a TAFE college.

Ann, who received the 1995 Australian College of Education Ku-Ring-Gai Award for Innovative Excellence in Education, is currently on leave from her school to implement the program further afield. This was initially sponsored by author Bryce Courtenay, however, that funding is no longer available and Ann is currently seeking new sponsorship.

While working directly with the NSW and Queensland governments, in other states she is working with individual schools. In SA she works with aboriginal children through the Anangu Education Service. She also works directly with small groups of teachers or individual teachers, if required.

Ann Morrice will be conducting further workshops this year. If you would like more information she can be contacted on 0418 440 313.

Brian Jensen



Volunteer assisting with story writing.



Volunteer taking a group for news.



Volunteer assisting with story writing.