

## PARTNERSHIPS IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: ENGAGING WITH SECONDARY TEACHERS TO SUPPORT LITERACY IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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**Abstract:** *In a global and volatile world, teachers are being constantly challenged to support students' literacy development and assist them to develop knowledge and skills to expand into new ways of knowing. This two-year school-university partnership is dedicated to enhancing teachers' learning about language with the goal of building teachers' repertoires in ways that promote effective literacy teaching within their subject specific teaching areas in an Australian high school. The project is grounded in theories of knowledge structures of discipline learning within the sociology of education and associated social semiotic theories of language as a resource for meaning making. The project utilizes formative experimental methodology to understand how teachers enact text-based approaches to school-based literacy. Initial findings reveal how a partnership based on trust, mutuality, and reciprocity motivated teachers to make small but measurable changes to their classroom practice in one area of literacy development.*

**Keywords:** teacher professional development, communities of practice, school-university partnerships, language-based theory of learning, teacher capacity

### Introduction

Teachers play a critical role in preparing students to “think, learn and communicate with texts” (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011, p.1) and in assisting them to develop knowledge and skills to expand into new ways of knowing. Consistent with the new Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012), this two-year project honors a school-university partnership in “ensuring appropriate transition in language learning to support initial and ongoing teacher education, to collaborate on research, and to promote and reward language learning.” The aim of the project is to provide professional learning and resources for high school teachers with the expectation of building their repertoires in ways that promote effective literacy teaching and learning within their subject specific teaching areas. The project focuses its research on one high school's engagement in ongoing professional learning dedicated to building teacher capacity to support literacies across the curriculum. It explores how a school's dialogue about literacy is

shaped and by whom. The project is motivated by an understanding of the synergies among the processes and structures that engage teachers' buy in to literacy, contextual factors that mould teachers' pedagogic decisions, and teachers' capacity to adopt literacy pedagogical practices. The purpose of this paper is to document how the school-university partnership, in its first year, is supporting teachers in one area of literacy development with the promise of improved outcomes for student learning across the curriculum.

### The Challenge of Literacy Learning in the Adolescent Years

Researchers and educators worldwide agree that as students move from primary to secondary school, they will struggle with the changing demands for reading and writing across the curriculum (Maclean, 2005). This view presumes that fundamental skills gained in the primary years are insufficient for working with more complex disciplinary knowledge. As

Heller and Greenleaf (2007) theorize, “A foundation doesn’t make a house, and basic skills don’t make for high-level competence” (p. 20). As students move through their schooling, they are met with an increasing specialization in literacy development in the curriculum. As students move through the middle years of school, moreover, they are likely to add more complex routines and responses to their reading and writing repertoires. Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) observe that these routines and responses tend to be general rather than subject specific. Predictably, as students move into the senior years of school, literacies become even more discipline specific.

A fundamental challenge for secondary teachers is how to embed literacy into their existing pedagogy in ways that increase student access to the curriculum without jeopardizing curriculum content or reducing discipline knowledge. Freebody (2012) discerns that the existing issue for literacy education is “the different ways in which literacy is put to work in the different curriculum areas.” As Faulkner (2012) found, making the shift to accommodate literacy into their classroom practice requires teachers to adapt or alter their pedagogical approaches to satisfy the requirements of their curriculum area. Faulkner also found that teachers’ pedagogic choices are frequently influenced by the context within which they plan and teach. For example, when limited time is available for sharing large amounts of content, the pedagogy is often reduced to ‘telling’ and ‘control,’ where ‘telling’ is often a lecture and recitation is used to cover content (Vacca et al., 2011); notwithstanding, this same pedagogy may not be conducive to student talk and active engagement with learning.

In Australia, there is growing acceptance that all teachers share responsibility for supporting students’ literacy development and explicitly teaching the “conventions of

language and text patterns within their own learning area” (ACARA, 2012, p. 14). A student’s knowledge of language resources to create academic language needs to be sufficiently rich to access the language resources of specialized academic discourses. Each learning area in the secondary curriculum has its own distinctive explanation of phenomena, and a way of locating people and communities. For example, the language of Mathematics is quite distinctive, as are, for example, the languages of Economics, Music and Science. Students, however, do not instinctively acquire these distinctive languages. Therefore, teachers will need to make explicit the unique ways in which language and literacy is embedded within certain disciplines (Freebody, 2012). As well, teachers across disciplines are expected to develop a shared understanding about how language works in academic contexts. ‘Metalanguage’ acts as a key tool in building a common language that is accessible to teachers, students and parents in talking about language (Derewianka & Jones, 2012).

### **A Language Based Theory of Learning**

In keeping with the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012), teachers are expected to implement a *functional approach to language* that is concerned with how language functions to enable us to make meaning that subsequently shapes our school and adult lives. A functional model of language draws on Halliday (2009) whose view of language is construed as a process of ‘learning how to mean’ through which we cultivate our ‘meaning potential’ (Halliday, 1992, p.19). A functional approach to language is guided by a theoretical framework grounded in theories of knowledge structures of discipline learning within the sociology of education (Bernstein, 1999; Christie & Maton, 2011; Maton, 2007, 2011) and associated social semiotic theories of language as a resource for meaning making (Macken-Horarik,

1996). It draws on language resources developed by academic literacy researchers (Derewianka & Jones, 2012; de Silva Joyce & Feez 2012; Feez & Joyce, 1998; Humphrey & Maton, 2010).

Drawing on Halliday's work, Australian linguists Martin (1985), Christie (2005), and others have designed a 'genre-based' (or text-based) approach that is founded on the understanding of "making the language demands of the curriculum explicit so that all students have access to the linguistic resources needed for success in school and to the powerful ways of using language in our culture" (as cited by Derewianka & Jones, 2012, p. 4). In recent times, researchers and literacy educators have applied the notion of genre to the examination and teaching of written text, and identified the general patterning of spoken and written texts used in school contexts. The notion of genre, identifiable structural patterns within texts, enables us to achieve our social purposes through language within a specific context (Martin & Rose, 2008). These genres relate to different disciplines within school curricula and to the different fields of work. Learning to recognize and to work with these genres "enables students to understand how to structure discourse to meet educational and work purposes, to critique what is presented to them and mould genres to their own communicative purposes" (de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2012, p.16).

Across all years of schooling, Australian teachers are expected to provide their students with sufficient language resources to achieve expected outcomes for purposes of explaining, arguing, describing, and recounting across a range of disciplines in a range of media and modes (Derewianka & Jones, 2012). In secondary school contexts, for example, students need to be proficient in a range of genres or text types in order to be successful learners across the curriculum in school and beyond. Because

their teachers are trained to be experts in their discipline area, it does not follow that all teachers can recognise, and explain explicitly, the language and literacy demands of their discipline area. As each learning area of the Australian Curriculum is rolled out, high school teachers are being challenged with applying their knowledge about language to adapt programs for the literacy teaching and learning students will need to achieve expected curriculum outcomes. Consequently, teachers will need access to professional learning and resources for learning about language and how a *functional approach* to language better equips them to support their students "to learn language, to learn through language and to learn about language" (Derewianka & Jones, 2012, p. 4).

### Context of the Project

In this two-year project conducted in 2013 and 2014, a newly formed school-university partnership between an Australian high school in the nation's capital and an Australian regional university provided impetus for building secondary teachers' capacity to support literacies across the curriculum. The project developed out of school community concern stemming from the school's disappointing results in the writing portion of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which students are required to do at years 5, 7, and 9. Predicated on the notion of literacy as a capacity for making meaning across the curriculum (ACARA, 2012), the school adopted a whole-school approach to addressing the writing needs of students in developing literacy proficiency across the curriculum and coupling these explicitly to the new Australian Curriculum. Professional learning and resources for scaffolding teachers' learning about language in all learning areas was developed jointly between the school and the academic partner. The professional learning

promoted genre as a part of an explicit approach to teaching and learning, featuring effective strategies for scaffolding students through explicit teaching of language and language resources that they need to be successful writers in high school.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

This Australian project draws on a U.S. study investigating high school teachers' engagement with literacy practices in professional learning communities (Styslinger, Clary, & Oglan, 2014). It focuses its investigation on the notion of Wengers' *communities of practice* or otherwise known as professional learning communities advocated by DuFour and Fullan. By drawing on available or alternate structures and resources for enabling teachers' learning in more collaborative ways (Fullan, 2005), the project seeks to understand how a school might engage in an intervention designed to promote a school-based approach to literacy learning using collaborative practitioner-based research.

The literature of school improvement (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2005) is unequivocal that schools with 'strong teacher communities' have the potential to 'reinvent practice' and 'advance learning' (Fullan, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). As Hargreaves and Fullan (1996) and Louis and Marks (1996) uncovered, school cultures have the capacity to respond to critical inquiry and create opportunities for dialogue. Subsequently, a school's culture is most likely to improve when teachers come together to dialogue about practice and "learn from each other on an ongoing basis" (Fullan, 2005, p. 221). As Lunenburg (2010) advises, school leaders invested in improving student learning and success might focus on "developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community" (p. 6).

Creating a professional learning community, however, demands thinking about structures and cultures of schools that must be 'brought to the surface, examined and discussed' with participants in the process. "Educators who acknowledge and honestly assess their current reality are far more likely to be successful in changing it" (DuFour et al., 2005, p. 250). Accordingly, to achieve a change in culture, schools will need to establish structures that enable teachers to work and learn collaboratively and to engage in sharing, learning and evaluating, and cross-role participation (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Wenger's original notion of *communities of practice* (1998), for example, may be applied to an education context where small groups of teachers come together to make sense of their practice by interrogating communal concerns. Within the literature, a community of practice is now accepted as 'the foundation of a perspective on knowing and learning that informs efforts to create learning systems' (Wenger-Trayner, 2012). A school, therefore, is not the 'privileged locus of learning: it is part of a broader system.' A community of practice has the capacity to 'influence theory and practice.' In a school context, however, 'changing the learning theory is a much deeper transformation' (Wenger-Trayner, 2012) evolving from teacher engagement in peer-to-peer deep learning about theory and practice in communities where teachers have autonomy over their learning agenda and membership of a community (Wenger-Trayner, 2012). In principle, communities of practice offer the 'promise of enabling connections among people across formal structures' (Wenger-Trayner, 2012); in a school context, teachers work in collaborative environments characterized by a non-hierarchical structure.

## School-University Partnerships

A distinguishing feature of this Australian project is the school-university partnership. The literature on professional development schools and school-university partnerships underscores the notion of schools as learning communities in an external collaboration designed to assist teachers to improve their practice. A survey of the literature reveals a range of activities designed to benefit the partnership including supervision and mentoring, collaborative teaching initiatives, action research, joint professional development, shared planning, and school enrichment and support.

The need for robust school-university partnerships continues to be a ubiquitous theme in the teacher education literature. The Professional Development School (PDS) that emerged in the United States in the mid-1980s concentrated on professional development school partnerships for (a) preparing future educators, (b) providing current educators with ongoing professional development, (c) encouraging joint school–university faculty investigation of education-related issues, and (d) promoting the learning of P–12 students (National Association for Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2008). It was championed as a joint venture by a regular public school and a university or a college of education to address new educational challenges (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Kennedy, 1990). Kennedy emphasized the potential of such a partnership: “When you *combine* what university people bring with the experience and practical knowledge that teachers have, you get powerful new educational approaches that neither one can produce alone” (p. 14).

In Australia, the need for forming partnerships has been promoted by a suite of official reports and commentators/

researchers. Commenting on the Australian context, Brady (2002) found

While these partnerships have produced invaluable collaboration, there have been further forays in recent years, most notably those involving joint participation in school-based research, and shared planning for, teaching of and assessment of prospective teachers. (p. 1)

My interest in school-university partnerships stems from recent work as a coordinator engaged in a professional development school (PDS) partnership in a southeastern university in the USA. From my perspective, also supported by Zuercher, Yoshioka, and Buelow (2014), the benefits for both the school and the university include the ‘reciprocal, relational’ aspect of professional development, mutual funding opportunities, and the involvement of classroom teachers in collaborative research. In accepting the role of critical friend/staff developer, I entered into a reciprocal partnership based on trust and understanding, and to which I would bring new knowledge, perspectives and insights about literacy education in authentic contexts, and the teachers would contribute practical knowledge and experience about teaching in their discipline specific contexts.

## Methodology

This project draws on formative experimental methodology (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Literacy researchers (Jiménez, 1997; Reinking & Watkins, 2000; Welch, 2000) have used this research methodology in response to inadequacies of traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods. The formative research design allows researchers to become actively engaged with the participants and organizations involved in the research and to encourage change (Jiménez, 1997). Formative

research seeks to improve instruction through a mix of qualitative methods of investigation and interventions in learning situations (Jacob, 1992). The epistemological stance associated with formative research is *pragmatism* (Reinking & Watkins, 2000), that is, data collection, analysis, and interpretation are dedicated to the pedagogical goal(s).

This project is supported by practitioner-based action research, a form of formative research, where researchers and teachers collaborate in the design, implementation, and analysis of practice (Reinking & Bradley, 2008), giving them the assurance to review and implement teaching

approaches. As a part of the research design, the process requires teachers to implement the intervention, specifically designed to implement a literacy pedagogical model to extend students' literate practices and raise literacy across the school, as well as document the outcomes of their professional learning efforts. As illustrated in Figure 1, the project consists of six phases of professional activity designed to improve teacher pedagogy over two years. The project design is largely informed by the literature of teacher change (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Young, 2002; Guskey, 2000; Hattie, 2009).

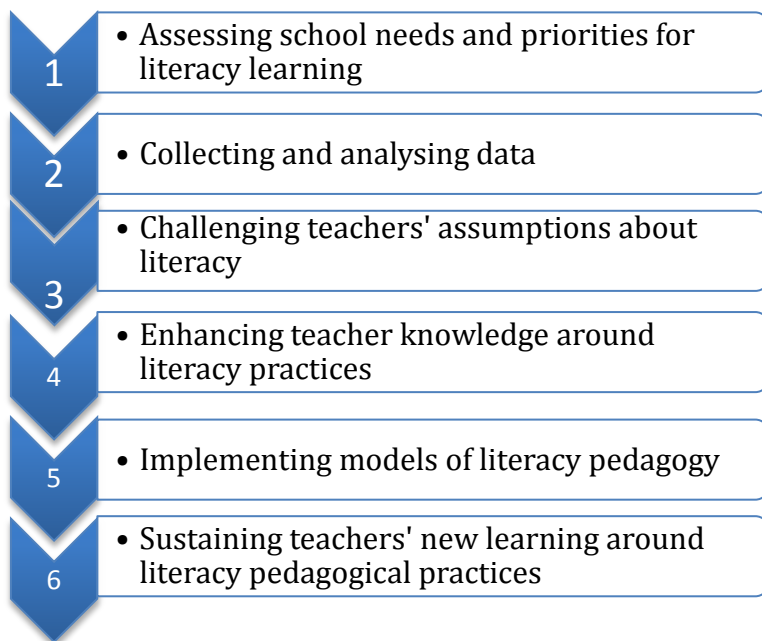


Figure 1. Project Design for Improving Teacher Pedagogy

Teacher participation in the first year involved all staff in professional learning offered in staff meetings and professional development days. The professional learning was designed in collaboration with the school and the academic partner with the goal of providing teachers with new learning about language, as well as a stimulus for teachers to reflect on their work and how their work can be demonstrated to and shared with others. It

proposed approaches for scaffolding the development of literacy skills and strategies to assist students to meet the literacy demands more effectively. Specifically, the professional learning targeted writing in response to a decline in students' writing performance in the NAPLAN tasks. Teachers focused their attention on assessment tasks that require students to write extended text, using

samples of student writing to identify literacy learning needs.

At the start of the project, a sample of eight teachers representative of the discipline areas was invited to engage in action research over two years. The following methods were selected to gather data from a range of teachers as well as examining some teachers' experiences in greater depth: (a) Survey using Qualtrics software to collect baseline data about teacher participants; (b) Interviews with a sample of teachers during and after the intervention; (c) Interviews with school principal and school literacy leader; (d) Video footage of classroom practice to capture teachers' practice following the intervention; (e) Other data e.g. student work samples, assessment tasks, school assessment data, e.g. NAPLAN.

Data analysis consisted of elements used from grounded theory and that of content analysis.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section consists of a looking back and across the project's first year. It details emerging insights about teachers' learning that can be best represented as three strands: (a) processes and structures to engage teachers in literacy professional learning, (b) contextual factors that mould teachers' pedagogic decisions, and (c) teacher capacity to adopt literacy pedagogical practices.

In this section, the nature of the school-university partnership as it unfolded in the first year is also examined.

#### **Processes and Structures to Engage Teachers in Professional Learning**

Having an infrastructure in place has enabled the school to progress its goals to improve literacy. Prior to the school-university partnership, the school enacted strategies to increase the focus on literacy

across all learning areas by establishing a Literacy Coordinator role which attracted a teacher release component, and a School Improvement Committee to oversee teaching and learning. To embed literacy in the discipline discourses, each of the learning areas was now required to have a literacy plan and report outcomes annually.

Consistent with the literature of *communities of practice*, the school was a part of 'a broader learning system,' having participated in joint projects with other universities and the wider education community. At the principal's instigation, the school has developed its own *communities of practice* (alias COPs), designed primarily to support the *National Professional Teaching Standards* (NPTS). In an effort to motivate staff to engage students in literacy learning across the curriculum, the school identified literacy as a priority area for COPs. In its first year, teachers elected to join an across curricula teacher community supported a teacher facilitator, whose role was to collaborate with the community of teachers about their learning agenda. A COP's facilitator cited 'two broad but related themes,' that guided his community of practice in the first year:

The first is the application of high expectations in the classroom; the second is to understand what habits and skills differentiate our high achieving students from our medium to low ability students....We have also focused on the implementation of high expectations and literacy through professional reading....

Consistent with the principal's 'hands off' approach to COPs, teachers reported the benefits of a structure that can enable teachers 'to set our own project and its parameters as we feel more ownership over what we do.' Aside from building new professional relationships and collaborating across disciplines, a teacher attests that COPs has "opened our doors and made us more open to sharing our work and our ideas." As a vehicle for

peer-to-peer feedback about one's teaching, teachers reported that COPs as a 'learning system' has afforded them learning about 'new teaching techniques' and 'new behaviour management strategies.' However, as one teacher opines, "sometimes coordinating opportunities to observe each other can be difficult," lamenting that she/he "wanted to ask for cover every now and then but felt bad doing it as it impacts whole school budget..."

Indicative of how COPs was making impact on teachers' pedagogical practice, a teacher facilitator reported that teachers are engaging in "honest and fruitful conversations" about what they are doing in their classrooms, thereby "leading to changes in the way they teach their classes and an improvement in pedagogy." Similarly, a teacher attested: "Rather than avoiding issues which may be leading to disengagement, we are open to discussing and improving them and the no-blame culture leads to discussions which are positive and empowering rather than negative and critical."

### **Contextual Factors that Mould Teachers' Pedagogic Decisions**

A broader context for this project is the Australian Curriculum. The implementation of the Australian Curriculum Phase 1 has fostered increased dialogue about literacy across the curriculum. At the start of this project, most teachers demonstrated that they possessed a good grasp of the requirements of the 'literacy' strand detailing their students' literacy skills development in their learning areas. Most, if not all, acknowledged that it is their responsibility to incorporate literacy into their classroom practice and programs. Nonetheless, the act of adopting a literacy pedagogy in one's classroom and the show of a commitment to literacy are not mutually exclusive, as this project found.

From the outset, the school's community agreed that literacy is important; thereby, creating the perception that literacy is the responsibility of all teachers. A decline in students' performance in NAPLAN (2011-12) prompted the school community to collectively find ways to improve students' writing. The Literacy Coordinator has since championed a school literacy handbook, now published on the school's website, in collaboration with the parent and academic community. Literacy spotlights are now featured at school assemblies and staff meetings. Closer collaboration with local primary schools has also started. While such initiatives are encouraging, the real test lay in teachers taking risks in adopting a new pedagogy necessitating recognition by principals and others who work closely with teachers that teacher change is a gradual and difficult process (Guskey, 2002). It follows that teachers must come to use new pedagogical practices as routine practice, but they will require follow-up and support.

### *Teacher capacity to adopt literacy pedagogy*

While it is accepted that all teachers, regardless of their teaching area, are teachers of literacy, nevertheless, systematic planning for content learning and literacy learning, though essential, can be complex on many levels. As well, it is important to acknowledge that no innovation will be implemented uniformly (Guskey, 2002). In this project, teachers in some curriculum areas have started to shift in their thinking about how to meet the writing needs of their students. For example, to complement a persuasive text as an assessment item for year 7, physical education teachers have instituted a fitness journal across years 7-9 and invited students to use multimodal texts as a platform for assessment tasks in year 9. To address literacy in the mathematics curriculum, faculty introduced a persuasive



text into an assessment task in years 7-8. This task was subsequently removed following parental concerns alleging that the text type should be taught in English. Ultimately, several mathematics teachers remained unconvinced about the use of a text-based approach. Similarly, science teachers have been cautious of adopting a genre-based approach, favoring 'cherished practices' developed and refined over time. The inference is that teacher and community awareness of how literacy is pervasive across disciplines is at odds with current policy and thinking about literacy education, and that there exists reluctance by teachers to take ownership of literacy development in the high school years.

Inevitably, professional learning involving new theoretical understandings can be irritating and threatening for teachers (Guskey, 2002). Teachers will contest the adoption of new pedagogical practices unless they are confident they can make them work (Guskey). As this project reveals, teachers are not 'too keen on theory,' and moreover, they want to know 'what works' in their distinctive learning area. Nonetheless, observations underline teachers' willingness and readiness to make 'small changes' to classroom practice in one area of literacy development, specifically writing, in their efforts to enhance student learning in the secondary curriculum at large.

### **The Possibility of School-University Partnerships**

As critical friend, teacher educator, and researcher, I have sensitively navigated an informal reciprocal partnership based on trust and teachers' impetus for new deep learning. I have been enthusiastically welcomed into the school and earned teachers' trust in the deepening of a partnership to which I am contributing new knowledge, perspectives, and insights. What this research confirms is that teachers and teacher educators essentially want to work together in ways that respect

each other's unique contributions. Moreover, as the findings indicate, reciprocal and relational partnerships are most likely to emerge from a commitment that the focus of participation is the learning of all members of a learning community, most importantly, student learning.

The findings indicate that an effective and enduring partnership has a *focus on learning*, linked to the school's priorities, in this case, literacy, and the needs of all members of an extended learning community focused on, and working toward the shared goals for a whole school approach to literacy learning. At the heart of the partnership is the development of *professional authentic relationships* afforded by the institution of the partnership and stimulated by the anticipation of professional conversations among all members of the learning community. Notably, this partnership is being enriched by *enabling structures*, such as COPs, affording a space for members of a learning community to start new learning relationships by valuing each other's contributions in forming committed relationships within the context of a safe and supportive environment.

### **Hopes and Challenges**

In an era of educational change characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity occasioned by the introduction of national curricula and an increasing focus on accountability measures, it is important that teachers have a clear understanding about language and how their knowledge about language is essential in planning, teaching, assessing, and supporting students in achieving expected educational outcomes. This project underlines the benefits of a school-university partnership supported by targeted professional learning to help teachers better understand the challenges of how they develop approaches about teaching language learning across the curriculum. It provides

insights into how teachers might start to identify and design interventions to address new literacy demands in their discipline specific contexts.

To do this work, however, schools need to have structures in place that support teachers' work and learning through collaboration (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Fullan, 2005). Teachers in this project attest to the potential of *communities of practice* as a vehicle for motivating pedagogical change, and consequently, student achievement. Moreover, the project reveals how site-based context-specific professional learning provides a positive context for teachers to reflect critically and openly on

their teaching, and how teachers are willing to exert a high degree of agency over educational outcomes with the promise of improved literacy pedagogy. It is the hope that these teachers will continue to build a repertoire of teaching practices and pedagogical skills focused on reading and writing that will effectively meet the targeted learning needs of their students. Indeed, as the partnership endures, we expect to expand our knowing about the synergies among the processes and structures that can engage teachers' buy-in to literacy, the contextual factors that govern teachers' pedagogic decisions, and their capacity to adopt literacy pedagogical practice.

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