The answer has to be deep engagement with other colleagues and with mentors in exploring, refining, and improving their practice as well as setting up an environment in which this not only can happen but is encouraged, rewarded, and pressed to happen. (Fullan 2006, p. 57)

The Literacy Assessment Project (LAP) is a ground-breaking, evidence-based approach to improving reading outcomes for students in Years 3–6. The project promotes innovation, quality teaching and professional learning that is embedded in teacher practice. The multi-tiered design of the LAP has successfully supported teacher professional learning through an emphasis on literacy leaders and professional learning teams working laterally in collaborative partnerships. Internal accountability is created through this design, which recognises diversity and values-building capacity at the teacher, school and system levels.

Innovation
The innovative structures and resources promoted in the LAP encourage the development of a professional learning environment where understandings of the complexity of reading development are enhanced and all students’ learning needs are addressed effectively. The Progression of Reading Development (PRD) is a central LAP resource and was developed during the 2004–2007 pilot phase of the project. The development of this resource involved the mapping of commonly used comprehension assessments onto the same developmental continuum of reading skills. Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) meet regularly and follow an innovative meeting structure that promotes evidence-based discourse. This structure supports the teachers to combine the use of the PRD with standardised and ongoing assessments to estimate students’ levels of development and to investigate teaching strategies and resources most appropriate for each level. Teachers’ capacity to work in this cycle is developed through targeted professional learning activities and resources for both leaders and teachers.

Quality Teaching
In his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to the influences on student achievement, Hattie (2009) identifies teachers as ‘among the most powerful influences in learning’ (p. 238). Hattie emphasises teachers’ engagement in ‘critical reflection in light of evidence about their teaching’ (p. 239) as a major theme in the pursuit of excellence in education. The Literacy Assessment Project identifies, values and encourages teachers to operate from a culture of high expectations and developmental understandings about learning. Through the LAP, teachers focus on what is best for individual students and implement differentiated teaching approaches and resources that best suit their learning needs. The LAP enables teachers to share and access effective examples of teaching strategies, practice and resources that they then adapt and use and to meet their students’ learning needs.

Professional Learning Embedded in Teacher Practice
Hawley and Vall (1999) advocate that professional learning should be ‘continuous and ongoing, and include follow up and support for further learning – including from sources external to the school that can provide necessary resources and new perspectives’ (p. 137). Timperley (1992) adds that ‘in effective professional development, theories of curriculum, effective teaching and assessment are developed alongside their applications to practice’ (p. 11). The establishment of professional learning teams provides a powerful forum for teachers to learn and a purpose for collaborating and cooperating.

As they share ideas, plan and teach together, teachers create opportunities to learn from each other and to make quality teaching plans as a team (Crévol & Hill 2005). PLTs situate teachers at the heart of knowledge creation and innovation, enabling the development of pedagogical practices specific to individual contexts. Teachers are motivated to make the necessary changes by a shared sense of purpose and belief in their common ability to make a difference.

An essential element of professional learning teams is the leadership role exercised by the school-based literacy leader. The role involves that of peer coach, co-researcher, mentor, change agent and a linker of stakeholders, including teachers, the school leadership team and the community. Involvement in the planning and design of professional learning affords them the opportunity to be both a lead learner who has the ‘big picture’ and to contribute to the project design.

Research
2004–2007 PILOT STUDY
Between 2004 and 2007, 20 schools participated in the pilot implementation of the Literacy Assessment Project. Substantial shifts in student reading comprehension development and in teacher knowledge, practice and discourse were noted in participating schools.

Finding 1: A substantial shift in reading comprehension development, up to three times the normal expected gain, occurred in the initial group of Literacy Assessment Project schools.

The difference between a high and a low response on an assessment was mapped onto eight levels. Each of these levels was divided into approximately two logits (a unit of measurement). This scale was used to describe progression along a developmental path.
Repeated studies of development, including national and state (AIM) testing have shown that a growth of 0.5 logits can be expected within a one-year program for the typical student.

The average gain per school in the LAP was approximately 1.0 to 1.5 logits – three times the normal expected gain, with the students at the lower end of the PRD progressing by up to two levels. The analysis showed that over time, not only were all students’ reading comprehension skills progressing at a greater than average rate but also fewer students were operating at the lower levels of reading ability.

Finding 2: A substantial shift in teacher knowledge, discourse and literacy teaching practice was evident among teachers and literacy leaders involved in the initial group of Literacy Assessment Project schools.

Through the course of the project, a marked shift was observed in the discourse of the literacy leaders and teachers when discussing the learning and teaching of reading. This shift was noted during project meetings, on analysis of the resources submitted over time and in the results of a survey of all participating PLTs.

Conclusions
The substantial improvement in student reading outcomes occurred as a result of the interaction of two powerful processes: professional learning teams working with the Progression of Reading Development alongside a professional learning culture that emphasised the importance of teacher professional learning embedded in practice.

It cannot be assumed that teachers who have identified a starting point for students’ learning have the expertise to design the most effective learning opportunities to move them along the continuum. Through the project this expertise was developed and deepened. Replication of these levels of improvement would not occur in other schools unless the use of the PRD was accompanied by strategic professional learning opportunities that developed and strengthened teachers’ pedagogical practice.

The multi-tiered design of the LAP promoted teacher professional learning through an emphasis on professional learning teams working laterally in collaborative partnerships. An internal accountability was created through this design, which recognised diversity and valued building capacity at the teacher, school and system levels.

2009–2011 AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH LINKAGE GRANT
As a result of the compelling reading comprehension gains noted in the LAP pilot study, the importance of studying the relationship between teacher behaviour, knowledge, skills and attitudes, and student learning outcomes was recognised. This relationship has become the focus of a large Linkage research project funded by...
the Australian Research Council. The Linkage research is a partnership between the Assessment Research Centre, University of Melbourne, the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM), and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The research will further investigate the factors that influence substantial growth in student outcomes.

Implementation

COLLABORATIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE PARTNERSHIPS

The LAP is designed to be collaborative in nature, recognising the knowledge, expertise and skills each stakeholder brings to it. An important characteristic of the LAP is an explicit accountability and an expectation that each project member can learn from and with each other.

The organisation of the project is three-tiered. This design is driven by the goals of building instructional leadership capacity, teacher pedagogical content knowledge and internal accountability systems that inform school improvement.

Within the first tier, CEOM literacy education officers and senior researchers from the Assessment Research Centre, University of Melbourne, coordinate project implementation, data collection and analysis.

In the second tier, literacy leaders contribute findings from the use of the assessment tools and resources, give feedback on the calibration of assessments, and engage in data-focused discussions. While the target group in this tier is literacy leaders, with responsibility in the Years 3–6 area, a number of principals have also chosen to engage at this level of the project and have reported substantial benefits to their school as a result. Close liaison is maintained between the CEOM, the University, and the literacy leaders in each school. This collaboration is a central feature of the project.

The third tier incorporates school teams, who examine the data in light of their knowledge of individual students and assist in identifying and addressing any anomalies in the data. The work of professional learning teams in the ‘workplace’ is central to the validation of the Progression of Reading Development. In addition to validating the progression, PLTs also work to identify and document teaching strategies and resources appropriate for individual students’ learning needs.

WHOLE-SCHOOL COMMITMENT

While LAP promotes professional conversations, internal accountability and a research/inquiry approach, it is essential that the school culture supports an environment where professional learning communities flourish.

Participation in the LAP involves a three-year school commitment to structures and protocols that:

- enable the literacy leader to act as a coach and challenger
- convey an expectation that teachers are lifelong learners
- provide adequate time for regular opportunities to meet as a PLT.

Schools are supported through:

- opportunities for collaboration with academics and consultants who are experts in assessment and data analysis, reading development and pedagogy
- school-based literacy leaders
- collaborative learning in PLTs
- targeted professional learning embedded in practice
- ongoing CEOM literacy education officer support.

CONTINUOUS AND ONGOING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

A variety of sites and modes of professional learning in the Literacy Assessment Project allow for differentiation according to schools’ needs.

Central to the teachers’ ongoing professional learning are the school professional learning teams. At the heart of these learning communities are the school literacy leaders who actively model, facilitate and support collaborative learning. The literacy leaders are highly supported in the LAP to build their leadership capacity through literacy-focused professional learning and engagement in orchestrated networked learning.

The professional learning supports and expects literacy leaders to operate at a high level. Literacy leaders undertake professional learning modules (accredited at postgraduate level) to enable them to:

- use data in an evidence-based approach to planning and evaluating instruction and curriculum
- use reporting and analysis software to inform decision-making and monitor student development

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**Figure 3:** Three-tiered organisation of the Learning Assessment Project.
• demonstrate an understanding of the nature of individual and group differences in achievement
• demonstrate leadership strategies to support a professional learning culture in their schools including the successful operation of professional learning teams
• demonstrate capacity to develop a culture of professional inquiry and reflection.

Literacy leaders are also supported through their involvement in a literacy leaders’ PLT, which meets after each lecture. Education officers facilitate these meetings where literacy leaders have the opportunity to support each other by sharing and clarifying their deepening understandings and experience. Recent research in networked learning communities highlights the advantages of learning that takes place between individuals from different schools. Collaboration and sharing across a range of learning environments spreads innovation across sites and in turn enables participants to transfer the learning to their own schools. The learning within purposeful networks can be described as learning from one another, learning with one another, and learning on behalf of others (Jackson & Temperley 2007).

In addition to the leadership exercised by the school literacy leader, the work of the PLT is supported by the provision of off-site professional learning days that explore the complexities of reading comprehension and associated pedagogy.

**LAP Implementation Plan**

**YEAR 1**

**Focus: Developing a professional learning culture, preparing the ground for substantive conversations to occur in school Professional Learning Teams**

A vibrant professional learning culture in schools is essential for engaged participation in the LAP. The first year of the LAP includes five professional learning days for literacy leaders. The PL focuses on building the literacy leaders’ capacity to lead a professional learning culture in their school and to prepare the ground for substantive conversations to occur in school PLTs.

**YEAR 2**

**Focus: Using the PRD to focus data-informed conversations within the Year 3–4 PLT, supporting teachers to identify their Years 3 & 4 students’ reading behaviours and to explore, design and implement appropriate learning opportunities to meet their learning needs**

In the second year of the LAP, school PLTs assess Years 3 & 4 students’ reading proficiency and engage with the PRD to focus data-informed conversations within their PLTs. The literacy leader supports PLTs to identify their students’ reading behaviours and collaboratively explore, design and implement appropriate learning opportunities to meet their learning needs. The second year of the LAP includes five off-site PL days for the literacy leaders and two off-site PL days for Years 3 & 4 Professional Learning Teams.

Literacy leaders undertake a second unit, Assessment for Learning, with the University of Melbourne. Through this unit the literacy leader’s capacity to interpret and use data to drive instruction is enhanced. To supplement the on-site professional learning facilitated by the literacy leader, schools’ Year 3 & 4 teachers attend two off-site PL days with their literacy leader. The content of the off-site days encourages teachers to consider the reading process from a social–critical perspective and to use the PRD as a starting point to plan for differentiated instruction that caters for individual students’ starting points and learning needs.

**YEAR 3**

**Focus: Using the PRD to focus data-informed conversations within the Year 3–6 PLT, extending the use of the PRD and supporting teachers to identify their Years 3–6 students’ reading behaviours and explore, design and implement appropriate learning opportunities to meet their learning needs**

In the third year of the LAP, school PLTs collect data on Years 3–6 students’ reading and again engage with the PRD to focus data-informed conversations within their PLTs. The literacy leader continues to support teachers to identify their students’ reading behaviours and collaboratively explore, design and implement appropriate learning opportunities to meet their learning needs. Literacy leaders undertake a second assessment unit with the University of Melbourne to develop their capacity to use assessment for learning. To supplement the on-site professional learning facilitated by the literacy leader, schools’ Years 3–6 teachers attend two off-site PL days with their literacy leader. Again, the content of these days encourages teachers to consider the reading process from a social–critical perspective and to use the PRD as a starting point to plan for instruction that considers individual students’ starting points and learning needs. The PL in the third year focuses on the needs of the middle years learner and the resources they require to engage in learning across the curriculum.
POSTGRADUATE ACCREDITATION AND NETWORKED LEARNING

The literacy leaders’ professional learning in each of the three years incorporates the delivery of a unit through the University of Melbourne. Literacy leaders have the opportunity to gain recognition of their professional learning by enrolling in the subjects through the University of Melbourne. Literacy leaders who successfully complete the PL and associated assessments are awarded 12.5 points for each unit towards a Specialist Certificate in Literacy Leadership, a Postgraduate Certificate in Literacy Leadership or, in combination with other postgraduate certificates, a Master’s in Literacy Education. Participants are strongly encouraged to consider deepening their professional learning through participating in the accreditation tasks. The subjects are delivered in the morning session of the PL days and literacy leaders are further supported through their involvement in a Literacy Leaders PLT in the afternoons.

ONGOING NETWORK

Schools which have participated in the first three years of the LAP continue to have the opportunity to access the ALPS reporting software. Reports placing students on the Progression of Reading Development are generated through this software. Literacy leaders are enrolled in the CEOM Ongoing Literacy Assessment Project myclasses page and can enrol in two LAP ongoing network days. On these days literacy leaders meet with CEOM Literacy Education Officers and staff from the Assessment Research Centre, University of Melbourne. The network days are timed to be close to the pre- and post-assessment periods to provide support in the analysis and interpretation of the data and the use of data to drive developmental learning and teaching processes. The network days also provide an opportunity for ongoing LAP schools to remain connected to the project and to be kept up to date with developments within the project.

The yearly implementation plan above is a model for school involvement. Variations can be made to ensure that CEOM support is differentiated to match individual schools’ contexts. For example, some schools in past cohorts have enrolled additional leaders in the Literacy Leaders Program and have engaged with Years 3–6 student data in the second year of the project rather than only Years 3–4 student data. The CEOM encourages schools to discuss their particular context with the CEOM Literacy Team.

The LAP contributes to the achievement of the CEOM vision: to provide equity and excellence in education for all students in Catholic schools. The project recognises teacher professional learning and enhanced pedagogical practice as the key to raising student achievement. Inherent in the design of the LAP is an understanding of the crucial role leadership plays in driving the school improvement process. The design provides structures and professional learning to support literacy leaders in their role in building teacher capacity in the teaching of reading.

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