



STANDARDS OF LITERACY IN SCHOOLS IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

Taken from 2004-2007 reports



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Literacy

It is generally acknowledged that to be literate means to be able to read and write.

However, this is over-simplistic if we acknowledge that how well individuals are able to function in society depends on how literate they are. So, although the road to being literate may begin in the early years of schooling with a focus on phonemic awareness and word recognition, each individual must be able to rapidly move beyond these to develop the more complex skills of reading with understanding and being able to write and talk about everyday ideas, information and concepts.

Concern has been expressed throughout the English speaking world about the importance of raising standards of literacy in schools. Tertiary institutions bemoan the fact that too many students arrive with underdeveloped literacy skills and therefore struggle with the courses of study that they encounter. Employers often lament the inadequate literacy skills of young employees. These concerns are no less true in the Cayman Islands, where the perception of many is that standards of literacy in our schools are too low.

Introduction

This report looks at the evidence from evaluation reports from 2004 to 2007, from government and private, primary and secondary schools, and seeks to paint a balanced picture of the present standards of literacy in schools in the Cayman Islands.

Evaluation reports, because they focus on what is actually happening in schools, can help to shed some light on why standards of achievement in English / language arts vary so tremendously. They show a very mixed picture across the islands in both primary and secondary schools. While it is true to say that some of the best practice - and therefore some of the best results - is found in private schools, it is also true that some of the weakest practice and poorest results are found across both government and private schools.

There is no doubt that standards of literacy, and thus the standards that students achieve in all other subjects, depend almost entirely on the quality of teaching that students receive. Evaluation reports indicate that the quality of teaching in most of our schools varies too widely.

Where the teaching is most effective, students have frequent and extensive opportunities for listening and speaking, reading and writing. These three strands are all inter-related and each is equally important. Where teachers afford them equal importance, students generally perform at a much higher level.

Main Findings

Speaking and listening are of a higher standard in Cayman schools where there is evidence of the following:

- The classroom environment encourages active and regular participation, and students feel secure enough to talk and ask and respond to questions
- Teachers encourage students, from the earliest years, to add detail to their answers
- Teachers regularly read aloud to students and encourage discussion
- Teachers model standard English in the classroom, and correct students' grammatical errors in a sensitive way

These are recommended practices for all schools.

Commentary

When students feel secure in their classroom environment, and are actively encouraged to talk, and to ask and respond to questions, they gain confidence in speaking and learn to listen to others and respond appropriately. Evaluators found that too many teachers were content to accept one word answers instead of encouraging students to answer in sentences and add details of their own.

In order for students to speak confidently, they must be able to understand what is being said and have the vocabulary needed for discussing that particular topic. It is therefore essential that teachers help students to build their vocabulary. This is especially important for children who come from disadvantaged homes, where they have access to few books, if any, and parents and carers generally do not take time to talk to them or to read aloud to them. It was noticeable that it was these children who had most difficulty in expressing themselves orally, and evaluators found that they did not tend to ask questions, either to find out more or to clarify something they did not understand. Many schools are not doing enough to make up for these deficiencies.

In schools where teachers provided regular opportunities for students to work in pairs or in small groups, their listening skills were better developed, their vocabulary was broadened as they heard and used new words, and they were learning the importance of waiting their turn to speak. Working together to solve problems helped to build students' self-esteem and gave them confidence to analyse what others were saying and add ideas of their own. Also, students who had frequent, daily opportunities to listen and talk and to hear books read aloud to them – non-fiction as well as stories – made greater progress in building their vocabulary and general knowledge.

Evaluation reports commented on the fact that "too often students' errors go unnoticed..." This was partly due to the fact that not all teachers were modelling correct Standard English when they spoke to students. This was particularly noticeable in some primary schools and where students are continuously exposed to poor grammar, this way of speaking becomes the norm, and the same grammatical errors are automatically carried over into their written work. Conversely, in schools where students' speaking and written work were good, it was noticeable that the teachers were good role models of Standard English.

Reading is of a higher standard in Cayman schools where there is evidence of the following:

- Teachers systematically and consistently teach phonics skills to all younger students
- Students have frequent opportunities to discuss their reading in pairs, small groups and as a whole class
- There is a wide range of attractive and relevant reading material for both boys and girls
- Teachers read aloud to students and model proper pronunciation and good expression

These are recommended practices for all schools.

Commentary

The systematic and consistent teaching of phonics is essential, so that students learn early the skills of decoding and encoding. However, these skills should be in place by Year 3 at the latest, so that students can then concentrate less on the mechanics of reading and more on comprehension skills. In many primary schools, students have phonics lessons up to Year 6: the majority of students should not need this unless they have a specific learning problem.

As students progress through the primary years, it is important that there is smooth transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn', so that they are eager to read for enjoyment and for information. Evaluation reports commented that often students "read without expression and understanding, although they may be reading accurately". The spoken and written responses of these students showed that they had not really understood what they had read, although they were able to decode accurately. They were therefore unable to analyse what they had read or make use of any of the same techniques in their own writing. The enjoyment of reading comes when students can read words fluently and accurately so that they focus their energies on comprehension.

Students' level of general knowledge and their range of vocabulary play a big part in their ability to comprehend text. These varied tremendously across schools. Where there was a variety of teaching strategies, including frequent opportunities for students to discuss what they were reading, expand their vocabulary and build their general knowledge, students were found to be more enthusiastic about reading and read much more widely.

Texts in different subjects require different reading approaches. In both primary and secondary schools, when students encounter new concepts and new vocabulary, teachers must be able to help them make sense of these. It is important that teachers of all subjects are confident in teaching the literacy skills needed for different subjects. This was a common feature in only a few schools.

Boys in our Cayman schools, as in schools the world over, especially need to be motivated to read. Some evaluation reports noted that "In many lessons, boys are not motivated by the choice of texts." It is clear that texts need to be chosen to appeal to boys as well as girls. In schools where students were exposed to a variety of genres, and had books read aloud to them, students were more able to discuss themes and issues as well as the techniques used by the writers.

Many schools encourage students to read by providing challenges and competitions and students can earn points or certificates. However, if students are to enjoy reading, schools must ensure that they not only provide reading material that will tap into students' diverse interests, but that the material represents a range of difficulty. Evaluators found that too often teachers

were more concerned with the number of books students had read than with the extent to which students had actually understood what they had read and engaged with the text.

Writing is of a higher standard in Cayman schools where there is evidence of the following:

- Students are required to write at length for a variety of purposes and audiences
- The topics chosen are interesting and relevant and students have to do some research to find out more
- Students do not learn the skills of grammar and punctuation in isolation
- Students have the option of using technology to enhance the presentation of their work

These are recommended practices for all schools.

Commentary

Evaluation reports noted that in schools where students were required to write meaningful, interesting and challenging assignments for a variety of purposes and audiences, they often expressed themselves freely, using varied and imaginative vocabulary. This was usually because they were expressing their views on 'real life' situations and they perceived this as being relevant to their own lives. In schools where there are few opportunities for students to complete extended pieces of writing, evaluation reports stated that students' "vocabulary is very limited and unimaginative; spelling and punctuation are weak and sentences are poorly constructed."

There is no doubt that students learn best when they are working on meaningful pieces of writing rather than completing pages in workbooks, or practising grammatical skills in isolation. They need to be actively involved in exploring topics that interest them, and expressing their thoughts freely. Evaluators found that when students' writing sprang out of interest in a topic, they were more likely to have a better general knowledge of that topic and have the appropriate vocabulary to enable them to write in a lively and imaginative way.

Where there were opportunities for the integration of technology, students, especially boys, were often more motivated to write.

The teaching and its impact on learning

Evaluation reports show that teaching ranges from very good to unsatisfactory. This is the case across all phases, from the earliest years to the final years of high school, in both government and private schools. It is this lack of consistency that is contributing to lower levels of literacy across the Cayman Islands.

Evaluators found that in many of our schools, teachers were using the text book as their curriculum, and, especially in primary schools, were teaching the skills of grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary and comprehension as discrete lessons. Students often completed worksheets or grammar exercises without having to bring these skills together in a piece of extended writing. In most cases, scores or grades from these discrete exercises indicated that students were performing well because they are getting the answers right. This was giving a false picture of the actual standards of achievement.

Evaluation reports also indicated that in schools where the teaching was most effective, teachers planned well and shared the objectives of the lesson with students, so that everyone understood what they should be aiming to achieve by the end of the lesson. Teachers then had a benchmark by which to judge whether or not students had achieved the objective and used that information to plan the next steps for individual students.

Students need to know how they can improve the quality of their work. Most teachers mark written work fairly regularly, but they do not always add comments to help students know what they need to do to improve. Often teachers make the corrections to a piece of work themselves and there is little follow-up by students in terms of re-drafting.

Teachers need to know their students well so that they can match the work to their varying levels of ability. Evaluation reports found that 'differentiated work' often meant worksheets at different levels of difficulty. Whilst this can be appropriate, it is important that teachers also allow students to choose how to respond and to demonstrate their learning in different ways while still achieving the stated objective of the lesson. Where teachers had high expectations, students made better progress.

Overall conclusions

- The standards of literacy in schools in the Cayman Islands depend almost entirely on the effectiveness of the teaching that students receive. One of the main conclusions of evaluation reports over this period is that, although there is some very good teaching in almost every school, there is too much that is unsatisfactory. Systems within the schools for monitoring teaching and learning and standards of students' achievements are, for the most part, not rigorous enough. Senior managers do not have a good understanding of expected standards and are not holding teachers accountable.
- The three strands – speaking and listening, reading and writing - are all inter-related and each is equally important. Where teachers afford them equal importance, students generally perform at a much higher level.
- There has been some improvement since the last report on literacy in 2001 in that all government primary schools now have a literacy coordinator, and a national literacy policy has been drafted, which will give all schools a framework from which to develop their own and will provide a benchmark against which provision for literacy in our schools can be judged.