

'Getting it Right' Symposium – Paper I

Getting it Right ... using the right data effectively



Rosemary Cahill

*Department of Education and Training,
Western Australia*

Rosemary Cahill is Manager, Literacy and Numeracy in the K-10 Academic Standards and Support Directorate of the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia. She has been central to the planning and management of the Getting it Right Literacy and Numeracy Strategy from inception in 2001. Her teaching experience includes Special Education, ESL and mainstream primary settings and her curriculum development experience includes writing teacher resource materials in support of bidialectal education (*Solid English* and coordination of the *Deadly Ways to Learn* package).

Abstract

The Getting it Right - Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is a targeted and coordinated program of additional support for government primary schools in Western Australia. The program provides additional specialist teaching personnel, professional development and support to schools across the government school system. The key purposes of the strategy are to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes across government schools, and to achieve greater parity of outcomes across all groups of students. The model for teachers' professional learning incorporates many features of effective professional development identified in current research findings. Central to that professional learning has been how to select, collect and analyse credible diagnostic and summative student performance data to inform the teaching and learning cycle, whole-school planning and resource allocation.

A trend that is evident in all levels of planning undertaken in recent years by the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia has been careful and deliberate analysis of performance data to inform resource allocation, actions and adjustments to actions. Through a series of complementary teaching and learning professional learning initiatives being implemented in all WA government schools at present, every principal and most teachers within the system regularly hear about the virtues of formative assessment and 'evidence-based planning' as key features of outcomes focused education. An increasing number of teachers and principals have embraced these virtues; prominent among the teachers and principals that have gone down this

path are those involved in the Getting it Right Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Getting it Right was a \$27 million pre-election commitment of Western Australia's Gallop Labour government which came to power in March 2001. The commitment included the training and deployment of 200 specialist teachers to work in government schools to improve levels of literacy and numeracy among high needs students with a particular focus on Aboriginal students and other groups who lagged behind the general population. The initial 4-year commitment expired in July this year, but the strategy has proven so successful that maintenance of current staffing and support has been assured into the foreseeable future.

Planning

The pre-election commitment set down certain parameters for planning (including the number of specialist teachers to be involved by 2005, broad outcomes, focus cohorts and budget) but it left open details about the model for implementation. In a nutshell, key implementation details that were subsequently determined are as follows:

- Specialist Teachers work in high needs schools. Not every school will get a turn. Relative needs are determined through a combination of systemic quantitative data and more localised qualitative data: Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) data is factored against teacher numbers to allocate full-time equivalent (FTE) teacher time to districts, then District Directors use school performance data (WALNA plus other school data) to allocate the district FTE to high needs schools.

- There is now a total of 300 Specialist Teachers of literacy or numeracy working in 300 schools across WA, occupying (in either a full-time or a part-time capacity) the overall commitment of 200 FTE by 2005.
- Specialist Teacher allocations are made for 2-year periods. After an initial 2-year allocation, schools remain eligible, on the basis of demonstrated need, for subsequent 2-year allocations.
- Schools get a literacy *or* a numeracy Specialist Teacher. The rationale here is that participating schools are often challenging settings, and there would be a risk of overstressing resources, energy and goodwill if teachers in participating schools were expected to make significant gains in literacy *and* numeracy at the same time. Rather, they are encouraged to focus wholeheartedly on improving one thing at a time.
- Resources and attention are divided equally between literacy and numeracy. Historically, literacy and numeracy initiatives in WA have unfolded as initiatives that focus on literacy ... and numeracy if you've still got time. The 'fifty-fifty' split within Getting it Right was a strategic decision to redress this imbalance, further influenced by the fact that First Steps in Mathematics research and resource development was completed in 2002.
- Specialist Teachers (STs) work shoulder-to-shoulder in classrooms with colleagues, assisting with the collection and analysis of student performance data, using that data to inform planning, modelling lessons and team-teaching. The methodology modelled by STs is outcomes focused and reflects the principles

and values of the *Curriculum Framework*. Specialist Teachers do not routinely withdraw groups of students from a class, and the classroom teacher maintains responsibility for the progress of all students in the class. In collaboration with the principal and other staff, the Specialist Teacher also facilitates implementation of a whole school approach to literacy or numeracy and the systematic collection and analysis of student performance data.

- Principals of participating schools are required to set a 2-year school improvement target for literacy or numeracy, then to track and report (through normal quality assurance processes) their school's progress towards that improvement target.
- Principals of participating schools attend a 2-day induction workshop before the strategy commences in their schools and Specialist Teachers participate in seven 3-day training workshops spaced across the two years, the first of which occurs before they begin in the role. Between workshops, a member of the Central Team provides ongoing support and site visits to Specialist Teachers and principals.

Professional learning and support

The basic premise of the Getting it Right Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is that teachers make the difference.

Further, that teachers are best equipped to make the biggest difference when they have:

- A deep and thorough understanding of the outcomes students are required to learn. In particular, that they know what the WA *Curriculum Framework* and the government

school system's *Outcomes and Standards Framework* says about outcomes within the English and Mathematics learning areas because those documents capture the version of literacy and numeracy that WA government school teachers are required to pursue. This point is significant in the context of evidence-based planning and teaching because what counts for credible and useful data is significantly coloured by what version of literacy and numeracy you are seeking to teach.

- A deep and thorough sense of 'where their students are at' in relation to progress towards those outcomes – what they already know and can do, and what they have yet to learn.
- A broad repertoire of teaching practices from which to select so they can properly match student learning experiences to student needs.

Clearly, the above three domains of professional knowledge are necessarily linked in a cyclic process of assessment, teaching and learning. Accordingly, the professional learning and support provided through the Getting it Right strategy gave balanced attention to each. Given the theme of this conference, however, the focus to be taken from here on with this paper will be how Getting it Right was designed to help teachers and principals to make more effective use of data about their students' achievement using a range of sources, including the Literacy Net, Numeracy Net, diagnostic First Steps tools and WALNA data.

The focus on data

From the first workshop that principals and Specialist Teachers attend, they are

told very clearly that the Getting it Right strategy is a data-driven initiative and that they will be required to make systematic use of data in their own schools and classes to inform decisions. There are two significant data-driven tasks for principals which are outlined during their 2-day induction workshop and are constantly revisited through subsequent school site visits by members of the Central Team: target setting and the allocation of Specialist Teacher time within the school. The focus on data in classrooms is manifest as systematic monitoring of student learning to inform planning. This is a large part of the support and advice provided by Specialist Teachers when working with classroom colleagues.

Target-setting

The only extra reporting requirement placed on schools involved in Getting it Right is that they have to set a challenging yet realistic school improvement target for literacy or numeracy, and to track and report progress towards that target. To ensure that school improvement targets are genuinely challenging yet realistic, principals are required to gain endorsement for the target from his/her District Director. Progress towards school improvement targets is then reported through normal quality assurance processes with District Directors.

The spectre of target-setting is generally greeted by principals with some horror. To start with, if you are going to set a target for a point in the future, you first need to know a fair bit about the platform from which you are working, and many principals know that the data they have about their school's current performance is, at best, rather thin. When they start digging, many also find that a lot of the data that is collected

by their teachers does not tell them much about progress in relation to our *Outcomes and Standards Framework*.

Target-setting is often where the 'rubber hits the road' for schools involved in Getting it Right. Most schools spend the first term looking back into their WALNA data in greater detail to detect trends and gaps, and then turn to supplementary assessment tools to gain a more fine-grained and diagnostic picture of current performance and priority needs. The professional learning workshops conducted for principals and Specialist Teachers anticipate this need by the inclusion of sessions about analysing WALNA data, using the Literacy Net, Numeracy Net and ESL Bandscales, and getting to know developmental phases, teaching emphases and diagnostic uses of First Steps English and Mathematics resources.

Several important benefits have emerged from the way target-setting has applied in the Getting it Right strategy. Firstly, the need to set targets in relation to the outcomes of the English and mathematics learning areas has forced principals and teachers to make sure they know what those outcomes are about. It is felt that a significant factor giving rise to this benefit is that schools were not told what their target would be, nor what measure they had to use. Rather, they looked at the strengths and limitations of various assessment instruments, determined the extent to which those instruments yielded information in relation to our outcomes, and made an informed decision. Secondly, schools have a strong sense of ownership relating to the targets they have set, so have a much clearer sense of purpose with their planning in relation to those targets. It is not the case that an

external body has told them to do something about 'issue A' while they believe a more pressing problem is 'issue B'. Thirdly, targets have become a rallying-point for schools, giving them a tangible and collective focus. All staff know that their school's target is informed by good decisions about good data, so they can see the logic in directing resources, time and energy towards the priority areas captured in their target.

Allocation of Specialist Teacher time within the school

To achieve a balance between impact and coverage and to avoid spreading Specialist Teachers so thinly that they become ineffective, it is recommended that Specialist Teachers work about 1 day per fortnight or half a day per week with each classroom colleague he/she is asked to support. It follows that if a school received 0.8 FTE, the Specialist Teacher could be expected to work with about 8 classroom colleagues – more if they were highly experienced, less if they were inexperienced or had very challenging classes. It also follows that some classroom colleagues will not receive direct support from a Specialist Teacher so principals need to decide who will get the support and who will not. To inform these decisions, principals are directed back to the performance data of students in various classes, plus consideration of qualitative data regarding teacher strengths and other forms of support available in the school.

Systematic monitoring of individual student and class needs

As the focus shifts from whole-school to class and on to individual students, the imperative to use data to inform planning continues. In classrooms, it is

necessary to supplement the quantitative evidence of class trends and individual needs with more fine-grained assessments of progress towards the outcomes. To this end, Specialist Teachers are trained to help their colleagues to use the First Steps diagnostic maps and the Literacy Net, the ESL Bandscales and the Numeracy Net to monitor progress. Collectively, these fine-grained qualitative assessment tools help teachers determine the nature of any difficulties that students are experiencing so they can be more focused and systematic in their planning and teaching.

An early assumption made by some of the teachers with whom Specialist Teachers worked was that the Specialist Teacher would 'do' the assessment or 'do' the planning – or better still, take the more difficult students away – so the classroom teacher could get on with the real business of teaching. Not so. Rather, Specialist Teachers worked alongside their classroom colleagues to jointly determine student learning and future needs, then to work out appropriate instructional foci and to plan accordingly. The mismatch between early assumptions and the actual support Specialist Teachers were primed to provide needed to be carefully managed by principals. In time, however, classroom colleagues have found that the time spent analysing work samples and probing students' thinking through insightful tasks and questions is a good investment because it enables them to be far more efficient and effective teachers.

A breakthrough achieved in Getting it Right schools is that principals and teachers are inclined to view data as a 'friend' they can use to support their work rather than as something that is used primarily by others to 'check' on

them. While they are under no illusions about the accountability agenda and how systemic data contributes to that agenda, they also understand how WALNA data and other qualitative sources of data can be blended to provide a rich picture of progress and needs and are essential tools to support and inform school, class and individual improvements.

What the data tell us so far

Three layers of data collection have been established to monitor the extent to which Getting it Right is proving effective in meeting its intended outcomes and to inform adjustments that may be warranted: school target setting, systemic WALNA data and an external evaluation being conducted by the ACER.

School target-setting

The requirement for schools to negotiate with District Directors realistic yet challenging improvement targets and to report progress in relation to those targets was outlined earlier. There is clear qualitative evidence that target-setting has been pivotal to getting schools to make constructive use of assessment information. Further, that positioning target-setting as being primarily about *improvement* rather than *accountability* has given principals the confidence to be open about what worked, what didn't work and what adjustments they intend to make in the future.

The vast majority of participating schools have reported that they either met or exceeded their school improvement targets. This could be taken to be a very positive result. On the other hand, the degree of rigour

exercised by District Directors in reviewing school targets is unknown, so it would not be prudent to claim success on the basis of this finding alone.

Systemic WALNA data

To guard against freedom of information requests for school-by-school WALNA data which could reveal individual student performance in small schools, WALNA data is not centrally collated school-by-school so rates of improvement in 'Getting it Right schools' are not easily compared with those of 'non-Getting it Right schools'. Individual schools who have been participating in the strategy for more than two years, however, provided WALNA data to Central Office for analysis at the end of 2004. When compared with 2001 data, the 2004 literacy or numeracy data from these schools indicated an overall improvement. Given that students in many participating schools are highly transient, these gains are significant: students who have benefited from the strategy may have moved prior to the test, only to be replaced by other students who are struggling and have not been at the school long enough to benefit.

It is noteworthy that gains were less evident in difficult-to-staff locations in which teacher turnover is high. This is to be expected in a strategy which seeks to effect student improvements by building the capacity of teachers – if the teachers with increased capacity are constantly moving, their improved teaching practice will benefit students in the school they move to, not those in the school they leave. This finding signals the need to consider supplementary ways to support such schools, many of which are in the country and receive a large proportion of graduate teachers.

Over time, it is expected that the very gradual improvements evident in WALNA data over the past decade will accelerate, and that these gains will be most prominent at the tail. It is too early, however, to detect such trends. Further, when they do become evident, it will not be possible to attribute them entirely to Getting it Right because this is one of several improvement initiatives supporting WA government schools at present.

ACER evaluation

An independent, external evaluation has been commissioned by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to monitor teacher development goals of Getting it Right, in particular, the extent to which Specialist Teachers, their classroom colleagues and their principals:

- a Develop improved understandings, confidence and teaching skills in relation to literacy and numeracy;
- b Understand Curriculum Framework outcomes relating to literacy and numeracy, especially those set out in the English and Mathematics learning areas;
- c Collect and analyse credible diagnostic and summative student performance data to inform the planning and teaching cycle;
- d Participate in cohesive, data-driven, whole-school planning for literacy and numeracy; and
- e Participate in and engender two-way home—school collaboration and communication in support of literacy and numeracy development.

The ACER has recently submitted a final report from this evaluation and its findings will be made public in due course.

Concluding comments

Among the principals and staff at schools participating in Getting it Right, there is almost universal agreement that this strategy is making a significant difference in their schools. While the calibre of Specialist Teachers, the leadership provided by the principals of participating schools and the quality and depth of expertise provided by the central Getting it Right team are pivotal 'people' factors contributing to the strategy's success, a number of structural factors that are particular to the model adopted have also contributed to its success. Central among these is the systematic and deliberate use of high quality data that tells us something important about the things that matter at every stage and every level of Getting it Right as it unfolds.