

## Best practice: Raising standards in middle schools

*The National Literacy Strategy*

### Background

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**LEA:** Northumberland

Whytrig Middle (250 pupils) is situated in southeast Northumberland in what is classed as the 'Seaton Valley Partnership'. This comprises of one high school, two middle schools and five first schools.

Attainment in literacy in 1996 dropped significantly between 1996 and 1998 (L4 and above: 1996: 57%, 1997: 48%, 1998: 37%, 1999: 66%). In 1998, Whytrig fell into the lower quartile in comparison with similar schools nationally and was identified for intensive literacy consultant support.

Despite the substantial increase in the percentage of children achieving Level 4+ in 1999 to 66%, there was a wide discrepancy in attainment between reading and writing, in particular with relation to boys within the same cohort: reading L4+ 84% (boys – 87%) writing L4+ 40% (boys – 32%). There was clearly an issue here.

A number of new staff had been appointed to the school, prior to the Literacy Consultant's intervention. They were keen and hard-working but lacked confidence in delivering the National Literacy Strategy.



*Whytrig Middle School, Northumberland*

### What was planned?

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Curricular targets, with a focus on writing, were agreed with the Literacy Co-ordinator. The Literacy Action Plan (LAP) was devised to support the development of the targets. The LAP was reviewed termly and shared with the staff to keep the elements being addressed in focus.

### What was done?

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In order to reach more schools and develop the partnership, feeder first schools were invited to relevant training at Whytrig Middle. As the Seaton Valley Partnership is relatively small, the headteacher suggested also inviting the partner middle school. This had a major impact on strengthening links within the partnership in addition to ensuring that all schools were developing a common understanding of the teaching of literacy. Sessions were well attended by headteachers and staff and the link led to a home-school reading project being established between the first schools. This project involves the use of bookmarks with support prompts for parents and a working party from the schools is developing these to link with termly objectives from the NLS *Framework for teaching* to share via the county web site.

Schools were gaining confidence in the strategy but also making it their own. To address the key curriculum targets, the Literacy Consultant, with the staff, first adjusted planning to ensure that a greater percentage of time was dedicated to the teaching of writing both fiction *and* non-fiction. She planned and prepared non-fiction writing lessons for team teaching with all teachers as well as observing and providing feedback. Teachers approached shared sessions with competence and confidence and usually differentiated appropriately for independent group tasks.

Group target setting for writing was then implemented following a whole staff introductory session and these were supported on a one-to-one basis to ensure the process was manageable and focused.

Work is now matched more clearly to the needs of pupils and objectives are shared. The quality of teaching improved over the course of the year of consultant intervention, along with an increase in teacher confidence.

INSET provision was planned to focus on the key curricular targets and included:

- weekly planning and assessment
- guided writing
- non-fiction writing
- improving sentence structure
- spelling
- group target setting
- drama in the Literacy Hour
- questioning skills
- introduction to Additional Literacy Support materials for Literacy Co-ordinator, SENCO and two class assistants.

Throughout the year, staff reviewed and revisited the key curriculum targets which were clearly related to professional development and training.

## What was the impact and how was this verified?

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The 2000 Y6 English test results showed a substantial increase in the percentage of pupils achieving L4+ 86% (from 66%), 43% achieved Level 5 and the gap between boys' reading and writing was closing. This can certainly be attributed to the clear focus on the development of the Curricular Targets over the course of the year. Staff ensured that teaching strategies and target setting procedures introduced reached the classrooms.

Whytrig had set 71% as their target for pupils achieving L4+ in summer 2000 and, whilst they were delighted with the confirmation of success resultant from their concerted efforts, their immediate response was that the results were a 'one off'. This was not the case. Levels were maintained in 2001 and there is a continued focus on reducing the reading/writing and boy/girl differential as a long-term plan. A whole-staff concentration on targets worked!

## What has been learnt and what will the next steps be?

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The staff now approach their teaching of literacy with greater confidence and a clearer focus. They are beginning to see improvement in children's writing. When all staff work together with common goals, focusing resources and training on those goals and applying strategies in the classroom, *there is an impact*. The staff at Whytrig have been part of this process and the impact of their actions has given them a clear guide to addressing future needs. The consultant will work with the school to set the agenda for the following year, so that there was a clear exit strategy.

Next steps identified were:

- ensuring curriculum targets identified are carefully considered;
- matching training and monitoring to support the targets;
- continuing the focus on the development of writing (particularly for boys).

## Appendix

### School achievement targets

WHYTRIG MIDDLE SCHOOL

2000 71%	2001 76%	2002 80%
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Standards at summer 1999	Targets for summer 2000	Key curriculum targets	Outcomes: standards achieved summer 2000
<b>Year 6</b> 65.6% level 4+	<b>Year 6</b> 71% level 4+	<b>Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pupils write non-fiction for a range of purposes, e.g. to instruct, persuade, inform using appropriate grammatical and textual forms.</li> <li>▪ Pupils write in a range of narrative forms using the appropriate structure and language features of the chosen text type.</li> <li>▪ Pupils structure their writing to create interest and effect. They show an ability to construct sentences in different ways including complex sentences, using them appropriately. They develop their use of grammatical sequence, punctuation and connectives.</li> <li>▪ Pupils apply basic spelling rules consistently. They develop an increased ability to analyse and investigate errors in their own work using strategies taught.</li> </ul>	<b>Year 6</b> 86% level 4+
<b>Reading</b> 84% level 4+ 87% of boys at level 4+ 82% of girls at level 4+	<b>Reading</b> 84% level 4+		<b>Reading</b> 97% level 4+ 94% of boys at level 4+ 100% of girls at level 4+
<b>Writing</b> 40% level 4+ 32% of boys at level 4+ 50% of girls at level 4+	<b>Writing</b> 59% level 4+		<b>Writing</b> 65% level 4+ 58% of boys at level 4+ 72% of girls at level 4+
<b>Differential</b> Boys reading and writing – 55% Girls reading and writing – 28%		<b>Target setting</b> Teachers develop medium-term group learning targets for literacy which set appropriately high expectations and help pupils to monitor their own learning.	<b>Differential</b> Boys reading and writing – 36% Girls reading and writing – 28%