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Planning for teaching / planning for learning

... we must begin from where the children are: ... there can be no alternative ...

James Elliott (1972, p. 134)
Becoming a Teacher of Language and Literacy

I can still vividly remember the door closing behind me. Highly respected members of the school community were deciding my fate around a table piled with documents and planners. They were searching for a graduate teacher, a piece of the puzzle, to fit in with their school's philosophy and direction. I nervously approached the panel with a tentative smile and a secret anxiety and sat down ready to hear the verdict that was to decide my immediate future. I studied the panel members' faces for any insight into the result, but clearly they had played poker before. Thomas, the Principal started, 'If I understand correctly, you are prepared to go into that classroom with all those students and instil in them a love for learning, so welcome to the school'. We shook hands and the door opened for me. Four years have passed and I am now a Year 6 teacher at a primary school (Preparatory Year to Year 6) along the coast of Southern Australia.

In this chapter you will be hearing more from Thomas, and reflecting on the complex decisions he makes when planning for literacy learning and teaching. In addition, you will be presented with two other accounts of planning for learning and teaching: one by Gaelene that arises out of her work as a literacy teacher within a middle years context; the other by Maria about her experiences of whole-school planning within a primary school.

A common theme running through these accounts of planning is the need to focus on the students you are teaching. These days, teachers are expected to plan their lessons and develop curriculum with regard to the outcomes mandated in official curriculum documents. They also need to ensure that what they do accords with whole school policy. Even more pressures can be imposed by the need to ensure that their students are ready for system-wide literacy testing, such as the NAPLAN tests. The paper work required to show that what you are doing accords with official policy can be enormous. With all these demands being made on teachers to comply with policy mandates at a school, state and national level, there is a danger of slipping into box-ticking that loses sight of the students. The three examples of planning presented here reflect a common concern on the part of the teachers involved – Thomas, Gaelene and Maria – to meet whole-school and system-wide curriculum and assessment requirements while remaining responsive to the needs of their pupils.

The stories that comprise this chapter provide examples of planning for learning and teaching, not models. As with all the narratives presented in this book, you are invited to reflect critically on what is being done and to consider whether it is something you might wish to do or whether it would even be feasible to implement such an approach. Although the stories presented in this chapter are quite diverse, they have been chosen to reflect the multiple dimensions of planning, ranging from Thomas's focus on his own class to Maria's account of the dynamics of whole-school planning. Gaelene's story also prompts thought about links between primary school and secondary school and the responsibilities of both primary and secondary teachers for the welfare of pupils as they make the transition from one sector to the other. Taken together, these stories are intended to encourage you to think about all the things you
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need to consider in order to engage in effective planning, including a knowledge of policy at a school, state and national level, as well as theoretical resources relating to language and literacy development. But before all else, we are asking (echoing the epigraph we have taken from James Britton): how can you ensure that you begin where the children are?

Thomas's story: beginning with the child

Consider this: have there been times when you have felt challenged by the suspicion that the language we use to talk about literacy is inaccessible to students? Would it enable your students to take more ownership of the learning that you are expecting them to accomplish if the official curriculum could be worded in ways that they could understand?

Thomas is one who has faced such a challenge. In Thomas's Year 6 classroom, planning begins with careful assessment of students. The students are placed at the centre of the process as Thomas translates the language of the Australian Curriculum into 'Kidspeak', involving them in goal setting, planning and assessment.

Thomas aims to personalise the learning and to differentiate reading and writing tasks so that all students are working at their instructional level for optimum achievement. In his approach there are strong links between learning, assessment and curriculum planning that are maintained through continuing conversations between the students, parents and himself as the teacher.

Here is how Thomas explains his approach:

To meet the fresh challenges that accompanied the introduction of the new national curriculum, I developed a planning and teaching framework that could be used to map the current Language and Literacy skills and understandings for each student from Preparatory right through to Year 10. It takes the teacher curriculum terminology from Level 1 (end of Preparatory), to Level 10 (end of Year 10), and translates it into learning intentions for the students. This way, students know exactly what they're learning, why they're learning it and how their learning can be applied to real life situations. To engage students in reading, they need to see purpose in the activities they complete. Additionally, because the curriculum is translated into simple student-friendly language, the framework can be used to inform my lessons, assessments and reports. I give each of my students a bookmark with the learning outcomes expressed in language that they understand. An example of a student-friendly translation of some of the national curriculum standards into 'Kidspeak' as printed on a bookmark is shown in Table 8.1.
Table 8.1: Thomas's student bookmark

**LEVEL 4**

Standards Statements (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.) (not included on the bookmark but included here in bold to show the translation into 'Kidspeak')*

**STRAATEGIES TO USE**

Students understand how content can be organised using different text structures depending on the purpose of the text:

- Can I understand at least three pieces of information from a magazine, newspaper, novel, diagram, letter or song?
- Analysing newspaper article – Concept map – Character cards – Advertisement – Recipe – Magazine cover – Letter – Art Attack

Students read and view different types of texts, identifying how they vary depending in either complexity and technicality, depending on either the approach to the topic, the purpose and the intended audience:

- Can I explain why authors write different text types?
  - E.g. Narratives, poems, song, persuasive, newspapers, letters, postcards, advertisements, signs and magazines.
  - Advertisement – Teacher conference – Letter to character – Narrative music – Interview author – Read and create poetry

Students build literal and inferred meaning to analyse and evaluate texts, for example making inferences about a person's motivations and intentions and consider how this impacts on the audience:

- Can I predict and infer events in my novel?

Students recognise how authors and illustrators choose techniques to hold a reader's attention and elicit an emotional response:

- Can I relate the information in a novel to something that happens in real-life?
  - TV broadcast part 1/2 – Venn diagram – Interview character – Newspaper headline/picture – BTN – Life – Culture shift

Using what I already know
Predicting
Finding key words
Questioning and thinking aloud
Reading and retelling
Re-reading to check meaning

Using what I already know
Asking why the author wrote it
Asking who s/he is writing it for
Looking at the text structure and layout
Looking at the pictures and other visual effects
Looking for key words (connectives)
Predicting and confirming
Inferring and drawing conclusions

Using what I already know
Retelling events
Finding key events
Re-reading to check meaning
Predicting
Summarising characters and plot
Inferring and drawing conclusions

Retelling and re-reading
Summarising
Picturing events and characters
Activating prior knowledge
Linking to what I already know
Inferring and drawing conclusions
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Students identify and explain characteristic text structures and language features used in a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive texts to meet the purpose and audience of the text.

Can I understand that some texts are written for different audiences?

Advertisement – Teacher conference – Letter to character – Narrative music – Interview author

*Outcomes statements in official curriculum documents, such as the Australian Curriculum, can change The key point that Thomas is making concerns the desirability of translating existing outcomes statements into language that is accessible to a wider audience, including students

I felt that this framework would be a good way to combine the explicit reading strategies that were taught in many literacy programs operating in schools, with the expectations in the national curriculum. I was aware that the CAFE (Boushey & Moser 2009) and the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) ‘Benchmark Assessment System’ were popular literacy resources that were used by many teachers and schools. Our school was using both, so I incorporated elements of both to make the framework a flexible ‘living’ thing that I could own, as well as my students. Visiting teachers often asked me if the framework I was using was only suitable for one particular aspect of literacy teaching My answer was no, and that was what made it so effective. The framework was designed with a need to focus on the explicit teaching of reading strategies, with room to add and change the strategies, whenever I hear of and learn of other strategies that might work with my students.

The student bookmark that Thomas designed to accompany his framework is one way he makes the curriculum accessible, involving them in a conversation about their learning by providing a shared language for understanding and communication.

Reflection and discussion

What steps do you take in your own planning to make the curriculum accessible to students? Do you think that Thomas’s strategy would enhance their learning? How would you be able to gauge that you have successfully opened up the curriculum, enabling them to take ownership of their learning?

Thomas certainly feels that his initiative has been successful, though he needed to go further, as he explains:
My students were starting to take control of their learning and monitoring their progress. However, after using the bookmarks I realised that engaging them in the conversation wasn't enough to engage them in learning. I needed to involve them in planning as well. I wanted to incorporate explicit teaching of reading; I wanted students to write their own learning intentions, success criteria and reading and writing goals; I wanted them to self-assess and peer-assess in each lesson ... but how? That's when I decided to design a planner with the students. A planner would allow students to use their bookmark to choose an appropriate learning intention that would be specific to their needs.

A short example of a student’s planner is included in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2: Excerpt from a student’s planner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SESSION</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>LEARNING INTENTION</th>
<th>SUCCESS CRITERIA</th>
<th>MATERIALS</th>
<th>SELF-ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>PEER ASSESSMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40-50 MIN</td>
<td>Act: Analyse a newspaper</td>
<td>Learning intention:</td>
<td>Success criteria:</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>- Can I understand three pieces of information from a newspaper?</td>
<td>- I can find an interesting newspaper article.</td>
<td>- I can identify who wrote it, when it was written and for which paper.</td>
<td>Laptop, computer, Pen, English book, Scissors</td>
<td></td>
<td>Even though the student didn’t find an article at his level, the student still achieved his success criteria.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By taking this initiative, Thomas became aware of even further ways in which he might involve his students in their own learning.

Now I had a new challenge. Students knew what they needed to do to learn and how to plan their own learning, but not how to get there. I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be good if they could independently access activities that would provide evidence of their learning?’ So I provided around eighty activities written in student-friendly language with step-by-step instructions that directly targeted the students’ learning intentions and goals. These were open-ended, differentiated and catered for different learning styles. For example, some students visited an Art Attack online video, which ran through hundreds of different art creations that could be completed using simple school materials. Students watched and followed the instructions to create art pieces of their own and then wrote the procedure for another student. Other students then read and used those instructions to make the same product without the video. This task allowed
for higher order thinking, as some students were able to suggest different ways to improve the same item or plan a design for the product. Others who enjoyed debating researched a controversial issue of their choice, and shared a 'monologue debate' where they debated the arguments of two personalities in front of the class by themselves. By filming the debate and receiving feedback from peers, the students were using self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies respectively We were also engaged in conversations about the purposes and audiences for texts, and the links between reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The process did not stop there, but as Thomas explains it also had implications for assessment and reporting.

There was now one final piece missing in the jigsaw of planning and assessment: how to communicate outcomes to students, teachers and parents. I had the answer right in front of me. Once students had planned their activity, completed it, self-assessed, peer-assessed and then finally conferred with the teacher, we now had evidence of student learning sitting on the table for all to see and discuss. Students used this in their digital portfolios. They uploaded self-assessments and student–teacher conferences to the school website or Web 2.0 site so that parents could connect and take part in the conversations no matter where they were.

And so the cycle began again.

This approach provided Thomas with an individualised diagnostic assessment approach that established each student's entry-level achievement within the national curriculum. It gave Thomas and his students 'pre-test' assessment information, which assisted them to select appropriate classroom activities that would target specific learning outcomes for each child. As the literacy program proceeded, Thomas and his students progressively accumulated evidence of outcomes that had been met, working together to realise each student’s individualised reading and writing goals.

The process that Thomas recounts illustrates the way teachers continually reflect on their teaching practice. Thomas was continually questioning, trialling and reviewing his practice and the way he went about planning for learning and teaching. He began with a suspicion that the students’ learning might be enhanced if he were able to devise a strategy that made the language of the curriculum accessible to them, and through implementing this strategy he was then able to take other initiatives that gave the students even more ownership of their learning.

You might now find it useful to reread Thomas’s account of his initiatives, asking yourself the following questions.
Reflection and discussion

What educational ideals seem to motivate Thomas? Do you share those ideals? How do you gauge the success of the initiatives he has taken? Do you think that such initiatives would work in schools in which you have taught? Can you think of other ways in which students might play an active role in curriculum planning and assessment?

Gaelene’s story: working with tensions and debates in literacy

We shall now consider a rather different example of planning for literacy learning and teaching, drawing on Gaelene’s experience as a teacher within a middle years literacy program in a large secondary college in a coastal town in Australia. Gaelene has extensive experience as a primary school teacher, but she currently finds it professionally rewarding to work part time as the co-ordinator and teacher of students with additional needs at this school, as well as working at a university as a lecturer in curriculum and pedagogy.

When reading the following account of Gaelene’s work, you might ask yourself many of the same questions that you have just asked in response to Thomas’s story, but you will also be prompted to think about other issues, including how students’ literacy learning can be sustained as they move from primary school to secondary school.

What is a middle years learner?

The ‘middle years learner’ is typically positioned between the later primary school years and the first few years of secondary schooling. In chronological years this may extend from around eight or nine years to thirteen or fourteen years. A key challenge they face relates to the transition from primary school to their secondary education, especially with respect to the literacy demands that this transition involves.

‘Middle years learners’ have been typically characterised by various educational stakeholders as learners who are sophisticated users of new communications media and technologies, have more exposure to popular and mass culture messages, are more heavily influenced by their peers than significant adults, are ‘at-risk’ of educational disengagement and under-achievement and are more demanding with respect to how the knowledge, skills and values that teachers and schools promote connect with their world.

Victoria Carrington explores middle years learners in the following text: Carrington, Victoria 2006, Rethinking Middle Years: Early Adolescents, Schooling and Digital Culture, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW. You might also find it interesting to read the ALEA journal, Literacy Learning: The Middle Years journal, which, as its name indicates, focuses on literacy issues in the middle years.
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In response to such perceptions, schools approach 'the middle years' as a time where curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should be more connected to the world of adolescence, more intellectually demanding overall, developing higher-order thinking and more problem-based.

With respect to language and literacy, middle years learners are expected to read silently and with increasing speed to gain meaning from a wider range of texts, critically engage with an increasing range of multimedia and print-based texts, write independently, utilising a range of genres across various subject areas and use new and emerging forms of communication and technologies.

This, at least, is how the 'middle years' are often constructed, but you might pause to consider whether such perceptions paradoxically promote a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the teaching and learning of literacy with such students, rather than really providing for their individual needs.

How do you feel about the 'middle years'? Do you feel that this classification really captures a distinctive phase in the development of young people?

Reflection and discussion

When reading Gaelene's story about the various strategies she uses to help students with literacy difficulties you might also consider how her pedagogy fits within this conception of the 'middle years learner'.

Throughout her teaching experiences in mainstream primary and secondary education, and now her work with students who may be deemed to be 'at-risk' or as having additional needs, Gaelene has been engaged in literacy debates, or in what one academic has styled as the 'literacy wars' (Snyder 2008). Debates over the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of this or that literacy approach have often been constructed by the media as responses to an ongoing 'literacy crisis' in Australian society, and they are often bound up with complex social and economic changes. Literacy educators themselves have been swept up in these debates, often arguing among themselves about the best approach to literacy teaching. Gaelene remembers times in the 1980s and early 1990s when heated arguments about 'process' or 'genre' approaches to teaching writing occurred between participants at conferences and professional development seminars.

If you would like to read more on these arguments, you might care to look at Ian Reid's book, The Place of Genre in Learning, which was published in 1984. Both English in Australia and the Australian Journal of Language and Literacy have featured articles about genre pedagogy over the past two to three decades.
Gaelene became personally involved in these debates, and they still influence her practices today, being key moments in the formation of her identity as a literacy educator. It has been argued, for example, that from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, education was heavily influenced by ‘growth pedagogy’ or ‘whole language’, a progressive educational philosophy that emphasised the importance of ‘natural’ models of learning. Process approaches to teaching writing were considered by their advocates to be the best way to encourage children to express their personal ‘voice’ and individual points of view through writing.

For an understanding of process approaches to the teaching of writing see Calkins (1983, 1991, 1994) and Graves (1983, 1986). The emphasis of such approaches is on negotiating with students the topics they would like to write about and the form their writing might take. Teachers encourage students to draft their work and then to seek feedback from others in order to craft the writing further.

But in the mid-1980s and 1990s a number of researchers and teachers began to identify problems with process approaches, arguing that they were not adequate to meet the needs of the groups of children who continued to experience educational disadvantage, including those from low socio-economic groups and from minority cultures with languages in addition to English.

Children have diverse cultural and linguistic resources, and some researchers argued that practices and strategies associated with whole language and process approaches to writing privileged mainstream, mostly white, middle-class children.


Many of these studies criticised so-called progressive approaches for emphasising the particular discourse patterns, interactional styles and spoken and written language codes of predominantly white, middle-class student populations and their teachers. They argued that, in some contexts, the explicit teaching of the rules, including the conventions associated with the literacy practices of the dominant culture, is necessary in order for children from minority cultures and disadvantaged groups to experience success in reading and writing. Emphasis on individual choice in topics, purposes and forms for writing was seen to limit the range of text types that students typically used to narrative and recount (Martin & Rothery 1986). Advocates of a genre-based approach, proposed as an ‘alternative’ to process writing, believed that a focus on the explicit teaching of specific genres in writing would expand the children’s
repertoire of texts and allow non-mainstream and disadvantaged students access to the language of power (Martin 1989; Rothery & Martin 1986).

Reflection and discussion

Have you been involved in debates with colleagues about approaches to teaching English literacy? How did you resolve any differences between your approaches when planning with colleagues?

It is worthwhile to familiarise yourself with key aspects of the debates about whole language and genre approaches. (Note that many teachers drew on a combination of approaches in attempt to take a balanced approach to the teaching of literacy.) It is, after all, important to implement a pedagogy that is fully informed by research on the teaching of writing, even though you might modify what you take from such research in the light of your own teaching experience. You can access the debates about process and genre by chasing up some of the references in this chapter.

In the meantime, you might pause to consider whether in your experience some approaches to literacy teaching privilege some social groups over others. This is an issue that has always concerned literacy educators, as you can see if you revisit Chapter 2 of this book and consider the account given there of Shirley Brice Heath’s work.

It seems difficult to escape the conclusion that there will always be debates and tensions within the field of literacy education, as shown by other chapters in this book. This is because literacy is complex, and people will inevitably have different views about how it should be taught. Unfortunately, while debates can be valuable, prompting teachers to think critically in an effort to improve their practice, they can also polarise, with some people adopting a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. The teaching and learning of literacy is far more complex than simply jumping on the latest pedagogical bandwagon. It is important to keep an open mind, viewing the ideas, theories and approaches that you come across as a smorgasbord from which to choose, as you consider the diverse needs of every new cohort or problem of practice that you face.

Planning for learners from diverse backgrounds in a middle years context

Can you imagine a class of children who are all exactly at the same level of development, from exactly the same socio-economic and cultural background, with exactly the same access to resources, and with exactly the same life experiences and attitudes to learning? The reality is that classrooms always comprise diverse learners, although that diversity can be wider in some settings rather than others. This is what makes planning for learning and teaching such demanding (and professionally
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rewarding) work. In the following story Gaelene shares with you her own challenges when catering for the needs of a diverse group of ‘at-risk’ literacy learners within a middle years setting.

I sit with long lists of test scores, piles of samples of writing and teacher feedback sheets, all in an effort to sift through and identify ‘at-risk’ students. As coordinator of additional needs students I select students in Years 7 to 9 for various Literacy Support programs based on a variety of assessments, primarily in Reading. I use scores and levels from standardised tests and on-line tests based on levels 1–10 in the national curriculum, and I ask for recommendations from English subject area teachers. I also look at past reports and transition information from primary schools, if there is any. But although these are valuable, I still feel the need to gather more data. If students are three or more year levels below their expected level, they are listed to receive small group assistance, and, in the case of indigenous students, one-to-one tutoring. About one in five students need additional assistance of some sort. I try to select them discreetly, but the program has been running for three years now, and there’s not the same stigma attached to working in Literacy Support. So I take the lists and, together with teachers, select the students we think could benefit. We look at each student’s desire to achieve, degree of need, age, potential for positive improvement, attendance records and behaviour in mainstream classes. I send letters home, but in the end it is the students and the parents who make the decision whether they will participate.

We keep the groups small for intervention/support on a regular basis for several weeks, but the classes don’t replace mainstream English classes. Testing in reading is the starting point, but then during classes I try to build a picture of each student as a literacy learner and their particular area of need. This isn’t easy because literacy is multifaceted and hard to explain, let alone assess accurately. I use things like the BURT word test, South Australian Spelling Test, Peter’s Dictation, Progressive Achievement Test – Reading (PATR) and Reading For Understanding Running Records in (Rowe, Lamont, Daly, Edwards & Mayor Cox 2000).

The English teachers are pretty happy with the withdrawal aspect of Literacy Support because they’re not sure how to deal with ‘these students’ (as they call them) whose levels are low to mid Primary levels. They sometimes ask me, ‘Shouldn’t they already be literate? Why didn’t they learn to read in primary school? Can’t the problem be solved by preventing reading difficulties early on?’

Kids with low literacy levels sometimes display behaviour problems in class, and so they spend a lot of time in the RP (Restorative Practices) room. A good way to get out of Reading and Writing is to mess up in class. Other subject area teachers are at a loss to know how to engage such low literacy students in Science or History or Maths, and
many don’t think it’s their job to teach students to read and write. I have given them a copy of The Four Resources Model but there’s a long way to go with this


Careful selection and assessment of students is important to Gaelene’s practice, as is communication with teachers. At the same time, she raises questions about the perceptions of the English teachers and teachers of other discipline areas within secondary school who do not appear to be prepared to identify themselves as ‘teachers of literacy’.

In her story, Gaelene mentions that the Four Resources Model can be used by educators from discipline areas other than English as a framework for the teaching of literacy. This model can assist educationalists to adopt a balanced approach to literacy education and to plan for and monitor the resources or strategies that students adopt when they are reading and writing. The model also assists teachers to plan for and monitor subject literacies (Queensland School Curriculum Council 2001).

Reflection and discussion

Why do you feel that some students continue to require additional support when they enter secondary school? You would have noted that the secondary school teachers with whom Gaelene is working seem to blame primary teachers for not ensuring that students learn to read. Do you feel that this kind of accusation is warranted? How might secondary school teachers address the needs of students who require additional support? What might primary school teachers do to help their students cope with the literacy demands associated with each subject area when they arrive at secondary school? How might secondary teachers and primary teachers work together to ensure that the literacy needs of students are met during this transition phase?

Gaelene continues with her account of the kind of preparation she feels obliged to do in order to address the needs of her students.
I plan the Year 7, 8 and 9 programs by beginning with Reading comprehension. The school has been working on improving reading engagement and comprehension for the past three years. It’s part of the school’s Strategic Plan. So explicit teaching of reading comprehension is a key part of Literacy Support classes. I use the comprehension processes and strategies of Snowball (2006) and Munro (2006) with the students in order to talk about reading comprehension processes like predicting, questioning, thinking aloud, using text structures and features, visualising and summarising or paraphrasing. Some students don’t have, or can’t remember strategies to help them solve problems when they read in order to gain meaning. We use these during shared reading, guided reading and reciprocal reading. These strategies are used in other programs and considered effective intervention/support strategies. A lot of students can’t or don’t want to read because they think it’s about saying the words right, and so I spend time boosting their confidence by convincing them that they are reading if they can gain meaning from the text, even if they don’t know all the words. Reading is a meaning-making activity, or it is nothing at all.

I use ‘Hand’, ‘Head’ and ‘Heart’ questions to prompt reading for meaning. The posters I have on the wall explain these as literal, inferential and evaluative/response levels of comprehension. I try to get them to read critically with the evaluative/response type questions and I mainly use newspapers for this. The local paper is good, because the text isn’t too difficult, but there is a problem with suitable materials for this, as the topics don’t always interest the kids. With guided silent reading (New Zealand Department of Education 1983) most can be guided to form an opinion on an issue. Guided Silent Reading asks that students read silently in response to posed questions with discussions that follow (commonly used in the middle years).

My reading of debates about genre approaches linked to diversity and disadvantage means that I am always talking about purposes, structures and text types, as I link them together and I try to use the language that’s employed in some standardised tests, such as: What is the purpose of this text? Why did the author write this text? Who might read this text? Why? We begin with finding main ideas and supporting ideas as in short factual DVDs and print texts. A lot of kids can’t find the main ideas to begin with, but they engage with the DVDs and learn to identify facts and main ideas. Students record the main ideas on a graphic organiser and use it to retell/report in pairs. We talk constantly about purposes of reports, who writes reports and why, what makes a good report and how we go about writing reports. I do some modelled writing and they give oral reports or some might write short reports or just a paragraph.

Many of these ‘at-risk’ students are reluctant writers and rarely write voluntarily. They have little understanding of what makes a piece of writing ‘good’ and how to improve their own and other’s writing. It’s a struggle to get them to write anything, and so we have response journals in which teachers and students write to each other. It’s like free writing, we don’t correct it, it’s just personal writing about interests, learning and school.

Throughout the weeks in Literacy support we work through different structures like time-order, cause-effect, problem-solution, one point of view–another point of view. We use multimodal texts, as well as texts they read and write in subjects such as Science and History. We look at cause-effect structures in their Science texts and
time–order structures in History texts. Some kids make the connections and others don’t. Figure 8.1 shows how it fits together.

**Fig. 8.1:** A planning template developed and used by Gaelene
Gaelene also integrates the teaching and learning of reading, writing and speaking tasks by drawing on some aspects of genre approaches. In this respect, she experiences some tensions, as she explains in the following reflection:

I don’t really follow the curriculum cycle proposed in some genre-based teaching models (Macken 1989). We talk about the purposes and structures and features of texts as we read and view a range of texts, and link short speaking and writing tasks to the genres. I try to engage students in learning by linking tasks and experiences to their interests. So I choose content, a subject, a topic or an issue to explore as they are learning skills and concepts. At present we are exploring the natural environment and issues related to sustainability. I have heaps of great resources such as nature and travel DVDs, posters, catalogues and picture books, and National Geographic magazines and interactive whiteboard resources. Students pore over the fishing, hunting and surfing magazines during quiet reading and flick through the Motorcycle Trader, Motor Trend and Classic Car magazines any chance they get. They Google all kinds of facts about whales, crocodiles and other deadly creatures and really get into adventure movies that pit humans against the wilds of the environment. All of this gives me a context to explore some big picture ideas related to sustainability, like water conservation, alternative energies, biodiversity and climate change. This is the way I planned in upper primary year levels when I developed inquiry units of work and used strategies for integrated learning (e.g. Murdoch [1998]), so I follow this design model. It gives me a context to do some vocabulary work and spelling linked to the inquiries.

Reflection and discussion
How would you describe Gaelene’s pedagogy? Can you identify specific examples where she appears to be influenced by one theoretical position rather than another?
She says that ‘explicit teaching of reading comprehension is a key part of Literacy Support classes’. What kind of rationale would you give for ‘explicit teaching’? Why would this help students who are ‘at-risk’? What is the purpose of ‘free writing’? Why might this be of benefit to her students? What strategies does she appear to use in order to ‘engage’ students in their learning? What do you believe is necessary to facilitate student engagement? Would any of these strategies that she mentions be useful when working with high-achieving students?

Maria’s story: turning it upside down: working in professional learning teams
The two previous stories about Gaelene’s professional practice have opened up some of the multiple dimensions of planning for learning and teaching literacy.
No teacher plans in isolation, but his or her practice is mediated in complex ways by a wealth of considerations, not least the need to work within mandated curriculum frameworks and school policy. In Chapter 2, Rachel recalls the conflict she was experiencing between conforming with school policy and her desire for greater professional autonomy. To lessen her anxiety, one of her colleagues told Rachel to simply close her classroom door and do what she liked! Whether this is really an option is an open question – it is clear from Rachel’s story that she continued to grapple with tensions in her efforts to address the needs of her students. And it is important to recognise that collaborating with others in order to plan for learning and teaching is not necessarily a bad thing. The activity of planning can generate a sense on the part of teachers of shared responsibility, not only for the welfare of students in their individual classrooms but for the welfare of students throughout the school. It can produce a sense of belonging to a professional community where everyone is working together for the benefit of all students.

Maria’s story focuses on the complexities that arise when staff plan together, exploring both the challenges and the positive outcomes that can occur when staff engage in this process. It is divided into two parts: the first is a somewhat critical account of planning with one group of teachers, and the second is a more positive account, when Maria found the quality of the discussion much more satisfying. An experienced teacher who has taught in both primary and secondary school settings, she has been extensively engaged in collaborative planning. A key challenge, as she sees it, is to ensure that students remain at the centre of the planning process, when staff collaboratively take steps to ensure that they do not lose sight of their students.

As you read through the first example of planning, consider how it compares with your own experiences, especially planning that moves beyond your own classroom to involve other colleagues. This is the first part of Maria’s story.

My experience of planning meetings has been one of hour-long sessions focused on packing in as much administrative information as possible. Excursions, incursions, reporting, resources, timetabling and the day-to-day business of teaching were the topics of conversation.

When units of inquiry have been reviewed it has often been a case of ‘show and tell’, with experienced teachers showing their breadth of knowledge and accumulated resources on the topic and less experienced teachers either feeling inadequate or madly sourcing resources that they can share. For graduate teachers or teachers new to a department, the lead-up to these meetings is often stressful and highlights their inexperience, placing the more experienced teacher in a position of authority and superiority. There is rarely engagement in reflective, collaborative discussion.
When we talk about teaching in such meetings, it is more a case of the expert teacher or a member of the leadership team passing on knowledge to those of us who are less knowledgeable. We listen attentively and leave with a checklist or formula to follow to make sure that our teaching was ‘effective’. Some checklist items that I recall have included:

- Did we have all the elements of the e5 instructional model: engage, explore, explain, elaborate, evaluate? (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2013)
- Have we planned for whole-part-whole teaching and learning?
- Have we made use of Web 2.0 technologies in the classroom?

I can see the merit of such foci and have experienced some successes through their implementation, but over time I became concerned that these discussions were focused on the teacher with little mention of the child.

This is not uncommon practice. A study conducted into the professional development required to achieve positive student outcomes found that there was little impact on student learning when the focus remained on ‘desirable teaching behaviours that should be implemented’, rather than on the identification of ‘a specific problem to solve or goal to achieve’ (Timperley, Parr & Bertanees 2009, p. 231). This means remaining attentive to the behaviours of children in your classroom, trying to learn from your observations of their learning and the work that they produce. The focus on children can be lost in the planning process if the focus is on the implementation of a teaching template or a particular instructional model.

Wiggins & McTighe (2005) find that primary schools typically have a heavy focus on the activities that could be used in the hope that learning occurs, whereas secondary schools focus more on coverage – have we covered all the content that needs to be covered in this subject? In both cases, whether the discussion is related to the activities or to content, the focus is on what teachers intended to teach, and not on the learning that might occur or what the children might bring with them into the classroom.

However, Maria’s story does not end here, with her unease about the way planning meetings tended to focus on teaching rather than learning. The second part of her story has a more positive outcome. It explores a transformation that occurred in the interactions that took place when Maria began teaching in the early years of primary school, when she became part of a new teaching team. Her team meetings during the year involved an initial change in focus that acted as a catalyst for more generative planning. Here there was a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning and a move towards reflective, collaborative discussion.
More than a number: sitting in on a team meeting

At the end of a long day, we filed into the leader’s classroom in dribs and drabs, talking to each other about our daily challenges, our triumphs and after-school plans, bending the ear of a sympathetic other. Prefaced with a dramatic glance down at her watch, the leader called us to attention, handing out the agenda and launching into the first item with little preamble. Having assessed all of our students on their reading skills as per our school’s mandated testing schedule, we were to discuss our students’ outcomes. We looked at those outcomes as an overall average reading level score and we looked at the individual outcomes of all of our students. We compared our students’ outcomes with each other and with the outcomes that they received the year before. Nothing new there. This was a practice we were used to and the script was one we could have recited from previous years.

By the end of the previous year, all except one child had achieved the minimum benchmark level in reading and it appeared that we were well on the way to achieving the same outcome this year as well. We could have chosen to tick that box on our administrative checklist, pat ourselves on the back and then move on to the next agenda item, as had been our common practice. But on this occasion something transformative happened that took us in a new direction. Rather than discussing what we were going to teach next, with a cursory comment that linked back to the data we’d just looked at, we chose to dig deeper. ‘But what learning has really occurred?’ we asked. ‘Reading a text demonstrates that a child can decode text, but what skills, strategies and understandings have they learned to use through the process?’ ‘How does this tell me Johnny or Jane’s story so that I know what to teach next?’ A reading level, a number, were summary judgements that could not answer those questions. Our leader paused for a moment, pushed her copy of the agenda aside and said, ‘Let’s talk about that’.

That day, we began to question intensely what we should be expecting of our students. Returning to the curriculum, we familiarised ourselves with the achievement standards from a number of levels. The curriculum indicated that at the foundational level students were expected to be able to make text-to-self connections, predict and question. The next level, level one, asked that students use text-to-self connections to explain characters and main events, and that at the next level up, level two, students are able to make text-to-text connections to inform their deeper understanding of the text. Through these professional conversations we developed a greater appreciation for where our students were heading and how the skill of reading developed in complexity and built on the skills that came before.

Through such processes teachers can come to appreciate the limitations of the data used to inform teaching. If such data do not appear to provide any valuable insights into students’ learning, then teachers can jointly decide to refine those assessments or replace them with other assessments that are more diagnostic or formative in
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their function. Data that simply categorises students as belonging to a certain level do not necessarily show how you might scaffold them into higher learning. In addition to summative assessments, it is also necessary to implement formative assessment that provides a more nuanced picture of a child’s language and learning.

As teachers we need to see purpose to our engagement in the planning process. That process should be akin to inquiring into our professional practice, addressing both our own needs and those of our students. We also need to connect with our prior knowledge and to think about how that knowledge might be transformed by what we are learning now.

Mana and her colleagues were embarking on a cycle of collaborative inquiry that is similar to those discussed in Chapter 3. When interrogating your own practice it can be useful to consider various models of inquiry to assist you or the groups you work with to improve performance through the identification and setting of goals, self-regulation and reflection.

Above all, we need to go away from such meetings with a view to implementing new ideas and exploring new strategies that might answer some of the questions we have raised. Otherwise we run the risk of simply reverting to our previous practice the moment we leave the meeting.

A few weeks later: sitting in on another team meeting

At the end of a long day, we filed into the leader’s classroom in dribs and drabs, talking to each other about our daily challenges, our triumphs and students ... yet this time it was different. This time our conversations were centred around our changes to our literacy practices. There was no glancing at watches or handing out of agendas. We knew the main topic of conversation and launched into the meeting without pausing for breath.

One teacher shared how she made displays and referred to them periodically when reading a text, asking students what connections they were making and how they were interpreting what they had read, based on those connections. Asking students to reflect and interpret was part of her prior practice, but it was now more structured, scaffolded and explicit, as she was referring to the displays when asking the students to consider their interpretations. She engaged students in deep conversations, respecting their prior experiences, knowledge and reflections, respecting them as equals
rather than ‘fishing’ for predetermined answers. Another teacher mentioned that she often modelled this behaviour when reading aloud but had not explicitly explained the strategies she used to assist her in making those connections. This helped her to explain her ‘think aloud’ to the students and assisted her with her choice of language when seeking to engage them in deep conversations and to help her students to explain their own thinking. I explained that I often asked my students to predict what the text would be about, when first looking at the cover and when stopping strategically throughout a text. I integrated this focus into my prior practice by asking students to make connections to self, other texts and world, listing these on the board and then using their collective knowledge, understandings, experiences and connections to inform predictions.

This sharing of practices and resources did not feel like a ‘show-and-tell’ session. Everyone felt as though they could contribute, no matter how many years of experience they had. This put everyone on a level playing field, with the child squarely within focus. This also led us to reflect on how we could better gather data on our students’ abilities to make more informed judgements.

This meeting generated plans for further research by the teachers into particular strategies that they could employ to meet the needs of the students. All the teachers eventually made use of those strategies, integrating them into their current practice to improve and enhance what they already considered to be relatively effective, while considering what would work best for their students. As a result of the sharing sessions and following the successes they had had in their own classroom, they were able to trial new ideas, to reflect on their practice and share those reflections with each other.

**Conclusion**

We began this chapter with Thomas, highlighting the need for student voices in planning, assessment and feedback so that students were empowered and became active participants in their own learning. We then moved on to Gaelene, and encouraged you to consider the diversity of the students you are teaching, and how the adoption of particular approaches or programs should always be tailored to the needs of individual students. We then invited you to sit in on team meetings with Maria. Here we encouraged you to consider whether you are planning:

- begins with the *child*
- allows for time to get to know your students
- begins with the *learning* that you want to take place
- becomes an opportunity for you to engage in further professional learning that enhances your teaching practice.
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Teaching can often take place in isolation. Here we have challenged you to consider how your planning for learning and teaching might be developed into a process of reflective collaboration and partnerships with other teachers and more importantly your students.

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Thomas Fraser is a Year 5 teacher at Warrnambool Primary School where he has taught for five years. We thank Thomas for his help in writing this chapter.

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