

Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)
Literacy and Language Arts
Research Review



**Research Findings from Cycle 1 (2000-2003) and
 Early Findings from Cycle 2 (2003-2006)**

University of Lethbridge
Faculty of Education

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AISI Literacy and Language Arts
Research Review

Findings from Cycle 1 and
Early Findings from Cycle 2
2003-2006

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Foreword

This research review was conducted to provide information to inform Alberta Education and Alberta K to 12 school jurisdictions in their future efforts to develop and enhance literacy and language arts programs. Although direction was given to the researchers and writers to establish parameters for the task, the content of this document reflects the writers' perspectives on topics and subjects reviewed and does not necessarily reflect the position of Alberta Education.

Alberta Education would like to acknowledge the contributions of AISI University Partners at the University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge. We are also pleased to recognize Michael Pollard, Janice Sheets and Judi Hadden of the University of Lethbridge, Faculty of Education for conducting this specific review of AISI projects, with a focus on literacy and language arts.

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the Universities of Alberta, Calgary and Lethbridge completed research reviews of different categories of AISI projects from Cycle 1 (2000-2003) and Cycle 2 (2003-2006). The topics represented in these reviews include Professional Learning Communities (University of Alberta), Mathematics and Numeracy (University of Calgary) and Literacy and Language Arts (University of Lethbridge). The lead researchers in each of these projects found characteristics common to all of the projects. Specifically, it was found that successful AISI projects supported:

- regularly scheduled, job-embedded time for teacher collaboration
- a common culture of action research and shared inquiry
- significant leadership support at school and district levels
- empowerment of participants and ongoing professional growth of teachers
- a clear and shared focus on the goal of student learning.

These commonalities also emerged in an earlier AISI Technology Projects Research Review from Cycle 1 (2000-2003). The findings that follow should be read in the context of these common characteristics.

This document presents a study conducted by a research team from the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. Researchers reviewed 32 Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects that had a primary focus of literacy and language arts development and that were identified as having positive impact on student learning. Twenty-two projects were selected from Cycle 1 (2000-2001 to 2002-2003) and the remaining 10 projects were selected from Cycle 2 (2004-2005).

STUDY DATA

Three sources of data were analyzed for this report:

- annual reports from 32 successful projects in Cycle 1 (Year Three, 2003/04) and Cycle 2 (Year One, 2004/05)
- findings from a focus group of representatives from 13 schools and districts, drawn from the above-noted sample
- findings from telephone interviews with selected schools and districts in the sample.

Quotations found in this report are from the project participants in their annual reports or from the literacy and language arts focus group.

SCOPE OF PROJECTS

Cycle 1 projects, at the early literacy level, included:

- developing early reading intervention programs
- using a systematic approach to teaching phonics

- providing additional support time and resources at the kindergarten level, including weekly reading and writing instruction.

Beyond early literacy, other Cycle 1 projects included:

- creating a literacy support team to model and team teach new strategies and organizational frameworks for instruction to teachers
- improvement of reading and writing skills, through workshop approaches
- teacher mentoring.

Cycle 2 projects included:

- early literacy and reading intervention programs
- computer-assisted instruction in early literacy.

Other Cycle 2 projects extended the work done in early literacy to other divisions, extended language arts instruction to other curriculum areas and expanded resources.

KEY FINDINGS

I. Balanced Literacy

Balanced literacy projects developed listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and visually representing skills in ways that enhanced appropriate skill development of students. These projects developed phonics and other word recognition skills in conjunction with daily writing and the reading of quality literature. The skills and strategies for reading nonfiction were developed in appropriate content areas and children learned a variety of ways to respond to text, including writing and visually representing their experiences. One of the goals of these projects was to ensure that no single aspect of language arts would be emphasized at the expense of another.

Balanced literacy project classrooms engaged students in the shared readings of common texts, class lessons on key reading comprehension strategies, guided reading and literature circles, reading aloud and independent reading. Many of these projects also focused on literacy development in authentic settings; that is, they engaged students in reading and writing for genuine purposes.

II. Language Arts Across the Curriculum

Projects extended the language arts curriculum into appropriate subject (e.g., content) areas and defined all teachers as literacy teachers. Different subject areas, such as social studies, math and science, were examined to determine the literacy requirements of learning the content in those specific subjects and comprehension strategies were taught to help students develop subject specific literacy.

III. Early Literacy

Early literacy programs were based on detailed formal and informal observations of children as readers and writers, with particular attention to what children can do as they learn to read and write.

Teachers were better able to diagnose student reading and writing abilities and, consequently, provide appropriately levelled reading material for their students. They created environments rich with literature, where the work was created for a purpose and where collaboration among students, staff and parents celebrated literacy accomplishments.

IV. Teaching English as a Second Language

Projects that focused on English as a second language learning were most successful when staff built a vision of teaching English as a second language as core to learning in all subject areas.

V. Levelled Books

The use of multilevel texts allowed children to read at their instructional level as they learned and grew as readers. Continual support with texts at their independent reading levels allowed them to consolidate and reinforce their learning and to grow as effective language users.

VI. Best Practices

Early intervention for students who were struggling was rooted in accurate, ongoing assessment of strengths and weaknesses, with programs geared to developing basic competencies in the areas of word identification, including systematic phonics, phonemic awareness instruction and attention to oral reading fluency.

Comprehension strategies were taught explicitly with the teacher modelling the strategy and thinking aloud about the strategy, providing guided practice with the strategy and support when students apply the strategy independently.

Typical classrooms included shared reading of common texts, class lessons on key reading comprehension strategies, guided reading and literature circles, reading aloud and independent reading.

LESSONS LEARNED

I. Literacy and Language Arts

The complexity of new approaches to literacy requires leadership to initiate and sustain successful projects.

Many successful projects integrate language arts by explicitly connecting reading and writing curricula and by connecting literacy to other core curricular areas.

Projects are also developing the metacognitive abilities of students, with explicit attention to the process involved in learning particular literacy skills.

Early intervention programs, such as Reading Recovery, are allowing students the one-on-one support they need to improve their reading.

Writing has become a more ingrained part of school cultures and writing is integrated across the curriculum in school-wide initiatives.

II. Professional Communities and Professional Development

Literacy and language arts initiatives seemed to work best when staff developed a common goal, at the beginning of the project, and regular release time was given or built into the timetable to allow collaboration to unfold.

Successful projects began with inquiry, where the culture is driven to create, refine and question, in order to build upon successes and create a positive environment for all involved.

When teachers collaborated and developed a common language to teach literacy, students improved because of the continuity of literacy language in all classrooms from year to year.

III. Common Challenges

The common challenges reported by project participants were how to sustain what had been learned and finding ways to continue supporting teachers in their learning and professional growth. This included the challenges faced in integrating new staff members into the culture and practices of the project.

Introduction

CONTEXT OF AISI LITERACY AND LANGUAGE ARTS PROJECTS

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was developed through a collaborative partnership in 1999 and first implemented in Alberta school authorities in the 2000-01 school year. Partners include the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, the Alberta School Boards' Association, the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, The Alberta Teachers' Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Education, the Faculté Saint-Jean and the Universities of Alberta, Calgary and Lethbridge.

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF AISI

The goal of AISI is to improve student learning and performance by supporting initiatives that address unique needs and circumstances within school authorities. AISI funding is targeted, which means it is provided to school authorities for specific local initiatives that are focused on improving student learning. This funding is in addition to basic instruction funding. All provincially funded school authorities in Alberta have participated in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of AISI, including 77 public school authorities (i.e., public, separate and Francophone districts, charter schools) and 231 private school authorities (e.g., 115 private schools and 116 ECS private operators). Over 800 AISI projects were developed and implemented during the first cycle (2000-2003) and about 460 projects have been approved for the second cycle of AISI, which began in September 2003.

Cycle 1 of AISI established a foundation of trust between government and education stakeholders and created a model for collaboration that has been employed in other government initiatives. It also established accountability measures and criteria to provide evidence that the initiative is working and set the stage for continuous improvement. Cycle 2 of AISI is consolidating emerging knowledge and synthesizing what works. It has built on the enthusiasm and commitment from the first cycle and is expanding AISI's sphere of influence to more teachers and students in Alberta. During Cycle 2, there is greater focus on collecting the right data, in-depth analysis of promising practices and further dissemination of findings, all of which are fundamental to the future success of AISI.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to fulfil one of the School Improvement Branch's (SIB) mandates to work with learning system partners and stakeholders to share, integrate and sustain the successes and effective practices from AISI projects.

REPORT LIMITATIONS

Although data was triangulated and findings were redundant, researchers recognize the limitations of their work. The exploratory nature of this work lent itself to a qualitative approach, meaning that findings are descriptive rather than predictive in nature.

Findings provide insight into the range of opinions held by study participants, not a population at large and, while helpful for setting general directions or goals, may not be specifically applicable in other contexts, nor serve to offer specific predictive value.

COMMON THEMES

In 2005, the Universities of Alberta, Calgary and Lethbridge completed research reviews of different categories of AISI projects from Cycle 1 (2000-2003) and Cycle 2 (2003-2006). The topics represented in these reviews include Professional Learning Communities (University of Alberta), Mathematics and Numeracy (University of Calgary) and Literacy and Language Arts (University of Lethbridge). The lead researchers in each of these projects found characteristics common to all of the initiatives reviewed.

Specifically, it was found that successful AISI projects supported:

- regularly scheduled, job-embedded time for teacher collaboration
- a common culture of action research and shared inquiry
- significant leadership support at school and district levels
- empowerment of participants and ongoing professional growth of teachers
- a clear and shared focus on the goal of student learning.

These commonalities can also be found emerging within an earlier AISI Technology Projects Research Review from Cycle 1 (2000-2003). The findings that follow should be read in the context of these common characteristics.

Overview of AISI Literacy and Language Arts Projects

The focus in much of the recent literature related to language arts curriculum and instruction (Cunningham et al. 2002, Tompkins et al. 2005, Brailsford and Coles 2004) suggests that a fundamental goal of language arts instruction is to develop, in our children, the ability to think deeply about what they read and to express themselves accurately and persuasively when they write. “We want avid and enthusiastic readers and writers who continue to grow in all avenues of communication and learning throughout their lives.” (Cunningham et al. 2002, p.1) Developing avid readers and writers requires that we focus instruction, at all levels, on the various skills and abilities that contribute to the development of enthusiastic, thoughtful, critical readers and writers.

Literacy is fundamental to student learning. Students are required to develop abilities in a range of new and important literacies that require synthesis and integration beyond what was apparent a few years ago. “Literacy as decoding written text and the literate person as one fluent with high culture has given way to the complexities of new, multifaceted literacies that include the traditional concepts of decoding and interpretation of text as well as orality and numeracy, technological and media literacy. These new literacies also encompass broader notions of what constitutes text (e.g., action, media, speech, hypertext, symbols, cultural signs, writing), increasingly sophisticated ways of creating, interpreting, disseminating and evaluating such texts, and an increasingly complex understanding of the pedagogy appropriate to such multiple literacies.” (Hasebe-Ludt et al. 2003, p.103)

The Alberta English language arts curriculum is designed to prepare students for this increasingly complex range of language requirements.

“The aim of English language arts is to enable each student to understand and appreciate language and to use it confidently and competently in a variety of situations for communication, personal satisfaction and learning.

Students become confident and competent users of all six language arts through many opportunities to listen, speak, read and write, and view and represent in a variety of combinations and relevant contexts. All the language arts are interrelated and interdependent; facility in one strengthens and supports the others.” (Alberta Learning 2000, p.2)

In Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of AISI, districts recognized the fundamental importance of comprehensive language arts instruction to the overall well-being and growth of their students and implemented curriculum and instructional changes within their districts to reflect this knowledge. Many Cycle 1 projects focused on early literacy, recognizing that literacy begins to develop well before children begin formal schooling and that children are active learners who construct their knowledge about reading and writing with the assistance of parents, teachers and other literate persons. The importance of focusing on early literacy also allowed districts to recognize the critical role of appropriate intervention when students needed additional support and encouragement to develop appropriate literacy behaviours. A

number of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 projects focused on intervention and recovery strategies to provide early readers and writers with this additional support.

Literacy and language arts projects also recognized the need to sustain a rich language environment at all levels. These projects focused on providing a balanced approach to literacy development and opportunities to enhance language arts knowledge and skills in a variety of subject areas, such as math, science and social studies – helping students appreciate the value and role of literacy in reading and writing in these and all other content areas.

SCOPE OF PROJECTS

Twenty-two projects identified as having positive impact on student learning were selected from Cycle 1 (2000-2001 to 2002-2003) and 10 projects identified as having positive impact on student learning were selected from Cycle 2 (2004-2005) for further analysis.

Cycle 1 projects involved a total of 221 schools, with a range of 1 to 45 schools per project. Six of the 22 projects were single school-based projects. A total of 14 765 students were engaged in these projects, with a range of 15 to 5000 students per project. Twelve of the projects (54%) focused primarily on division one levels, with early literacy and reading intervention as prominent themes. The remaining projects focused on reading and writing development across a wider range of grade levels (e.g., 1 to 6, 1 to 9, 1 to 12).

The following general themes were the main focus of the projects:

- early literacy (nine projects)
- reading and writing development (six projects)
- reading intervention (four projects)
- listening (one project).

Cycle 2 projects involved a total of 24 schools, with a range of 1 to 12 schools per project. Eight of the 10 projects are single school-based projects. A total of 4262 students are engaged in these projects, with a range of 40 to 1400 students per project. General themes of Cycle 2 projects include:

- early literacy (one project)
- reading and writing development (four projects)
- reading intervention (one project)
- literacy and the fine arts (one project)
- teaching English as a second language (three projects).

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN CYCLE 1 AND CYCLE 2 PROJECTS

A noteworthy difference in the Cycle 2 projects is the predominance of single school-based projects, where an entire staff devotes its time and energy to a range of school-wide literacy and language arts goals. Often, the goal was early literacy development or intervention programs for at risk learners in division one.

A significant number of Cycle 2 projects focus on second language learning and the importance of developing fluency in the predominant language of instruction (e.g., English) when students bring a different language and a different culture to the learning environment. An understanding of the role of language development in various curriculum content areas was an integral part of these projects.

In their own words...

Developing fluency in English is not just the role of the English teacher. Every teacher in the school must share in that responsibility.

PROJECT FOCI

Cycle 1 projects included a range of goals related to literacy and language arts development. At the early literacy level, they included:

- improvement of reading skills, using a systematic approach to teaching phonics
- intensive weekly reading and writing instruction in full day kindergartens
- training lead teachers to provide one-to-one intervention in Reading Recovery and other early intervention programs
- additional support time and resources at the kindergarten level
- additional literacy development to students with delayed literacy skill acquisition
- providing individual or small group instruction in grades 1 to 3 to improve fluency, comprehension and writing.

Beyond early literacy, other Cycle 1 projects included:

- a literacy support team to help teachers develop their language arts repertoire of skills and enhance their teaching
- intensive reading/writing instruction, through a multidimensional approach
- improvement of reading and writing skills
- building literacy and language arts capacity through teacher mentoring
- writers' workshop to develop writing skills
- proven teaching strategies to enhance literacy development.

Cycle 2 projects continued the focus on early literacy to through:

- early literacy intervention programs
- computer-assisted instruction in early literacy
- Reading Recovery, through daily one-on-one programs for grades K to 2
- a language acquisition program for disadvantaged children, ages three and four.

Other Cycle 2 projects extended the work done in early literacy to provide a whole school approach to early literacy. They extended literacy instruction into other curriculum areas, provided acoustic clarity with FM sound systems in appropriate classrooms to develop listening skills and provided quality trade and reference books in special contexts.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement varied from the dissemination of information to parents through newsletters, presentations at parent council meetings and Web pages to workshops where parents were trained to be editors of student writing and encouraged to participate in an ongoing and direct way in the school AISI project. Special events, such as literacy fairs, student performances and celebrations, were also effective means of engaging parents. Parents were also actively involved with AISI projects through volunteer work, regular contact with the teacher and through interactive homework assignments with their children.

Key Findings from AISI Literacy and Language Arts Projects

BALANCED LITERACY

Balanced Literacy was the focus in many programs. These programs recognized that all areas of language arts instruction needed systematic attention, with continuity from grade to grade. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and visually representing were developed in ways that enhanced appropriate skill development. These programs developed phonics and other word recognition skills, in conjunction with daily writing and the reading of quality literature. The skills and strategies for reading information (e.g., non-fiction) were developed in appropriate content areas and children learned a variety of ways to respond to text, including writing and visually representing their experiences. The major goal of these programs was to ensure that no single aspect of the language arts would be emphasized at the expense of another.

A typical classroom included shared readings of common texts, class lessons on key reading comprehension strategies, guided reading and literature circles, reading aloud and independent reading.

Multilevel texts were used and were clustered into themes to allow exploration of the thematic content at a variety of instructional reading levels. Teaching in a readers' workshop format, where word study or comprehension strategies were developed with the whole class and then applied in a variety of multilevel texts, allowed for systematic, individualized growth. Similarly, a writers' workshop format allowed the same balanced instruction for writing skill development.

Some of the key components in Balanced Literacy included:

- modelling language, through reading aloud and shared reading of texts, to create a common content that allowed discussion and learning of skills
- guided reading of texts, at the students' instructional reading level, with support from the teacher to ensure that growth and refinement of language arts abilities occurred over time
- direct whole class instruction to students, using a variety of language arts strategies
- allowing students to read personally selected books
- modelling various aspects of the writing process and talking aloud by the teacher while the writing is drafted
- brief lessons where some aspect of a writing craft is taught
- opportunities for students to work on their writing through conferences and flexible support groups, with teacher assistance as needed
- opportunities for students to initiate and complete their writing, checking with the teacher, as needed.

Teachers are incorporating many more strategies to improve reading comprehension by providing direct instruction in creating mental images, questioning, inferring, synthesizing,

modelling reading and writing through think aloud techniques, developing research skills and the strategies to approach non-fiction text more effectively.

In their own words...

We wanted children to become passionate about their writing and empower them to see themselves as writers.

We involved children, parents and staff. Children saw their writing had a purpose and were given a forum to celebrate and share it.

Our project has given staff, students and families such a strong belief that what happens in our school is special. Staff morale is extremely high and students love to show off their work and our project promotes their sharing.

LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Teachers are also moving toward literacy instruction across the curriculum and, with the movement toward differentiated instruction, teachers are not seeing themselves as teaching a grade level but as teaching children. The practice of providing reading materials to children at their current independent reading level has improved reading comprehension and discipline issues because children are experiencing success in this new environment. The focus has begun to move from delivering a grade specific program to engaging students in learning.

EARLY LITERACY

Early literacy programs including reading intervention were based on detailed formal and informal observations of children as readers and writers, with particular attention to what children can do as they learn to read and write. The focus in these projects was knowledge of how children who become readers learn to read and how children who become writers learn to write.

Teachers recognized that children begin to read by attending to many different aspects of printed texts (e.g., letters, words, pictures, language, messages, stories) and their understanding of the reading process grows as they attend to a variety of print formats in different settings.

As a result of implementing reading intervention programs, teachers are better able to diagnose student reading and writing abilities and, consequently, provide appropriately levelled reading material for their students. They are building environments that are rich with literature, where the work is created for a purpose and where collaboration of students, staff and parents allows them to celebrate their literary accomplishments. There are real purposes to reading and writing, and children and teachers are more enthusiastic about doing both.

In many small group or one-on-one programs, assessment involved letter recognition, concepts of print, sight word recognition, writing vocabulary, sentence dictation, writing samples and the use of running records to evaluate progress.

Individual programs focused on concepts about print, book language and structure; letter recognition; phonemic awareness; the connections between reading, writing, listening and speaking; the pleasure that reading can bring; and the use of levelled books to promote a guided reading component.

The reading assessments were diagnostic in nature and provided an opportunity to look at individual strengths and to build upon students' internalized knowledge. Teachers often used running records to record individual progress and change over time.

In intervention programs, such as Reading Recovery, the regular classroom language arts program continued alongside extra tutoring. Children enjoyed the benefits of both regular classroom instruction and individualized tutoring. The combination allowed children to begin with those things they could already do and receive immediate, positive reinforcement from the teacher when appropriate responses were made.

In their own words...

We provided a safe environment that promoted risk taking. One of our main focuses was to build self-esteem and the motivation to become a better reader.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Projects that focused on English as a second language learning were designed to improve the rate of ESL students achieving the acceptable standard and standard of excellence in grades 3, 6 and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests. The projects were most successful when ESL teaching was embraced across disciplines and curriculum areas. When the staff of a school or district built a vision of teaching English language learners as an integral focus of learning in all subject areas, individual teachers were able to see themselves both as teachers of the subject-specific language (e.g., the English of science, the English of math) as well as teachers of content. The success of this focus is dependent upon the understanding that English language learners are working on language proficiency outcomes while they are simultaneously working on learning outcomes in all subject areas.

A variety of approaches was used to enhance second language learning. Intake procedures were established to ensure settlement, engagement and participation of second language learners from the outset. Individual classroom instruction promoted cultural sensitivity, the use of scaffolding techniques to support reading and writing in the second language, and strategies to build content literacy. Professional dialogue was increased through coaching, mentoring and modelling for the classroom teacher.

In their own words...

There is a thirst and a readiness for resources with effective teaching strategies that will accommodate second language learners.

We built teachers' cultural competency through having liaison workers present cultural profiles of specific countries represented in our schools.

LEVELLED BOOKS

Children progressed successfully when they moved through texts that offered the right amount of challenge but not an overwhelming amount of challenge so as to cause continual frustration. The use of multilevel texts allowed children to read at their instructional level as they learned and grew as readers. Continual support with texts at independent reading levels allowed children to consolidate and reinforce their learning and grow as effective language users.

Projects devoted time and energy to resources at varying levels of difficulty to ensure that students had sufficient reading material at their independent reading levels. In division one, tubs of books were made available to provide choice in independent reading to ensure sufficient practice and reinforcement of skills taught. In addition, resources at a variety of instructional levels were provided so that themes were explored with groups of children of varying abilities. Each student was able to read at his or her instructional reading level, where the balance between what was familiar and known, and what was new and unknown, permitted optimal learning.

This movement away from a single text for all students to using multilevelled texts in different groupings within the classroom and providing access to levelled texts in the library was an important component of many successful projects.

BEST PRACTICES

- Early literacy and early intervention projects focus on the development of beginner level reading and writing abilities, from initial considerations of concepts about print, book language and structure to the alphabet, letter recognition and phonemic awareness. The connections between reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and visually representing are stressed as is the pleasure and joy that reading can bring.
- Levelled books are used to teach comprehension strategies in a guided reading format. Writing is taught as a reciprocal process to reading.
- Early intervention for students who are struggling is rooted in accurate, ongoing assessment of strengths and weaknesses, with programs geared to developing basic competencies in the areas of how to identify words, including systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction, and attention to oral reading fluency. Children are given ample opportunities to apply what they are learning to their reading and writing.

- Core comprehension strategies are taught through explicit teaching, teacher modelling and thinking aloud about the strategy, guided practice with the strategy and support for students applying the strategy independently.
- A typical classroom includes shared readings of common texts, class lessons on key reading comprehension strategies, guided reading and literature circles, reading aloud and independent reading.
- Multilevel texts can be clustered into themes that allow exploration of the thematic content at a variety of instructional reading levels.
- Teaching in a readers' workshop format, where word study or comprehension strategies are developed with the whole class and then applied in a variety of multilevel texts, allows for systematic, individualized growth. Similarly, a writers' workshop format allows the same balanced instruction for writing skill development.

Readers' workshop practices involve:

- the teacher reading aloud to the class, modelling fluent expressive reading
- grouping students, according to their instructional reading levels
- the teacher and small groups of students reading a text together to enable class members to share common content
- direct class instruction on a reading strategy
- blocks of time for independent reading of personally selected books.

Writers' workshop practices include:

- teacher modelling of writing
- mini lessons on aspects of writing and on specific skills
- group writing to pool ideas and share the process of creating a common text
- assistance, as needed, through conferences and support groups
- students working on their individual writing.

In their own words...

The writing component of our project improved the students' ability to express themselves and their self-esteem improved as they experienced success. Results were very evident, not only in hard data but also in qualitative ways. Classroom teachers endorsed its success and parents were very supportive.

Change was brought about through modelling and team teaching in classrooms – taking professional development to the heart of teaching and learning – the classroom with real kids!

The strength of the project was going in and using strategies and techniques with classes – actually showing colleagues how these ideas would look in their own classrooms and with their own students.

We developed metacognitive students, students with better knowledge of the process they were learning.

LESSONS LEARNED**Literacy and Language Arts**

- The complexity of the new approaches to literacy requires leadership to initiate and sustain successful projects. Leadership requirements include a knowledgeable, respected leader who is able to recognize and articulate the needs of the school and to use expertise from the literacy and language arts field to develop a program that works for his or her community.
- Cross-graded reading for students led to collaboration amongst teachers who now constantly assess and discuss student progress in order to problem solve the strategies needed for student success. Timetabling has supported this cross-graded model by blocking in common reading times across grades.

Language Arts Across the Curriculum

- Many successful projects integrate the language arts by explicitly connecting reading and writing curricula and by connecting literacy to other core curricular areas.
- Projects are also focusing on developing the metacognitive abilities of students, with explicit attention to the process involved in learning particular literacy skills.
- Projects that built a vision of literacy as core to learning in all subject levels and that were able to work with teachers of all disciplines to build their confidence as teachers of reading and writing were, by far, the most successful and sustainable projects.

Early Literacy Intervention

- Early intervention, through programs such as Reading Recovery, is allowing students the one-on-one support they need to improve their reading. Teachers are more aware of individual needs and are moving toward a balanced literacy approach.

- Teacher practice involves more learner-centred teaching and diagnosis, with a toolbox of strategies to apply once student strengths and weaknesses are identified. Direct teaching of these strategies resulted in improved student reading and writing.
- There is greater attention to differentiation where teachers focus language arts instruction on individual students' needs. Running records are regularly used to analyze student needs and make decisions about appropriate instruction.

Teaching Writing

- Writing integration across the curriculum, in school-wide initiatives, supported writing skills for the real world (e.g., e-mail, thank you notes, lists, collecting research data, songs). Children see their writing has a purpose and are given a forum to celebrate and share it. It also supported the education of parent groups so they could help with the literacy learning of their children in an informed way.
- Teachers are developing a wider range of strategies to implement mini lessons for small groups of children within the classroom setting.
- In order for projects to gain parental support, parents were invited to the school before projects started to inform them about the rationale behind the project. This process created a sense of teamwork between the home and school and allowed progress to occur, with community support, from inception.
- Writing has become a more ingrained part of school cultures and has shifted thinking from the view of learning curriculum at a particular grade level to the broader consideration of individual growth of student writing from year to year.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Sustained, supportive professional development of all staff gave teachers the opportunity to internalize core information, integrate it into their practice and refine it.
- This process seemed to work best when staff developed a common understanding, at the beginning of the project, and regular release time was built into the timetable to allow for collaboration.
- Celebration of success created a sense of community as professional and learning relationships were forged with teachers and with students. This growth and success seemed to provide an impetus for more impassioned learning.
- Successful projects were driven by student needs that were identified through a variety of formative assessment tools. Whether the tools were commercially developed or created collaboratively by teachers, the common language and continuity of programming helped projects succeed and move forward. This continuity allowed for meaningful collaboration between teachers and students that built confidence.
- Confidence and common understanding created energy to learn more. When teachers and students defined what was expected of them, in terms of core literacy understandings, they improved.
- Success was realized when someone modelled the process, evaluated it and gave teachers the opportunity to adjust the process to fit their learning needs.

- Resources, whether developed on site or purchased, needed to be investigated thoroughly by staff, in a collaborative way, before they could be used effectively with students. Success seemed to rest with teachers either when they felt confident delivering a guided reading lesson, writing strategy or literacy concept, or when they were able to refine it to work for their students.
- Providing release time during the day to develop a deeper understanding of the process of literacy learning was crucial to this success. Collaboration helped teachers put the elements together to see the bigger learning picture across curricula and grade levels.
- A passion for continuous improvement developed when teachers worked toward a common goal, in a site-based collaborative learning environment, and achieved success.
- Development of this form of inquiry process, where the culture is driven to create, refine and question in order to build upon its successes, creates a positive environment and builds success.
- Building professional relationships seemed to drive everything. These relationships were well defined, broken down into workable strategies that were implemented, discussed and reinvented until they made sense to the people using them.

In their own words...

Early intervention promised long-term, lasting results.

Teachers were able to witness and contribute to student learning and achievement.

Common Challenges

A number of challenges presented themselves in incorporating what was learned into current practice. Project participants indicated it was difficult to:

- sustain learning and find ways to continue supporting teachers in their learning and professional growth
- integrate new staff members into the culture and practices of the project
- find sufficient time to reflect, revise and listen to others
- maintain balance and affordability
- overcome fear and lack of confidence
- get teachers to buy into a new and different approach to their practice.

Closing Thoughts

Effective changes in practice require time to develop teacher expertise and knowledge and time to practise that expertise. Successful AISI literacy and language arts projects developed professional learning community attributes to ensure the sustainability of implemented changes. Building and sustaining relationships as well as linking regular formative assessment, student programming and instructional strategies with student achievement was critical to success. The strategies were well defined, broken down into workable steps that were implemented, discussed and reinvented until they made sense to the people using them.

The AISI projects reviewed for this report were successful in improving student learning and achievement and may have value for others developing AISI projects related to literacy and language arts.

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Appendix One: Research Methodology

The purpose of this report was to gather and synthesize findings from a review of literacy and language arts AISI projects. The audience for this report includes key decision-makers, teachers interested in replicating successful practices and others interested in school success.

Three sources of data were used for this report:

- AISI project annual reports of those literacy and language arts AISI projects that were determined by AISI data analysis to show promising outcomes
- October 7th, 2005 focus group, consisting of 14 AISI project leaders from across Alberta
- follow-up telephone interviews with selected project leaders unable to attend the focus group.

RESEARCH REVIEW PROCEDURE

1. Three reviewers conducted a blind review of annual reports from selected projects. The reports were reviewed to:
 - a. identify common themes and exemplars
 - b. construct preliminary questions for phone interviews and the focus group
 - c. develop a preliminary list of potential candidates for the focus group.
2. Two of the reviewers participated in a focus group, with representation from 14 participants representing 12 school authorities and charter schools. Focus group data included:
 - a. notes taken during discussions
 - b. handouts to participants for individual completion of questions
 - c. reviewers' observations and synthesis, drawn from independent notes taken during and after the focus group sessions.
3. Reviewers conducted nine telephone interviews, each approximately an hour in length, with additional projects not represented in the focus group. Handouts used at the focus group were used to structure telephone interviews.
4. Findings were further triangulated by review of practitioner and scholarly literature related to literacy and language arts development.
5. Preliminary results, in the form of a first draft of this report, were shared with selected focus group participants to further verify the accuracy of reporting the discussions.

PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA

The following sources of data were used to determine projects selected for this review.

Cycle 1

- Project effect size on student learning – projects that had a statistically significant medium or large effect size on student learning measures, based on three year average results compared to the baseline, AND/OR
- Significant improvement in Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results during the life span of the AISI project – aggregated three year average PAT results for math or language

arts, based on percentage meeting acceptable standard and standard of excellence, yielded a large or medium effect size, compared to the baseline (i.e., three year average results prior to AISI), AND/OR

- Significant improvement in PAT results one year after the AISI project – aggregated 2003/04 average PAT results for math or language arts, based on percentage meeting acceptable standard and standard of excellence, yielded a large or medium effect size, compared to the baseline, AND
- AISI Project annual report (APAR), Section G1 – projects that reported success on student outcomes in section G1 of the 2003/04 APAR.

Cycle 2

- Project effect size on student learning – projects that had a statistically significant small, medium or large effect size on student learning measures, based on 2003/04 AISI Project annual reports (APAR), AND/OR
- Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) effect size – projects that had a statistically significant small, medium or large PAT effect on math or language arts at grade levels within the scope of the project. The PAT effect sizes were derived from an independent analysis of 2003/04 PAT multi-year results to determine improvement in percentage meeting acceptable standard and standard of excellence over the previous three-year average AND
- AISI Project annual report (APAR), Section G1 – projects that reported success on student outcomes in section G1 of the 2003/04 APAR.

EFFECT SIZE CALCULATION

An effect size of 1.0 indicates an increase of one standard deviation, typically associated with advancing children's achievement by one year, improving the rate of learning by 50% or a correlation between some variable and achievement of approximately 0.50 (Hattie 1992, pp. 5-13¹).

All data on student learning, both baseline and results, were converted to a common scale (e.g., standard score) that permits comparison of improvement, regardless of the type of measure school authorities used. An effect size expresses the increase or decrease in standard deviation units.

For each measure, the baseline and annual result were converted to standardized (z) scores with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The effect size for each measure was determined by the difference between the z scores for the baseline and the actual annual results and then averaged over the measures for each project and weighted by the number of students involved in each measure. These average effect sizes were grouped into four

¹ Hattie, J. "Measuring the Effects of Schooling." *Australian Journal of Education* 36 (1992), pp. 5-13.

categories: no effect² (less than zero or not significant), minimal (.01 to less than less than 0.2), small (0.2 to 0.3), medium (0.4 to 0.7) and large (0.8 or higher).

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² No effect includes all positive effect sizes that are not statistically significant.

Appendix Two: Focus Group and Telephone Interview Questions

AISI Focus Group, October 7, 2005 Lessons Learned Literacy and Language Arts Projects

Fourteen AISI project leaders from 12 school authorities and charter schools participated in focus group discussions. Sessions were organized to allow small group discussions, individual reflections and plenary sessions.

The focus group sessions began with three groups sharing the highlights of their individual projects. Group membership was changed twice as part of this initial sharing so that all participants were informed about other projects represented in the focus group.

Participants were then asked to individually complete written responses to a number of questions. Two lists of questions were shared with the participants. One set focused on the orientation and goals for the literacy and language arts projects. The second list requested detailed information about the organization and implementation of the projects. The same questions were used to structure follow-up telephone interviews.

Once written responses were completed, participants engaged in a series of small group discussions (i.e., three groups of five), where individual responses were shared and discussed. Themes emerging from the small group discussions were shared with the whole group in plenary sessions.

The questions presented were as follows:

TASK 1 - MAPPING THE LITERACY AND LANGUAGE ARTS TERRITORY

- How did you determine that literacy and language arts would be the specific focus of your project?
- Why this and not something else?
- What specific aspect of literacy and language arts curriculum and/or instruction was chosen as the focus of your project?
- What were the perceived needs (e.g., in the children, school, district) that took you in this direction?
- What were the important language arts goals and/or expected outcomes of the project?

TASK 2 – MINING THE LITERACY AND LANGUAGE ARTS DETAILS

- What professional resources/sources did you use? Why did you choose those resources?
- What were/are the strengths and weaknesses of the approach and the resources?
- What new teaching strategies did your staff members learn and apply in their teaching practice?
- How has individual classroom practice changed as a result of the project?
- What were/are the challenges in incorporating what has been learned into current practice?
- How, specifically, did student language arts learning improve?

Appendix Three: Project Summaries

Given the larger number of projects reviewed in this study and the unique contexts of each language art and literacy project, please refer to Alberta Education's AISI Web site for a complete list of projects, descriptions and contact information. The Web site is located at: http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi.