

**Improving literacy outcomes for all students through leadership in learning:
A discussion based on a study on the literacy needs of 10 to 13 year old students and
the strategies that lead to their success.**

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Introduction

Standing and leaning forward with intense passion, a young male teacher, George, holds a large picture book open and faces a class of 11 and 12 year old boys. The picture book is a sophisticated text. The boys are ones who have been identified as needing special motivation in learning, particularly reading. The boys, used to this opening to their daily reading sessions, are wired with excitement. They realise that another fascinating debate is about to open surrounding the character and storyline of a revisited text. Together they are about to embark on a journey of query, critical reflection and discovery.

George is the teacher of a ‘boys only’ class in a West Coast, South Island school. His class is one of a number of case studies that explore how effective teachers improve literacy outcomes for all students.

Focus of this paper

A ‘dip’ or ‘plateau’ in students’ literacy learning progress is reported internationally to occur in years 9 to 13. This paper examines the nature of that dip, discusses its causes and offers an emerging theorisation of factors that lead to successful development. We report current research that analyses the match (or lack of it) between learning needs and classroom strategies and propose a composite model of leadership of learning in literacy that will support shifts in current practice. Our presentation also invites further discussion with conference participants.

Review of the literature

International reports attest that most students learn to read successfully in their first two years of schooling (Myrberg & Rosén, 2007; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2001). However there is a growing body of research evidence internationally (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; Farstrup, 2005; Hattie, 2007; Hirsch, 2003) to support the proposition that reading progress drops off as students move through the schooling system and that reading is often not effectively taught at the 9 to 13 year old age level. For example, recent research in New Zealand (Hattie, 2007; McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, & Lei, 2007) indicates that there appears to be a “tapering off” of progress in reading for a significant number

of students in low socio-economic schools despite successful interventions at an earlier level.

Reading holds a position of central importance in students' secondary schooling, their critical response to society and community and their own personal development. Ownership of learning and access to career pathways are expected products of successful reading competencies. It is argued that critical literacy approaches (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; New London Group, 2000; Unsworth, 2002) are central to the needs of 9 to 13 year old students.

New Zealand research in reading practices, pedagogy and resources, and the development of models that will enhance literacy achievement adds further layers to internationally recognised findings. Clay (2001) emphasizes that all children have the ability to become literate and that no single approach to the teaching of literacy is sufficient in itself because learners' needs vary greatly. A number of reading theorists (Everatt, Smythe, Ocampo, & Gyarmathy, 2004; Gillon, 2007; Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolesal, 2002) discuss the need for children to develop phonological awareness, word level strategies, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension strategies. Further research (Andreotti & DeSouza, 2007; Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, & Taleni, 2006; Fletcher, Parkhill, Taleni, & Fa'afoi, 2005; Greenwood & Wilson, 2006; Parkhill, Fletcher, & Fa'afoi, 2005; Taleni, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, & Fletcher, 2007) emphasises the need for sociocultural relevant reading resources, contexts and tasks. Successful literacy instruction builds on the knowledge and understandings that children bring to the learning environment from their diverse cultural and language backgrounds (Alton-Lee 2003; Au and Raphael, 2000; McNaughton, 2002). Allington (2003) and Hattie (1999) remind us that all children need explicit instruction about some aspects of literacy processes and not every child 'gets it' after a single lesson. Meaningful lessons to teach strategies cannot be scripted from textbooks but need to be customised in richly contextual instructional settings.

Whole school environment and professional development

The literature talks of the importance of the school environment, particularly student-teacher relationships. An unsatisfactory environment contributes to a decline not only in academic performance but also to the student well-being generally (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Effective leadership is seen to play a vital role, as does the impact of a collaborative team of teachers who work together to ensure quality outcomes for students. Many commentators stress the need for whole school buy-in on raising achievement and collaboratively developing a school-wide plan based on sound guiding principles. When this is aligned with focused professional development it provides opportunities for peer coaching and fosters a learning community (e.g., see Fisher & Frey, 2007; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Professional development programmes that effectively raise achievement occur over longer periods of time, have an extensive investment both in time and financially, and are content based where there are sound theoretical understandings for teachers in the subject matter (Snow, 2002).

Home-school partnerships

Reading has a social nature (DeZutter, 2007; Gee, 2000) When a student's family and community value reading and provide a model by reading and developing talk around texts, a student is likely to develop a love for reading (Strommen & Mates, 2004). This 'reading mileage' is seen to influence reading achievement and long term attitudes to the value of reading. Literacy instruction, it is suggested, is more effective where partnerships are developed between family and school and where cognisance is taken of the divergence between home and school expectations (Gee, 1990). The literature discusses how parents and teachers might work together to provide a positive environment that supports reading. For example, Padak & Rasinski's (2006) study of a home reading involvement programme for primary grade students shows remarkable results. During the daily 10 -15 minute sessions the parents read a short passage both to and with their child, listened to the child read the text, and discussed and engaged in a related word study activity. The programmes were implemented both at the early and middle years of schooling and the students achieved in reading well above what would normally be expected.

Our Methodological approach

An initial exploration of the literature allowed us to develop an overview of literacy practices and outcomes both nationally and internationally and to position our study within perceived trends.

We then set out to find what is actually happening in the teaching of reading at Year 7-8 level¹ in New Zealand schools.

We surveyed all the schools with Year 7-8 students within a large regional district, the central and upper South Island. We asked about current school practices, classroom programmes, teaching and learning strategies, use of resources and support for marginalised and underachieving groups. Initial findings of the survey were reported at the recent BERA Conference (Parkhill, Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley, & Bridges, 2008). They showed that across schools there is a very wide range of practices and of time spent in structured instruction in the teaching of reading at these year levels. It also suggested that across the board there is significantly less attention given to the active teaching of reading at these year levels than in earlier ones.

Next we conducted in-depth case studies of particular schools that, according to literacies experts in our advisory committee and the initial results of our survey, had rigorous literacy programmes and that measured their students' reading achievement by a nationally standardised test. Here our approach was a qualitative one. Each case included observations and interviews with teachers, students of varying reading ability, principals, literacy lead teachers and parents. Details of the case studies were reported at the recent ECER Conference (Fletcher, Parkhill, Greenwood, Grimley, & Bridges, 2008).

From our analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data we are developing are theoretical models of critical literacy for this age group, and identifying features of effective practice.

¹ The ages of the students are about 11-13.

Broad outline of findings

Evidence from our study, read against national and international literature, confirms that the explicit approaches and strategies used to teach reading in each classroom and other contributing factors external to the classroom instruction are deeply entangled and influence reading achievement in unique ways for different learners. Nevertheless, a picture is emerging that effective teachers, with knowledge of effective reading instruction, and whole school leadership focusing on reading literacy and the differing needs of learners, can work together to improve reading achievement, and to mitigate to some degree the tapering off/ dip that is reported internationally across the age group. In other words, we found that literacy learning is strongly impacted by the leadership demonstrated by teachers and by school organisations.

We are left with a number of remaining questions about the students who constitute the reported dip, and we discuss these in the last part of this paper. First, we look at the feedback from schools in a little more detail.

Literacy leadership

At the case study schools the comments from the literacy leaders indicated how their role influences the quality of effective literacy teaching and student achievement. Themes that emerged a discussion of the importance of were school-wide professional development in literacy, sharing and collaborating amongst staff, including literacy leaders, principals and teachers, and interpreting school-wide and individual class assessment data.

1. Teachers sharing and collaborating together

The underlying importance of teachers learning from each other was evident at all schools. The following statements reinforce these interactions:

‘There is lots of sharing. When we look at each other’s practice it is always in terms of –‘this is what I have done, this is what I have tried, this is what I have found.’
(Literacy Leader – School W)

‘Now, with the PD you have to share. You have to share what you are doing. You have to share your successes. You actually have to talk about them. I think that has been really good because people are sharing and as I always say, ‘Why reinvent the wheel if it is working really well?’ (Literacy Leader –School P)

‘We have critical friends and we are buddied with them and we have set goals together and then they come in and look at that goal and it is always a literacy focused goal.’
(Literacy Leader – School P)

‘We have a mentoring programme that is operating in syndicate one, which is a buddy system where teachers feel comfortable with each other in saying or how can I say this. If someone was coming in to observe them and everything went all haywire they now

have the courage to say ‘look, what would you do?’ Or ‘what question could I ask to get that.’ (Literacy Leader – School G)

‘Lots of sharing. When we look at each other’s practice it is always in terms of –‘this is what I have done, this is what I have tried, this is what I have found.’ (Literacy Leader – School W)

‘I went around and observed teachers teaching. We made a list of strengths and we made a list of needs and we are working on those. So, how can it be anything but positive. And, yes, I have seen changes.’ (Literacy Leader – School L)

‘But I want people to pick up a journal, pick up a book. I want to make sure people are very familiar with these books, with what is online. I want to practically help them. So they can sit down and say ‘ok, I have read this story...so read it before you teach it!’ Just getting staff time to read them. Getting staff to say ‘I want to hone in on that particular sentence etc.’ We are buying time for staff and I think that is one of the most practical ways that we can help.’ (Literacy Leader – School L)

2. Professional Development

The importance of continuing professional development proved evident in the case study schools where effective literacy practices had been identified by key literacy personnel. The following statements reflect this:

‘Professional development needs to fit where we feel we are as a staff. It needs to be quite practical and hands-on so that when people walk away, they can think –‘I can try this with my class.’ (Literacy Leader –School W)

‘Professional development and opportunities to talk are important. We share new resources into the school and talk about how they can be used. We often go through Effective Literacy (a New Zealand Ministry of Education teachers’ handbook) by the chapter and pull that apart and talk about it. Our peer coaching involves going into other classes and seeing what is happening.’ (Literacy Leader – School G)

‘We have a mentoring programme that is operating in syndicate one, which is a buddy system where teachers feel comfortable with each other in saying or how can I say this. If someone was coming in to observe them and everything went all haywire they now have the courage to say ‘look, what would you do?’ Or ‘what question could I ask to get that.’ (Literacy Leader – School G)

3. Assessment

Typical of the comments from the literacy leaders were the following:

‘I would still be expecting to see target groups happening as a result of using data (norm reference testing in reading comprehension). There is a strong focus in our school on vocabulary that is right through the school. We do a lot of work around sentence comprehension and paragraph comprehension –so all of those sorts of things are built into their reading programme.’ (Literacy Leader – School G)

‘We had good results to begin with (data from norm reference testing in reading comprehension), so we were doing all right and I think what happened to us was from that initial data that was collected we thought we were doing quite well. I guess you could say we rested on our laurels perhaps and then when we got back our time two data – we got a bit of a wake up call, to think we were still really, only just, plateaued when what we should have been doing was accelerating.’ (Literacy Leader –School G)

‘I know that as far as our school has got two teams operating – syndicate one and syndicate two and syndicate three and four. In syndicate one, we do a lot of discussion and monitoring of students and I would say once a week we are talking about where our students are at and what we need to do etc. We have a mentoring programme that is operating in syndicate one, which is a buddy system where teachers feel comfortable with each other in saying or how can I say this. If someone was coming in to observe them and everything went all haywire they now have the courage to say ‘look, what would you do?’ Or ‘what question could I ask to get that.’ (Literacy Leader – School G)

‘We have had team teaching to, in cases where we have been particularly concerned about a staff member.’ (Literacy Leader – School G)

‘So we looked (at the norm referenced test results in reading comprehension) and printed off all of our data, our class data and then we just highlighted all of those that form our target group.’ (Literacy Leader – School W)

The impact of leadership in literacy learning

Our study shows that schools that had records of improving their students’ literacy achievements had clear and rich instructional reading programmes and strong leadership within the field. Here we will discuss the leadership features of our case study schools. However some of these features were reported by other schools in the survey, and there too there was a match with reported achievement.

All of the schools had literacy leaders, and the development of their focus on literacy was supported by the principal.

All schools had extensive professional development programmes in literacy, and these were sustained over a period of time.

Most of the school literacy leaders were supported by external facilitators of literacy professional development.

The schools took an active role in reviewing their external professional development provision, and one of the schools changed to an alternative provider that they felt better met their school's specific needs.

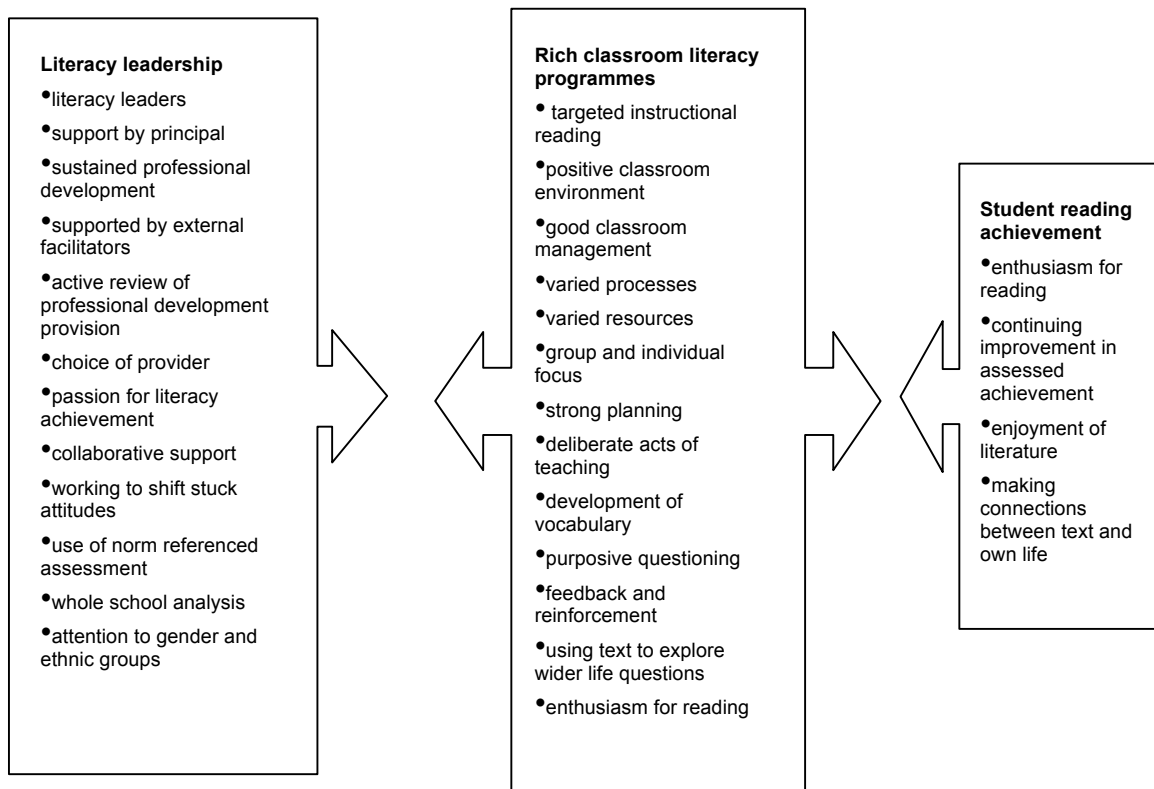
All the principals had a strong passion for raising literacy achievement, and worked in a collaborative ongoing manner with their staff.

All the teachers in the classes we studied (these were ones who were reported to be effective leaders of literacy) had a strong passion for raising literacy achievement.

Some of the principals and literacy leaders were actively and consistently addressing the problem of how to support and shift the teaching attitude of staff in their school who were perceived to be stuck in outdated practices.

All the schools used norm referenced assessment of reading achievement to ensure that there was a continuing improvement in achievement.

Assessments were analysed on a whole school basis to ensure that the school as a whole was positioning itself to better meet the needs of all students, with particular attention to gender and ethnic groups.



Teachers as classroom leaders

Within each of our case study classrooms, the teacher was an overt and strong leader of literacy learning.

All of the teachers had specific times in each day when reading was actively taught.

All had established a positive classroom environment and developed interactive processes that ensured that disruptions by unacceptable behaviour were kept to a minimum and quickly dealt with.

All had a rich range of instructional processes that involved students in interpretive and analytical approaches to the text as well as in decoding and comprehending.

All drew on a wide range of reading resources, aiming to meet the various interests of students in their class.

They used a range of whole class, group and individual processes.

All the teachers showed evidence of detailed prior planning that identified not only the key features and possible implications of the texts they brought to the lesson but also of the specific teaching opportunities the texts offered and the deliberate acts of teaching they would engage in.

All the teachers talked about the importance of vocabulary for reading comprehension and had developed strategies for explicit contextualised instruction.

Each had developed their own style of questioning, but evident across the group was the strategic use of both closed and open questions, facilitating in turn a focus to particular parts of the text and opportunity for students to bring their own understandings and their own questions.

Regular and timely feedback and reinforcement from the teachers we observed were evidenced in all case study classrooms and they impacted on the focus and confidence of the students.

In different ways that reflected their own personalities, all the teachers used the reading texts they had chosen to explore wider life questions, and to encourage students to bring their own experience and evolving questions to the text.

All the teachers expressed and demonstrated a strong enthusiasm for reading.

Impact on learners

In broad terms the impact on learners was the development of enthusiasm for reading and continuing improvement in their assessed literacy achievement. The students also expressed an enjoyment of literature and were actively willing to make connections between the texts they read and their own lives.

Of course, these results were no unexpected, because our case study classrooms had been selected because of the reputation their teachers had as effective leaders of literacy and because the school had used standardised testing to measure and report on-going achievement. Our focus in this study was to explore the leadership and teaching strategies that led to student progress in literacy.

But there was still a tail

Our findings in the project to date highlight the need for instructional reading to continue to be taught at the Year 7 and 8 levels. In the schools that informed our case studies, due to the continued active teaching of reading processes, there was no evidence of a tapering off of progress in reading achievement. There were, however, still some students who were achieving at significantly lower levels than others.

And in the schools who responded to the survey there was evidence of a significant “tail” in terms of reading achievement.

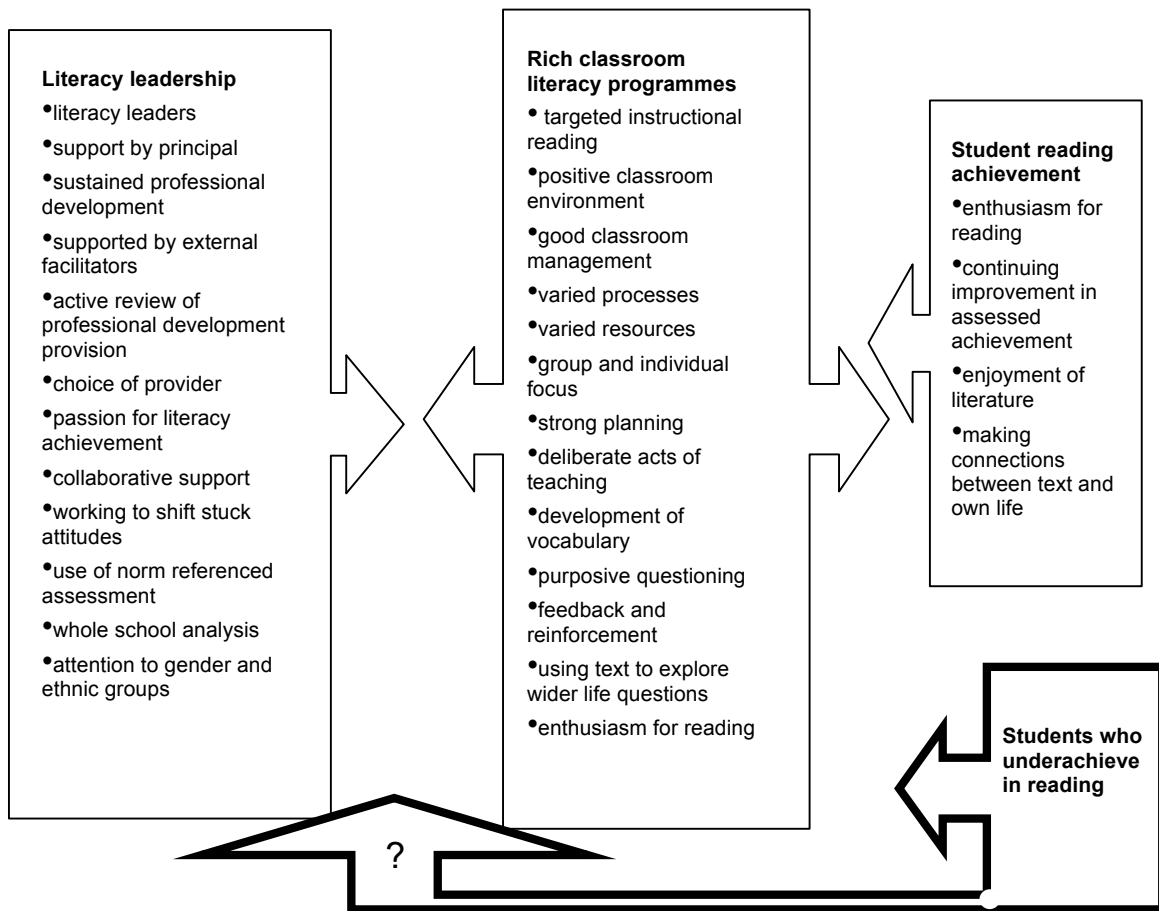
Current popular discussions in New Zealand, especially leading up to the 2008 election, statements were made and widely discussed regarding the underachievement of New Zealand children in terms of literacy. In particular, it was claimed that twenty percent are failing in reading by the time they come to high school.

In the next stages of our research we are interested in examining that percentage of underachievers, though our study to date has us unconvinced about the size of the group.

Unanswered questions that arose from analysis of our first stage

As we worked through the analysis of the case studies a number of questions arose, that we still did not have the data to answer and which we hope to explore in further phases of the project. Here we briefly indicate a few.

It seems that while a ‘gap’ or ‘plateau’ in reaching achievement seems to occur statistically across the age group, it does not occur in all schools and particularly not where there is active and well directed teaching of reading. Who does this plateau occur for: is it for most students in ‘other’ schools? Or is it for particular students?



If is for particular students, what causes it? Is it a failure of the teaching strategies used at Year 7 and 8, or is it that what was learned earlier had a threshold of usefulness that runs out when more complex reading demands occur? Are we perhaps introducing critical responses in literacy too late?

Is it competency in reading that tapers off, or is it interest? If it is interest, is that because of competing social pressures of community, peers and even puberty, or is it because of the choice of instructional materials?

How can schools better bridge the gap, where it occurs, between what motivates students socially and socio-culturally and what motivates, or doesn't motivate them, to read?

How can a teacher or a school, overcome a shortage of culturally relevant materials? How can a teacher, or a school, overcome his/her/their gaps in understanding the cultural background of their students?

What happens when family and school values do not align?

Are the tests of reading achievement we measure at primary and intermediate level good indicators of the kinds of reading students will need in their adult lives? Or for success at

secondary school? How does success in reading at intermediate level align with success at secondary level, or with success in the workplace?

Can success in reading alienate a student from significant peers, or community? And if so, how can schools reconcile the tension?

The next stages

So in the next stage of our research we plan to further investigate the needs and social contexts of this tail of underachievers.

Firstly, we propose to examine in more detail who the learners are in this group. Previous studies (Flockton & Crooks, 2001) have variously developed statistics about their socio-economic status, their ethnicity and their gender. We want to know more. We plan to explore the backgrounds, development, health, educational histories, needs and interests of the students who are underachieving in reading in the later years of their primary schooling. We suspect they are a very diverse group of people, with very different problems and needs. We hope that knowing more about them will in itself prompt better understandings by both classroom teachers of reading and school leadership and encourage the development of appropriate instructional strategies.

Secondly, we plan to develop a range of strategies or sustained teaching interventions based on the perceived needs and interests of these learners. Although final plans will evolve out of the investigation of who those who are underachieving are, we have some initial ideas. These include the use of digital media, of video and text, of storytelling, drama and visual art, of sophisticated children's picture books, of learning collaborations between school and home.

Conclusions

Our project so far has shown that leadership, in terms of school professional development and support and of teachers' active shaping of learning processes is vitally important in improving literacy outcomes for students. It has showed the impact of such leadership on students at Year 7-8 level, a stage where unfortunately a proportion of schools no longer offer specific reading instruction.

However, the first stages of our project have also showed us that even in classrooms where there is some improvement for most students there are students who continue to trail behind the rest, and whose underachievement is of concern.

In the next stages we plan to find out how our current conceptualisations of leadership in learning may need to be modified and/or expanded in order improve outcomes for this group as well.

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