2008 ENGLISH PLT
PROGRESS REPORT

Introduction

The primary focus of the REN PLT for 2008 was to use literacy data to inform the teaching and learning process in Year 8 English. A number of issues had to be addressed in order to achieve this goal.

1. **Famaliarising teachers with available data**

   PLT members began the year with little or no experience of using data in the classroom. The initial focus, therefore, was to become familiar with the available data and to develop skills in using this to profile student needs. Even the terminology of data analysis had to be learnt and reinforced from meeting to meeting. The amount of data available was initially quite daunting, with various tests reporting on different skills. How to prevent 'data overload' became an early issue.

   A number of steps were taken to address this. The PLT spent a significant amount of time discussing the basis behind the three main sets of data that were being used – AIM, ACER and TORCH Plus. Each teacher was given a folder containing AIM and TORCH results and this information was also available online. A central copy including data for the year level was maintained by the English HOD and this became a widely consulted source of information as teachers became more experienced with its use. As the year progressed, teachers from outside the PLT also began to consult 'the book of data', providing an early step in the extension of data use across the College.

   Colour-coding the data also proved useful in making the data more accessible. AIM data, sorted by class lists and coded to reflect students below, at and above the expected VELS level, was printed onto OHTs and inserted into teachers' planners. This provided a visual representation of this data that was easy to refer to when teaching and proved useful in making this data a day-to-day teaching tool.

   Further insight was gained at the end of the year when PLT members marked the TORCH Plus tests for the 2009 cohort. This was a useful professional learning activity that further informed discussions about the test's utility and limitations. This also facilitated a transfer of knowledge for NDC staff who were preparing to use this data for the first time.

2. **Using data to set teaching and learning focus**
   An initial analysis of the ACER and AIM data suggested that the 2008 cohort consisted of larger "top" and "bottom" level of achievement compared to an assumed "middle". Comprehension appeared to be a major factor for these students – while they could decode words, they found inference significantly more difficult.

   TORCH Plus tests confirmed the need for a specific focus on comprehension skills in general and inference in particular.

   These test results were also used by teachers to group students with like needs. Tailored in-class programs could then be implemented with these different groups where and when necessary. This data was similarly helpful when planning activities requiring mixed-ability groupings.

   At the end of the year, classroom teachers completed data profiles on their students that included the three forms of data discussed above, teacher-assigned VELS levels and comments regarding strengths and weaknesses. This information will be passed on to 2009 Year 9 English teachers to assist them in their preparations.

3. **Reviewing curriculum**
   The curriculum was trimmed to provide more class time to address comprehension in greater detail. Existing comprehension tasks were re-written to add emphasis to inference skills. As part of the process, PLT members attended a PD session, conducted by ACER, focusing on three-level comprehension activities. The knowledge gained from this was applied to a range of resources created throughout the year. It quickly became clear that the grammar exercises in the 'English Skills' workbook were too difficult for most students and the 2009 book list and resource book were changed as a result.

   The data clearly indicated that there were large numbers of students above and below the expected standard for Year 8 English. Teaching directed at a theoretical "middle" was bound to miss the majority of students. To tackle this, the PLT began a process of differentiating resources to enable students to access the curriculum at an individually appropriate level. Text comprehension questions were re-written to reflect ability levels above, at and below the expected standard.

   A colour coding system was again employed to enable students to think about their own abilities and to motivate students to improve. By using red, yellow

and green question sheets to represent the different levels of achievement, teachers could easily monitor the levels at which students were working. By providing work that was at once accessible and challenging for the range of abilities present, a noticeable improvement in engagement at both ends of the ability scale occurred. There was an ongoing discussion within the PLT about how best to maintain a whole-class focus while simultaneously differentiating work and this is likely to remain a focus for the team in 2009.

PLT meetings also facilitated the sharing of resources, particularly comprehension activities. A resource bank was developed that included activities for a range of ability levels. This was particularly helpful for those teachers who had little or no experience teaching junior English while developing a consistency of teaching practice across the year level.

4. Utilising REN support

The addition of a REN teacher for three classes a cycle provided a significant resource that assisted in overcoming some of the challenges associated with the differentiated classroom. The availability of a second teacher was a new experience for all members of the PLT; as a result, the role of the REN teacher was much-discussed and evolved throughout the year. Formalising this role and further integrating the REN teacher into lesson planning will be a focus for the PLT in 2009.

Most commonly, the REN teacher worked in tandem with the classroom teacher to provide assistance to students and to check student work as the class progressed. This facilitated the focus on differentiated group work that became common in many classes. In some instances, the REN teacher was able to work with small groups of students in a different room to achieve specific goals set in conjunction with the classroom teacher. More individualised attention was able to be provided to students further contributing to the engagement of many students, particularly those at the lower levels of achievement.

An ongoing focus of the team was to insist on high expectations from all students, regardless of their level of achievement. The support provided by the REN teacher assisted in monitoring these expectations as sub-standard work was detected more quickly and remedies immediately implemented. Furthermore, the presence of another teacher in the classroom was very useful in facilitating the sharing of good teaching practice. Having another teacher involved in setting classroom strategies was a powerful form of professional development for all PLT members.

5. Monitoring progress

Teachers continued to collect formal and informal data on students throughout the year. Spelling and grammar test results were tracked for improvement and initial attempts at using this information to inform future teaching were made. The spelling log was one example of this, although further teacher-training in this area would be desirable.

Anecdotal evidence suggested a significant improvement in student engagement as a result of the REN teacher and the differentiation of class work. As our experience of teaching tells us, this is a vital pre-requisite for learning progression to occur.

The major component of monitoring progress involved students re-sitting the TORCH Plus test in December. This enabled a direct comparison between achievement in the key area of comprehension over the course of the year. The first testing applied the same test for all students regardless of ability. The December testing was conducted using a range of tests matched to ability; these results could then be standardised to enable comparisons across the cohort and with the previous test.

The results demonstrated that the majority of students who sat both tests improved their performance on the TORCH Plus by one or more stanines. For some students, part of this improvement was possibly due to completing a more accessible test. Alternatively, some students who appear to have progressed negatively were likely set tests that were too difficult for them. This experience will inform the conduct of similar testing in 2009.

Comparison of TORCH Plus testing

-1 or more change in stanine rank	23%
No change in stanine rank	22%
+1 or more change in stanine rank	55%

As the test allows for the expected level of development over the course of a year, even those students who did not change rank maintained their relative standard of achievement. That more than half of the cohort progressed more rapidly than the expected standard would suggest the REN program's success in meeting the primary goal of improving comprehension skills in Year 8 English.

Conclusion

Many of the tools made available to the REN PLT were initially unfamiliar and, at times, daunting. The capacity of the team to analyse data and to use that data to inform teaching practice has undoubtedly increased over the course of 2008. The process of differentiating the Year 8 English curriculum is well under way and the positive reaction of students will encourage further activity in this area. Having experimented with the use of the REN teacher throughout 2008, the team is well-placed to formalise this role for 2009.