

# THE LANGUAGE LITERACY PROGRAM AT CANBERRA CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

The Canberra Christian School, a two-teacher Adventist primary school, has served its Australian community since 1972. The school's logo incorporates the Parliament House flagpole, a distinctive symbol of Canberra, the capital city. Recently, the school has established an innovative Language Literacy Program, which is founded on a number of research-based learning principles.

This school was one of the first in Australia to implement this innovative program. Principal Barry Dean learned about the program by attending an in-service course conducted by Ann Morrice, an educational researcher from Sydney, Australia.

The program is based on two major hypotheses:

1. All children can learn, despite the tendency by some educators to overlook the capabilities of some of their pupils.
2. When children come to the classroom, they bring prior knowledge, experiences, and competencies with them.

Dean and his colleagues see oral language as the structure underpinning all strands of English. Speaking, listening, reading, viewing, and writing must always be linked together. They seek to develop other key curriculum areas through the use of oral language.

Students at the Canberra Christian School are becoming more proficient as language learners because adults (parents and community) help facilitate and

model literacy in the classroom, providing a rich environment in which students achieve higher levels of competence and engage in critical-thinking processes.

The program teaches children to use oral language effectively, to listen, comprehend, and record sounds and to understand and correctly pronounce the words being used. It combines wholistic, top-down learning with a skill-based approach to give students an advantage in long-term learning. Phonics, sight-reading, literature-based instruction, and whole language all enhance student achievement.

Rather than allowing the students to "invent" their own language, which they will be forced to unlearn later, the school teaches and models correct forms of literacy from the start. "It is our responsibility," states Dean, "to point the young children in the right direction, if we expect them to do well and cope with the demands of a society rushing toward the next millennium."

Only conventional forms of writing are allowed. Children are provided with

support through adult language/literacy facilitators, word lists, dictionaries, and peer tutoring.

To implement this program, each child must get personalized attention. Since a single classroom teacher could never meet these demands, the Canberra Christian School has sought to involve the wider community. Qualifications needed by parents and other community helpers are as follows:

The ability to speak, read, and spell correctly, and

The willingness to spend some classroom time with the students.

Community members must commit themselves to active involvement each day for periods of up to two hours. The school's attempts to achieve a ratio of one adult to every two or three children.

Over the past 12 months, parents have been pleasantly surprised to see the results of their efforts. For example, grades three and four wrote and cleverly illustrated a classroom book entitled *The Barbeque Burglar* based upon a true story of a family vacation at the park interrupted by the untimely visit of emu birds attacking their picnic lunch.

But the payoffs have not been limited to success in children's language skills. Just as important is the bonding that takes place when parents, teachers, neighbors, and students work as a team. In the final analysis, it is this collaboration that is one of the greatest evidences of success and excellence at Canberra Christian School. ✍

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