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Creating a reading culture in a school community

- > [Summary](#)
- > [Target student group](#)
- > [Method](#)
- > [Results](#)
- > [Lessons learned](#)
- > [Research base](#)
- > [Further reading and links](#)
- > [Contacts](#)





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Summary

Data from NAPLAN and local measures indicated a need to improve student outcomes at Proserpine State School, especially in the area of reading. As a federally funded Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership (LLNP) school, regional targets and goals were set, and the school implemented processes for change through the work of the Literacy Coach and teaching staff. A new reading policy aimed to encourage students to read more, and to read more widely. Teachers used quality focus texts to develop comprehension strategies, using the SCORE approach to demand reading. 'Inking your thinking' (Donnelly 2007) was modelled and practised to support comprehension, and improved pedagogy in the classroom supported differentiated learning. The Literacy Coach demonstrated lessons and strategies, and ran professional learning sessions for teachers. Also, Coaching Models were significant in activating change, with the aim of improved literacy outcomes for students across years F–7.

Data collected through NAPLAN results, along with other testing, attest to the positive impact of this whole-school approach to reading.

Target student group

Proserpine State School is located in regional Queensland near the Central Coast, 12 hours from Brisbane and one hour north of Mackay. It is an area with a relatively stable population. Proserpine is in a low socio-economic area and the school has a lot of challenges, employing seven Special Education specialist teachers because of the high number of special needs students. Indigenous students make up 20 per cent of the school's population. When the program was first implemented, it involved all 640 students and the whole staff.

"In year 1, we have identified a group of students who require more intensive, more explicit work; we're using the research of Dr Carol Christiansen [with them], and those students are having targeted teaching in literacy sessions five days a week."
(Lee-Ann Doherty, Head of Curriculum)



Method

The strategy

An evaluation of the school's data in 2009 drove the need for a program to engage students more significantly in reading. The data was gathered from local assessments of student performance, anecdotal observations, and results from NAPLAN; the strategy was driven by the desire to raise expectations of student performance. The school also wanted to introduce new ideas and research to teachers, and to provide distributed leadership opportunities to a highly motivated staff.

The Administration, the Curriculum team and the teachers closely analysed and identified the school's needs. They asked: 'What does data tell us?' They reflected on current reading practices and student needs, and they surveyed teacher understandings and needs. Home and community practices were monitored and a conscious effort was made to develop a reading culture via a multi-pronged strategy.

The strategy involved:

- implementation of the *SCORE* approach to reading
- the *Reading Rangers Program*
- a whole-school reading policy
- use of a coaching model
- evaluation of existing practices.

It was hoped that implementing this strategy would help to better prepare students for their next phase of schooling. The school also sought to develop a repertoire of strategies and strategies to help students self-regulate. The research base included Luke & Freebody (1999) and Christiansen (2005), among others.

The strategy involved the whole school cohort, which initially consisted of 640 students, 30 teachers, ten teacher aides, the leadership team and the Literacy Coach.

"The way we've used data in the school, everyone is responsible for looking at their data, every teacher. We have our statewide system now, called One School, and all our data goes on there and it gives out wonderful reports. So teachers can do item analysis, they can look at individuals and groups of kids. When they're planning for improvement, they get down to the explicit 'tin tacks' of what strategies they need to help those students improve."

(Ross Hughes, Deputy Principal)

What happened



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Development of the reading culture manifested itself in various ways, including:

- Reading Rangers and Readers' Cup
- newsletter articles
- mandating a whole-school reading policy
- implementing the SCORE approach
- demonstration lessons
- posters in classrooms and around the school
- modelling of facilitated conversations, collective responsibility and explicit teaching practices.

Cohort planning meetings were held to analyse data, and specific goals were identified to improve pedagogy and practice. WOW ('Watching others work') became common practice also. Observation-feedback proformas were developed so that there were common and shared understandings across the school. Differentiation and targeted teaching in years F-2 was identified as a focus area, and comprehension strategies were explicitly taught and assessed over a five-week period. Goal setting was established, and two key messages emerged that teachers used as their mantras: 'Make Implicit Explicit' and 'Linger Longer'.

Links with Essential Learnings

Proserpine State School aligns itself with the Essential Learnings (ELs) and standards as the starting point for planning the curriculum. ELs identify what should be taught and what is important for students to know, understand and be able to demonstrate. ELs are part of the common curriculum across all Queensland schools; they are specified for each key learning area at three different year-level junctures: the end of years 3, 5 and 7. The ELs can be accessed either by key learning area or by juncture. As a result, all students enrolled in years 1-7 at Proserpine State School complete assessment tasks common to a particular year level; receive feedback called 'Two Stars and a Wish', and explicitly learn thinking strategies such as Thinking Hats, [Thinkers Keys](#) and eLearning. Before-and-after comparisons are regularly made, as are comparisons between different categories of participants. Complete cohorts who participate in all school-based assessments – for example, all year 5 students, excluding high-needs students with a verified diagnosis – are assessed and evaluated as a discrete group.



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“It’s, ‘What can we do to help children become more literate?’ I think we’re always reflecting on our practices and saying, ‘Well, that is working. Let’s continue with that.’ ‘This isn’t working. How can we change this? Or do we stop doing this?’ The Literacy Coach has a network, so she can talk to people in other schools and find out what’s happening [...] and then come back here [to tell us], and we don’t feel so isolated then. We can say ‘Well this is what they’re trying at this school, let’s give it a go and see if it will work with our children’.”
(Peterina Dinnie, Classroom Teacher)

Results

Local assessments of student performance were kept as an ongoing aspect of this strategy, including running records, PM benchmarks and reading checklists. Students also completed moderated tasks, and interviews were held with teachers every five weeks to discuss the progress of specific students. Informal testing also took place, along with the mandated NAPLAN tests in years 3, 5 and 7. Student data were collated and analysed and areas of improvement identified. Data collected through NAPLAN results, along with other testing, attest to the positive impact of this whole-school approach to reading.

Some outcomes were apparent within the school. Students who participated in the Reading Rangers program showed that they were becoming very reflective of the reading behaviours of the younger students and their reading buddies. Teachers were becoming more reflective about their own practice and willing to share ideas with the Literacy Coach and other teachers. Increasingly, teachers were open to having the Literacy Coach visit their classrooms and observe their teaching.

Audit results in 2011 confirmed that Proserpine State School is making a difference in a small regional community, and proving that children in Queensland can attain a very high level of education without being in a large metropolitan area. Recognition of the students’ achievements and teachers’ commitment came when Proserpine State School was listed as one of the top ten schools in Queensland in 2011.

“The biggest improvement we’ve seen in student outcomes would have been our 2010 NAPLAN results. We made substantial gains in reading and writing, and I believe that comes from the strategies and the explicit teaching that the Literacy Coach has modelled for us, and that we’ve implemented throughout the school.”
(Peterina Dinnie, Classroom Teacher)



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Lessons learned

It is clear from the experience at Proserpine State School that the whole-school approach – where common approaches and frameworks have been implemented – ensures that change and improved pedagogy continues for the long term, with or without a Literacy Coach. Collective responsibility and shared leadership through an active curriculum team has the potential to provide support to all staff. The common approach of using data to inform evidence-based learning and the use of assessments for teaching is a long-term goal, but regular moderation and whole-school data gathering also ensures that goals and targets are reached.

Strong leadership with clear goals and targets is essential, as is the need to identify any shortfalls in teacher knowledge and understanding so that professional development can be provided. Experienced Curriculum and Leadership teams must be able to identify key focus areas, set short- and long-term goals, communicate the message to the whole school community, and then celebrate the successes. It is also important to establish a culture of collective responsibility, so that all students at any level are everyone's business. It is also important that the school declare its focus, eg 'Reading is our core business'.

"I think I have improved since we started doing this, because now I know how to look at the text more carefully, and we do exercises where we have to go and justify our answers in the text with a partner. So, yeah, that really helps."

(Samantha Diamond, Student)

Research base

Studies in Australia and overseas have established a strong evidence base of teaching approaches and learner strategies that develop and strengthen students' capacity to comprehend a range of texts. (For comprehensive reviews of this evidence base, see Fielding & Pearson 1994; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998; Freebody 2007.) This evidence has helped educators distil what works when teaching reading comprehension:

- Explicit teacher-directed instruction of comprehension strategies, such as predicting, summarising and monitoring, and emphasising what effective readers do when they read.
- Explicit and teacher-directed instruction on the syntactical and rhetorical features of texts across all genres and school subjects.
- Opportunities for students to learn in collaboration with peers and through dialogue focused on their reading.
- Opportunities for students to read independently, to read in pairs and groups, and to be read aloud to.



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- Opportunities for students to build their knowledge, vocabulary and language.
- Opportunities for teachers to use assessments that are targeted at informing instruction.
- Opportunities for teachers to be involved in ongoing professional learning.

(Synthesised from Fielding & Pearson 1994; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998; Freebody 2007.)

The OECD Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) defines *reading engagement* as the time that students report reading a diversity of material for pleasure and their interest in and attitudes towards reading (cited in Brozo et al 2007).

Further reading and links

Reference Christiansen, C: [The work of Dr Carol Christiansen](#)  has been used within this strategy.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, [Proserpine State School](#) .

Donnelly, P 2007, 'Inking your thinking: the ultimate meaning making strategy', [Literacy learning: the middle years](#) , vol 15, no 1, Education Queensland, The Learning Place.

Fielding, L & Pearson, D 1994, 'Reading comprehension: what works', *Educational Leadership*, vol 51, no 5, pp 62–67.

Freebody, P 2007, [Literacy education in school: research perspectives from the past for the future](#) , ACER, Camberwell, Victoria, retrieved May 2012.

Queensland Studies Authority, [Planning – using the essential learnings and standards](#) .

Snow, CE, Burns, MS & Griffin, P (eds) 1998, *Preventing reading difficulties in young children* , National Academy Press, Washington DC.

Wellcoaches 2009, [How coaching works](#) .

Contacts

For more details about this strategy, contact [Proserpine State School](#) .