Linking school targets to classroom practice

Summary

'We want things that don't just work, but work powerfully. We want educationists to seek the evidence, get the data and listen to the feedback – these actions are at the heart of good teaching.' (Hattie 2008)

This initiative describes a whole-school approach to improving student learning outcomes by linking whole-school foci and targets to explicit classroom practice. The goal was to maximise student learning through explicit success criteria and feedback, to ensure clear links between assessment and learning outcomes.

Evidence-based planning for teaching and learning was established using a whole-school approach in the NSW public school Rosemeadow. Student and school performance gains were achieved by identifying desired results based on achievement data and determining what would count as evidence of success. This was followed by targeted adjustments to curriculum and instruction, and regular reviews of results.

Teachers became more effective as they sought feedback from students and their peers and used that feedback to adjust approaches to teaching and learning. The strategy had a demonstrable impact on student learning.

Target student group

Rosemeadow Public School is a metropolitan school in Rosemeadow, near Campbelltown, 65 kilometres south-west of Sydney. There are 550 students; 45 per cent are English as a Second Language learners and there is an 8 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. This was a whole-school strategy.

Method

The need for change

Rosemeadow Public School developed an approach to linking school targets to classroom practice by using backward mapping and an informed instructional approach to professional development of staff. Backward mapping allows teachers to break down the targeted outcomes to determine the foundational knowledge and explicit performance skills that are required to develop assessment tasks, and then plan strategically to achieve them.

The development of the approach was a result of Rosemeadow's involvement in the National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy initiative. The school was included in this initiative following the analysis of NAPLAN data, which indicated poor levels of achievement in reading and particularly comprehension in the years 3–6 classrooms.

"The Individual Learning Plans (ILP) are a really powerful tool in narrowing down exactly what skills the kids need to focus on, especially when paired with the fantastic rubrics that Catherine has developed. Letting the kids have ownership over their goals and what they want to do helps them to understand that they share the responsibility for their learning. In relation to using them in the classroom, it is challenging in a school like ours in that we have a dozen or so kids in each class who have been identified as needing an ILP, and lots more who still need to review the skills, so often the most effective lessons are whole-class, then we can follow up with kids who still don't get it over the next few days. The ILPs are an effective planning tool, and as we are all becoming more familiar with teaching strategies that meet the indicators, we will become highly effective in implementing interventions that address the specific areas of need of our kids." (Amanda Barrett, Classroom teacher, Grade 4)

Reflection on the school's poor levels of achievement in reading focused on how the data could be used to improve student outcomes. It was evident that the data collected was mostly 'assessment *of* learning' and led to summative judgements about student achievement. It did not support teachers in understanding the further teaching and learning students required to move forward: 'assessment *for* learning'.

It was evident that teachers at Rosemeadow did not have clear and consistent expectations of student performance. The strategy was informed by the work of Hattie (2003) who contends, 'We need to direct attention at higher quality teaching, and higher expectations so that students can meet appropriate challenges.' Staff understood that classroom practice had a significant impact on student performance. However, there were no links between the targets set by the school and what was guiding the teaching and learning in the classroom.

The whole-school approach was to implement a focus on linking targets to identified outcomes and developing 'assessment for learning' (formative assessment) to drive improvement in student performance. Teachers' understanding of the explicit success criteria described in the assessment rubrics allowed them to identify specific teaching and learning that needed to be developed and implemented for the students in the classroom.

"Since the implementation of our National Partnerships programs, we have been exposed to a really innovative and diverse range of programs, and acquired some terrific resources. But probably the most beneficial part was having a highly experienced teacher available to do demonstration lessons for us every week. After watching her implement the program, I was able to implement it myself."
(Amanda Barrett, Classroom teacher, Grade 4)

Maximising learning and the achievement of targets was achieved using specific criteria-based feedback with students.

Setting targets

Rosemeadow set targets related to national benchmarks and school-based assessments.

- School-based assessment for reading: PM Reading Benchmarks.
- School-based target: 75 per cent of students achieving grade-appropriate benchmarks in reading.
- National Partnership targets:
  1. To decrease the proportion of students below national minimum standard (lowest band) in reading by 2.5 per cent.
  2. To increase the proportion of students at state proficiency standard (top two bands) in reading by 1.5 per cent.

A reading and comprehension rubric was developed by staff at Rosemeadow based on the targeted outcomes identified to support school improvement. The rubric was designed to make clear to students, parents and teachers what skills and knowledge were to be developed and how well these skills needed to be performed. The rubric guided teaching content, highlighted both student and teacher learning needs, and provided a vehicle for feedback on what needed to be achieved in order to succeed.

The outcomes within the rubric were then broken down into explicit criteria for each area of the rubric and assessments were developed. These criteria then guided the development of explicit teaching and learning content.

"As an early career teacher who didn't have a strong grasp about teaching comprehension, I found the pre-test data from the comprehension rubric invaluable. The explicit criteria pinpointed individual and cluster/whole-class areas of need for improving learning outcomes in reading comprehension. It also showed how I could extend capable students by assessing explicit skills." (Joel Zalunardo, Classroom teacher, Grade 3)

Teachers across the years 3–6 cohorts had specific direction to link the identified whole-school focus to what was happening in classroom teaching and learning. They were able to monitor progress towards these targets using the assessments identified in the plan. They then determined which individuals needed support or extension. The students also contributed to the discussions about their learning needs in feedback sessions. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were created based on the information gained from the assessment, feedback and then aligned to the whole-school rubric.

The process creates a very direct and clear link starting from identified focus skills and set targets, which are translated into explicit performance criteria identifying individual strengths and needs that then link to the ILPs.

The strategy was supported by an in-school mentor to lead professional learning and improve teacher quality, and external funding also supported the release of teachers for regular collaborative planning and professional learning.

Results

Evidence of success is demonstrated through significant improvement in all external assessments including NAPLAN and National Partnership assessments.

"When the approach of linking school targets to classroom practice was developed, communicated and implemented, I felt more supported and confident in my classroom practice, which led to greater opportunity and achievement by students in specific areas.

As I reflected on current data through the use of backward mapping, I found my teaching was more informed. The availability of continual support and professional development ensured my knowledge was broadened and my teaching was of a higher standard." (Joel Zalunardo, Classroom teacher, Grade 3)

Results of school-based assessments aligned with the results from external testing data. These included PM Reading Benchmarks, comprehension assessments and ongoing class assessments based on focus skills outlined in comprehension rubrics.

In terms of reading, year 3 students in the period 2008 to 2011 achieved:

- 23 per cent decrease in bottom two skill bands (2008–2011)
- 20 per cent increase in top two skill bands (2008–2011).

In terms of reading, year 5 students in the period 2008 to 2011 achieved:

- 19 per cent decrease in bottom two skill bands (2008–2011)
- 4 per cent increase in top two skill bands (2008–2011).

Lessons learned

'This is a model that can be replicated anywhere for any Key Learning Area. This model is not specific to student groups, schools, systems or locations.' (Teacher)

Having shared goals and expectations contributed to the success of the initiative. These were derived from working back from the identified outcomes and by clearly linking assessment to student outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe 2005). Breaking the identified outcomes into explicit skills and knowledge that could be articulated by teachers and students led to explicit and transparent teaching and learning.

Explicit success criteria allowed for explicit and effective feedback. Students began to self-regulate their learning goals.

"From the students' perspective, the rubric gave them clear, specific goals of where they were individually, and enabled them to set and achieve goals. This was achieved through teacher feedback, thus giving them an understanding of their areas of need outlined in the specific criteria of the rubric." (Joel Zalunardo, Classroom teacher, Grade 3)

Research base

Visible learning

> 'The quality of the classroom teacher and the teaching and learning programs have the biggest impact on student performance, other than the students themselves. It is what students bring to the table that predicts achievement more than any other variable.' (Hattie 2003)

Hattie's work emphasises the power of directed teaching, focusing on 'what happens next' through feedback and monitoring. This approach also informs the teacher about the success or failure of their teaching; making learning for both teacher and student 'visible'. Hattie's meta-analysis (a synthesis of 50, 000 previous studies) identifies effect sizes of a range of initiatives developed to improve student achievement. The number one intervention is identified as teaching that supports the students in knowing exactly how well they're doing and ensuring that they can articulate this, and what they need to know, to their teacher.

Backward mapping

The process of backward mapping, highlighted in the work of Wiggins and McTighe in *Understanding by Design* (2005), makes clear how teachers can support students and make learning visible. They describe identifying learning objectives, what will constitute evidence of learning, and planning for direct, explicit teaching. Teachers make desired learning outcomes clear to the students through well-designed, clearly explained objectives and assessment criteria. Teachers and students work together to identify and monitor learning using timely feedback.

Instructional leadership

Viviane Robinson's research about leadership (2007) highlights the importance of instructional leaders. Instructional leaders make relevant research findings accessible to school practitioners to support teachers in making decisions about pedagogical practices that may raise achievement and reduce disparity.

> "The more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their likely influence on student outcomes." (Robinson 2007)

Further reading and links

References

Hattie, J 2003, 'Teachers make a difference: what is the research evidence?', University of Auckland, Australian Council for Educational Research, www.acer.edu.au/documents/RC2003_Hattie_TeachersMakeADifference.pdf.

Hattie, J 2008, 'Raising the standards of assessment', *TeKuaka*, issue 1, www.education.auckland.ac.nz/webdav/site/education/shared/about/schools/tchldv/docs/news&events/raising-the-standards.pdf.

Hattie, J 2008, *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, Routledge.

Robinson, V 2007, 'The impact of leadership on student outcomes: making sense of the evidence', http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2007/5.

Wiggins, G & McTighe, J 2005, *Understanding by Design,* 2nd edn, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.

Contacts

For more information, or to access resources such as the rubrics used within the strategy, contact Rosemeadow Public School.

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