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Literacy coaching – reading comprehension

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Summary

The professional-learning partnership between a Literacy Coach and teachers from Reception to Year 7 in one school in South Australia developed a whole-school approach to improving reading comprehension and increasing student achievement in literacy and learning. Note: Reception is the first year of school in South Australia; it is followed by seven years of primary school.

Darlington Primary School in South Australia, with students from low socio-economic, Indigenous (the population of ATSI students at times reaching 20 per cent) and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, introduced a whole-school focus on reading comprehension to improve student achievement and learning outcomes. With the assistance of a Literacy Coach, attention was directed towards teaching approaches and learner strategies central to effective comprehension.

Data indicate that this program had an impact on levels of reading comprehension through explicit teaching, improved engagement in learning, and attention to higher-order thinking and learning tasks within class programs.

Target student group

The program was implemented across the whole school.

Method

The need to improve reading comprehension

Darlington Primary School has a transient population of students and a relatively high staff turnover. The school has worked hard to build a strong culture of student wellbeing to ensure support for students with a wide range of needs. Despite this, there was a perceived need to address low levels of student engagement and raise teachers' expectations of what students could achieve with support.

The whole-school focus on comprehension was identified following concern about the number of students who were not making the upper levels of achievement on NAPLAN, or whose achievement results had plateaued. Teacher judgements supported the analysis of the data. The school had a strong assessment regime in place, including individual



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portfolios of student work matched against the South Australian Curriculum Standards, ongoing assessment techniques, and the use of a range of standardised tests.

In 2009, the school worked with Jill McDonald, a Literacy Coach from the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) in South Australia, to address the quality of teachers' literacy teaching, learning and assessment practices. The aim was to engage with the research literature on what constitutes effective approaches to teaching comprehension, and to institute whole-school literacy-improvement planning to identify where intervention and support were required.

The literacy coaching – reading comprehension program

The Reading Comprehension program worked from a substantial evidence base about reading comprehension. It consisted of several interrelated elements. The central focus was on supporting teachers' explicit instruction of higher-order tasks, consolidated in the English learning area and embedded across all curriculum areas. In addition, the Reading Comprehension program aimed to develop students' meta-awareness of strategies they could use when reading different types of texts. To achieve this, the Literacy Coach implemented the following.

- **A professional learning program** to build whole-school knowledge and understanding of literacy teaching, learning and assessment; consistency in foundational knowledge, informed by research; and setting goals for improvement. Key to this was the focus on multiple measures of data to obtain a holistic view of students' needs (Bernhardt 1998). Three students (one high-, one medium- and one low-achieving student) were tracked over the course of the school year and demographic, perceptions of student learning and school-processed data were used to strengthen the focus on targeted teaching and student learning. (From the model devised by Bernhardt 1998.)
- **Regular literacy learning circles** were conducted during staff meetings. These included pre-reading on research, and practice related to the teaching of comprehension; professional dialogue; and reflection upon and sharing of strategies trialled in classrooms and their impact, both observed and measured, on student learning.
- **Staff meetings** where the focus was on the analysis of NAPLAN data to raise teachers' levels of knowledge and understanding around reading, reading comprehension and higher-order thinking. Teachers also explored literacy and thinking frameworks, including the Four Resources model (Freebody & Luke 2003), Vygotsky's Gradual Release of Responsibility (Vygotsky 1978), and [Bloom's Taxonomy](#): Learning in Action. They considered the interrelationship between quality learning and purposeful and targeted



design and planning to improve teaching, learning and assessment in the area of reading (Langford & Cleary 1995; Wiggins & McTighe 2005). In addition to the range of data gathered on student learning, teachers accessed [the Online Placement Instrument](#) (OPI), designed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), which was administered at the beginning and end of the year.

- **Opportunities for collaborative planning and programming** for teaching, learning and assessment across key learning areas. This included a focus on ‘backward design’ planning (Wiggins & McTighe 2005); modelling reading comprehension strategies; explicit teaching of comprehension strategies; scaffolding and guided practice of strategies by students, eg reciprocal teaching, literature circles and guided reading (see Harvey & Goudivis 2007 for a guide to these and other comprehension strategies); independent practice of strategies by students; assessment of student learning; and showcasing of student literacy learning.

Three key questions, directed to teachers, underpinned this multiple focus on comprehension strategies:

1. What do you get students to ‘do’ inside their heads when they read?
2. Do you make explicit to students what good readers do when they read?
3. Do students understand that they can use any of the comprehension strategies that they have been introduced to when they need to make meaning of any text?

Results

Several intended outcomes resulted from the whole-school focus on comprehension.

1 Improvement in student achievement on NAPLAN

The 2010 data for students in years 3 and 5 show improvement in the number of students achieving the National Minimum Standard for Reading (NMS) at all year levels, relative to the 2009 data. In 2008, 70 per cent of year 3 students achieved the NMS; in 2010, when in year 5, 81 per cent of this same cohort of students achieved the NMS. The shift from 70 per cent of this cohort achieving NMS in 2008 to 81 per cent in 2010 is significant, even though this figure is below the state percentage for NMS.

The 2010 data for students in year 7 show that 95 per cent achieved the NMS (compared with 73 per cent when this same cohort was in year 5). The participation rate by year 7s in the 2010 NAPLAN test increased from 89.3 per cent in 2009 to 97.6 per cent in 2010.



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The data also show improvement for the cohort of ATSI students at the school.

The progress between NAPLAN tests indicates an impact on levels of reading comprehension through explicit teaching, improved engagement in learning and attention to higher-order thinking and learning tasks within class programs.

The impact of teaching approaches and learner strategies is further evidenced by students' comments:

'Literacy circles is when you have four groups or more doing different English activities, like readers' theatre, grammar, writing and guided reading. You learn a lot at literacy circles. I think the most important thing about literacy is grammar and punctuation. The activity I enjoy the most is guided reading. It's easy and we all have different roles, like leader and word wizard. We have a book and we take turns to read it.' (Student)

'Literacy is fun and exciting.' (Year 7 student)

'Our class does literacy circles four days a week. There are four different activities to do. I enjoy readers' theatre because it is fun and I get to interact with people I don't normally interact with. The skills I learnt from readers' theatre are learning not to be shy of reading aloud to my peers and getting to know people in the group I work with.' (Year 7 student)

2 Teacher quality

'First, Jill modelled [a strategy] so that the students and I could see how this method worked. I could see instantly how it helped to develop students' deeper-thinking skills and made them use prior knowledge, make connections and create opinions. Jill supported me to facilitate this and gain the confidence to use this strategy on my own with any text.' (Classroom teacher)

Improvements in the quality of teaching reading comprehension were noted in the observations of classroom practice made by the Literacy Coach. She witnessed a greater emphasis on explicit teaching, where teachers modelled strategies to students, asked students to articulate what they knew and felt about a text, and engaged students in dialogue about texts. Notably, the practice of reading aloud to students was implemented across all levels of the school. Also evident were increased levels of student engagement



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about texts, and enthusiasm for the Book Clubs that had been established across the school.

The Literacy Coach also observed that the literacy learning circles had been pivotal to teacher change, and that regular professional dialogue about reading, research and the sharing of practice contributed to an enhanced sense of teacher involvement in whole-school change.

There was also a strong sense that the explicit focus on comprehension across the key learning areas was a real turning point for teachers, as it helped them to understand the reading demands of different content areas and different text forms.

3 Use of student data to design programs

The Literacy Coach observed that teachers and leaders of the school developed a stronger understanding of how student data could be analysed to ascertain how teachers were differentiating student learning; to what extent the teaching was meeting students' learning needs; and the extent to which the school was making a difference to student learning outcomes.

4 Whole-school improvement

As a result of the whole-school focus on comprehension, a draft literacy improvement plan was developed, including anticipated outcomes, targets, actions and measures. Other aspects of school improvement are noted in the following comment:

'I truly believe the impact of Jill's role was very positive. The quality of teaching and learning in the short time she was with us was phenomenal. She was able to shift people's ideas and opinions and engage them in quality teaching. She kept people up to date on current thinking, methodologies and good teaching practices by using readings, studies and useful resources. She challenged people's negative views or 'out-of-date' teaching because she had the evidence and knowledge to back up what she was saying. The NAPLAN results are a good reflection of the improvement achieved by Jill's work.'

(A school leader)

Unintended outcomes were also reported for the program. These related to the short timeline for measuring change in Phase One of the program. As the program began in Term 4 of 2009 and the NAPLAN tests were administered in May 2010, it was not possible



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to assess the real impact of the support provided to teachers on student learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the 2011 NAPLAN results are confirmation of sustained improvement in reading comprehension.

Lessons learned

The Literacy Coach reading-comprehension program has illustrated the positive impact on student learning that resulted from teachers building and sharing their expertise, and scaffolding learners through explicit instruction, higher-order tasks and pleasurable reading experiences.

Importantly, the results at Darlington Primary School demonstrate what happens when teachers raise their expectations of what students can achieve when they are given a voice in their own learning, and given access to strategies that empower them as learners.

Next steps

Sustainability for the whole-school focus on reading comprehension, the use of assessment data to target and monitor student learning, and for a school-literacy improvement plan has been established at Darlington Primary School. A strong culture of reflective practice and professional learning to improve teacher quality has also been established. This interrelationship between best-practice teaching, assessment and student learning provides a strong foundation for continuing improvement.

However, the role of a Literacy Coach is best supported through funding, and this is not always possible to sustain. Also, the transient teacher population at Darlington Primary School means that new teachers need to be inducted into the new teaching, learning and assessment practices.

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 assisted educators to distil 'what works' in teaching reading comprehension:



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- Explicit teacher-directed instruction of comprehension strategies, such as predicting, summarising and monitoring, and 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.
- Providing 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 development and learning.

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

Further reading and links

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