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Focused Improvement in Early Literacy Development

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Summary

In 2011 Seymour P–12 College trialled a new program with year 7 English students, which aimed to increase student performance in reading and writing beyond the expected maturational increase. This was to be achieved through changes in timetabling, the allocation of students to classes based on current reading levels, and a reduction in the teacher/student ratio for students with the greatest need. Both literacy and numeracy are charter priorities in the school so this strategy also involved numeracy, although that is not covered in detail here.

The strategy has particular impact for the students assessed as performing below the expected level. While the majority of these students were still reading below their expected level seven months after the strategy commenced, 94 per cent of them had increased their VELS reading level more than the seven-month expectation of 0.25. There was a concomitant improvement in the self-esteem, work effort and level of engagement of this group of students.

Target student group

Seymour P–12 College is in regional Victoria. It is a recent amalgamation of four schools and has 920 P–12 students. A nearby military base provides approximately 15 per cent of the post-primary enrolments. In 2011 there were 110 year 7 students.

Method

The need for change

While progress in reading and writing had been made with students as they moved from year 7 and 8 over the previous two years, analysis of NAPLAN data and other standardised reading tests suggested that too many students were performing below the expected level and were at risk of continuing failure.

The strategy

The strategy chosen to address this issue involved:

- rearranging the timetable to run all year 7 English classes in period 2 each day
- grouping students with similar reading levels
- improving teacher/student ratios
- allocating an 'expert' teacher to provide mini-lessons in areas of specific need
- providing professional development for teachers in a common approach to teaching literacy.



Timetabling

With the support of the other professional learning teams in the school it was agreed that, to optimise learning in the charter priority areas of literacy and numeracy, the timetable would be rearranged so that these subjects would be taught each morning at the same time.

This resulted in all year 7 English classes being timetabled concurrently for period 2 each day (after mathematics in period 1).

As well as placing literacy learning at an optimal time of day, there were the additional benefits of:

- all students knowing where they needed to be and what they would be doing in period 2, enabling lessons to start promptly
- being able to transfer students between groups with ease as required
- teaching literacy before recess, which proved a motivating factor for some students.

Grouping students

All year 7 students were assessed using the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) On Demand Reading Test and TORCH (ACER 2003). Together with teacher judgement, the results of these standardised tests were used to ascertain each student's reading level against the VELs. Students were grouped according to their reading levels. This resulted in two classes of students with abilities beyond the expected level, one class at the expected level and two classes for students who required additional support.

Teacher/student ratios

A key outcome of rearranging the timetable and grouping students was the ability to allocate staff according to need. The class with the greatest need for teacher assistance was limited to 18 students, with two teachers permanently allocated (normal class sizes are 24–26 students). An additional teacher visited once each week bringing the ratio down to 1:6 for these lessons.

'Expert' teacher

Cluster funding in 2011 made an additional 'expert' teacher available six periods a week. This teacher provided 15-minute mini-lessons focusing on the writing skills of paragraphing and sentence structure. Allocation of this expert teacher varied according to the timetable and student need, but on balance they were able to offer two mini-lessons per period.



Professional development

All staff members teaching year 7 English were able to attend four workshops over the course of the year. The workshops were delivered by Dr John Munro based on his High Reliability Literacy Teaching Procedures (HRLTP). This is an approach that introduces teachers to a set of explicit literacy teaching procedures designed to enhance text comprehension.

English classes

All classes commenced with 10 minutes silent reading. This provided the opportunity for teachers to listen to several students read aloud and record information on fluency. It also allowed them to monitor students' choice of reading matter to ensure it was appropriately challenging. Grouping students according to their reading levels also enabled those texts which were studied by the whole class to be selected at an appropriate level of difficulty.

After silent reading, classes were structured according to the needs of the particular groups.

Fifteen minute mini-lessons in paragraphing and sentence structure were also conducted, as required, by the expert teacher. This included developing in-house assessments and worksheets to identify and address particular weaknesses.

Results

“At the end of semester 1, two students from the group with the greatest need were promoted to a class with one teacher and they were able to maintain their focus and progress.” (Classroom Teacher)

Based on teacher judgement and an analysis of the VELS On Demand Reading Test and TORCH, students were allocated a VELS reading level in February and grouped in classes accordingly. Using the same standardised instruments, students were assessed again in September and allocated a new VELS reading level.

The aim of the strategy was to improve performance in reading beyond the expected chronological increment. In other words, given that students were seven months older in September than when first allocated a reading level, had they achieved more than the expected maturational increase?

The data generated by the students in the class that required the most support show that in February all the students were 'at risk', reading more than 0.2 behind their expected level. In September, while the majority of students were still reading below their expected



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level, 94 per cent of them had increased their VELS reading level more than the seven-month expectation of 0.25. The average growth of students over this period was 0.66 and two students had moved out of the 'at risk' category entirely.

While not formally measured, there was also a dramatic improvement in the self-esteem, work ethic and engagement of these lower achieving students. In the supportive environment of this grouping they received instant feedback and frequent encouragement, which enabled them to appreciate the purpose of their endeavour. They became keen to contribute to class discussions, read aloud, and share their writing, something they were reluctant to do in mixed-ability classes.

"In Term 1, none of the students in this [lowest] group were willing to read aloud. By the end of the year they were all willing." (Classroom Teacher)

Lessons learned

The key factors behind the success of the strategy have been the ability to run all year 7 English classes concurrently during period 2, and the decrease in the number of students per teacher in the group with the greatest need. To achieve this, the support of staff in other learning areas was vital as they were undertaking to teach their classes during potentially 'less optimal' times of the day (ie periods 5 and 6). There is also agreement that no incursions or excursions took place during periods 1 and 2.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the teachers involved was paramount, as was ensuring that any teachers placed in a team-teaching situation were able to work together effectively.

While the professional development undertaken was important, it was selected to suit the particular needs of Seymour College. In replicating this strategy, it would be the timetabling and teacher/student ratios that were of fundamental importance, not the selection of Dr Munro's HRLTP approach.

Next steps

The timetabling and class grouping strategy are still being used at Seymour College in 2012. Unfortunately, a lack of funding has meant there has been no additional support available in the classes and it is obvious that this support is fundamental to the full success of the program. Despite this, these timetabling arrangements are considered valuable in their own right and have been extended to cover years 8, 9 and 10, where feasible.

Research base



Secondary teachers working in the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne with Dr John Munro, trialled and developed a series of literacy teaching procedures to support literacy learning in all learning domains. The procedures are referred to as 'high reliability literacy teaching procedures' (HRLTPs) and work by suggesting how readers can 'act on' what they are reading in a number of systematic ways.

Students are instructed explicitly to:


- get ready for learning about a topic by organising and recoding what they know in a verbal form
- add unfamiliar verbal concepts to their vocabulary by studying between five and ten verbal concepts that relate to the content to be covered in the lesson. During the lesson the students accurately say each word or phrase, read and spell it, suggest synonyms and antonyms for each, clarify its meaning and link it with other concepts
- read aloud short portions of written text that teach the topic
- paraphrase or say in their own words each sentence in the text
- say questions that each sentence in the text answers
- summarise the text, usually paragraph by paragraph
- review, consolidate and show comprehension of what has been learned by silently reading a written summary of the content covered.

Further reading and links


Australian Council for Educational Research 2003, *Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH: 2)*, 2nd edn, ACER Press, Camberwell, Vic.

Munro, J 2002, 'High Reliability Literacy Teaching Procedures: A means of fostering literacy learning across the curriculum', *Idiom*, vol 38, no 1, pp 23–31.

Munro, J 2002, 'High Reliability Literacy Teaching Procedures: A means of fostering literacy learning across the curriculum'.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, '[On Demand Testing](#)' , Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority website.

Contacts

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