Creating change as a literacy coach

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Summary

How literacy coaching led to whole-school change for students and teachers.

As part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Partnership (NLNP) initiative to improve NAPLAN outcomes in reading, a Literacy Coach was appointed to Allendale East Area School, a rural Reception–year 12 school in South Australia. The project started with gathering baseline reading data in August 2009. This provided the initial direction for the Literacy Coach: to develop students' comprehension skills and enthusiasm for reading through professional learning in teaching reading comprehension skills, and through implementing student book clubs. (Note: Reception is the first year of school in South Australia. It is followed by seven years of primary school.)

Interest grew, and the literacy program was expanded. All students from R–7 were assessed and their literacy learning needs identified. The teachers became involved in additional professional learning about literacy teaching and assessment strategies. An intensive research-based phonics program was implemented for students in R–1; Australian Curriculum–aligned spelling programs were developed for years R–7; and guided reading groups were set up for underachieving students. Materials were developed for students and teachers to support literacy learning across year levels.

The initiative resulted in more than improved reading scores. Among other successes, the school won the regional debating eisteddfod in 2010, and a group of year 7 boys completed the Premier's Reading Challenge for the first time. The most important success is the change achieved in the school culture. Although the Literacy Coach's position ended in April 2011, the programs have continued.

Target student group

The program was implemented with seven teachers and 180 R–7 students at Allendale East Area School, an R–12 school in rural South Australia.

Method

The need for a new approach

The 2008 NAPLAN results indicated that many students at Allendale Area School were not meeting the National Minimum Standard in reading. A Literacy Coach was appointed to the school with funding from the National Literacy and Numeracy Partnership (NLNP) to address the needs of students in years 2, 4 and 6.

The Literacy Coach started at the school in August 2009. She assessed the targeted students' needs by looking at the NAPLAN reading data and administering informal reading inventories: PM Benchmarks assessment for students in year 2 and the Writing and Reading Assessment Profile (WRAP) for older students. Both tools involve listening to each student read, analysing strategies and fluency, and assessing comprehension. Levelled texts provide an indication of chronological reading age. Students' attitudes were assessed informally, with many indicating that they did not enjoy reading – it was just something they had to do in order to 'pass' at school. The Literacy Coach also observed individual teachers in their classrooms to see which strategies and approaches they were using to teach reading.

While the initial focus was directed towards years 2, 4 and 6 it soon expanded, with the Literacy Coach assessing all R–7 students. The results showed that only 54 per cent of R–7 students were reading and comprehending at their chronological age. Improving comprehension and enjoyment of reading were identified as primary literacy issues to be addressed for years 2–6, but the extended assessment identified additional needs and year levels that could benefit. As a result, the Literacy Coach developed a comprehensive program, combining a range of strategies and professional learning supports for teachers and direct assistance for students.

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The strategy

Professional development

The Literacy Coach's observation of teachers' literacy strategies in the classroom – combined with students' attitudes and assessment results – suggested ideas for professional development. She recognised the value of introducing an approach that shifts responsibility from teacher-directed to independent practice, based on the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher 1983). Her professional learning activities were built on this approach, which scaffolds students' learning through the processes of demonstration, sharing and guiding.

To address comprehension needs, the Literacy Coach developed professional-learning sessions on the critical reading strategies of predicting, connecting, visualising, clarifying, questioning and summarising to help year 2–7 students become engaged and independent readers.

These strategies have been discussed over decades in a range of publications and are referred to by different names, including Active Reading and Reciprocal Reading. The coach demonstrated and guided teachers in the use of each strategy, and put the strategies on laminated posters for classroom display.

Professional development in assessment was provided. Teachers, after observing the informal inventory assessment process and its outcomes, became more aware of the relevance of data collection for improving student learning. They requested training so they could implement informal reading inventories themselves. The Literacy Coach demonstrated and guided years 3–7 teachers through the process in one-on-one sessions to ensure that they were confident and proficient in the key aspects, including using running records. (Funding for teacher-release days was used to allow this to happen.) The coach collated and analysed teachers' data to track students' reading progress; at the end of each term, results were fed back, discussed with teachers, and reported to school leaders.

Book clubs

To motivate years 5–7 students to read, the Literacy Coach introduced book clubs to the classrooms. The book clubs were organised according to book selection, with students selecting the same text and reading it together as a group. The critical reading comprehension strategies were reinforced through roles given to each member.

Students alternated as Discussion Director and Questioner, Summariser, Connector (connecting to personal experience), Visualiser (imagining what it would be like) and Word Wizard (talking about new and unusual words). Students would negotiate how much of the text they would complete at home. The clubs promoted rich discussion, and boosted students' comprehension in an enjoyable manner.

Guided reading groups

Students in years 2, 3 and 4 identified as 'at risk' in reading were formed into groups of four to five for guided reading twice a week. The students were grouped according to their assessed literacy needs and withdrawn for instruction by either the Literacy Coach or the Literacy Mentor at the same time as their fellow students were studying literacy in the classroom. The first session each week was spent working on comprehending teacher-selected texts. The second session focused on reading for fluency. As students began to reach their chronological reading age, they left the groups and returned to the class literacy program.

Intensive tutoring

Towards the end of her time at the school, the coach identified 12 low-achieving students in two year 7 classes who were in need of similar assistance. Groups of four were assembled according to need from both classes and withdrawn for intensive tutoring. The students spent 20 minutes with the coach 'unpacking' Nelson Cengage Literacy Directions Exemplar Cards. These cards were selected because the texts were non-fiction, attractive and brief – which suited the audience.

The R–1 literacy program

Discussions with a new teacher in a Reception classroom revealed that she would appreciate assistance with reading development. Together, the teacher and Literacy Coach decided to implement a new early-literacy program from the beginning of 2010, under the coach's guidance. Building on research by Cunningham & Derewianka, as well as the MultiLit program developed by Macquarie University, a program was developed for the first two years of school, focusing on phonics, spelling and vocabulary.

The program incorporated 'Star of the Day' from the very first days of school, with students learning about each other by exploring each other's names and the letter–sound combination they started with.

Letters of the alphabet were introduced according to the Multilit phonics reading program, ie according to common usage, rather than alphabetical order. This meant that within four days, students knew enough letters to be able to blend them into words. The letter introduction was done in what the coach describes as a 'first, fast and furious' manner: one letter a day, four days a week. Students brainstormed words, extended vocabulary using *Animalia* (Base 1986), read alphabet books out loud, listened to a story with vocabulary rich in the 'letter of the day' and made an art/craft model of that letter. This was done daily, and formed the basis for rigorous learning.

The spelling program

As a result of the success with Reception, the coach, the mentor and two R–2 teachers developed a spelling program better suited to their students' needs. The phonics/phonemic awareness program extended learning of blends, sounds, onsets and rimes. The group developed scope and sequence charts for each year level.

Teachers were also assisted to teach in ways that helped students progress developmentally in how they learned to spell until they could successfully integrate the four forms of spelling knowledge: phonological, visual, morphemic and etymological knowledge.

News of the program and its success led to the working party being asked to develop a similar program and scope and sequence chart for year 3. Then the year 4 teacher requested one until finally a complete scope and sequence chart which was aligned to the Australian Curriculum was developed for all year levels F–7.

'One of the year 7 boys, who had never completed a Premier's Reading Challenge, came to realise that books are cool and became quite a bookworm. Every time I was on yard duty he sought me out to tell me about his latest book. His family couldn't believe the change.' (Literacy Coach)

The Premier's Reading Challenge

Although The Premier's Reading Challenge was a regular event at the school the year 7 boys, who participated in the Guide Reading Group had never completed one. They were persuaded to participate based on the promise of a trip to Adelaide to meet the Reds soccer team – if they all completed the challenge. To get them started the Literacy Coach read the book 'Shark Bait' by Justin D'Ath during lunchtimes. After listening to several books, the students began to realise that there were some 'cool' books in the library and started to read independently. They completed the challenge and made it to Adelaide!

Results

The initiative resulted in more than improved reading scores. Students' attitudes to reading improved and the leadership team and teachers, recognising the impact of the coach's input, continue to use and add to the strategies that she initiated.

Reading scores

The Literacy Coach worked full time from August 2009 until the end of 2010 and part time through Term 1, 2011. All results of assessments were collated, recorded and annotated in Excel spreadsheets. Before-and-after comparisons were made to determine the contribution of the initiative in lifting literacy outcomes. At the beginning of the project, students were assessed as reading and comprehending at a 54 per cent success rate. Assessment at the end of the project showed a success rate of 72 per cent, and by the end of Term 1 in 2011 it was 81 per cent.

NAPLAN results also reflect these positive outcomes. When comparing the results with 'like' schools:

- In 2008 year 3 scored 18; as year 5 in 2010, they scored 26.2
- In 2008 year 5 scored 7.4; as year 7 in 2010, they scored 30
- In 2008 year 3 scored 18; in 2010, year 3 scored 19.8
- In 2008 year 5 scored 7.4; in 2010, year 5 scored 26.2
- In 2008 year 7 scored 18.7; in 2010, year 7 scored 30.

Since systematic phonics instruction was introduced in the Reception classes in 2010 and 2011, all students reached the minimum PM reading benchmark (level 5), apart from one student with specific learning difficulties.

An unexpected result was when students in the book clubs commented on how participation had expanded their relationships. Even though the school is quite small and part of a small farming community, friendship groups remained close. Because book club groups were formed according to texts selected by students, they came to know students they would otherwise have had little to do with.

Another unexpected positive outcome was the interest that secondary teachers showed in the program. The Literacy Coach was occasionally invited to demonstrate reading strategies to support secondary students' learning in various curriculum areas.

> 'The Literacy Coach acted as a mentor by modelling teaching strategies to do with debating. She delivered feedback in a positive and warm manner, which made me feel highly competent and clever.' (Year 6/7 teacher)

Lessons learned

Designated literacy staff and support

Having a Literacy Coach was a key factor in to the program's success. The coach was able to develop students' reading outcomes by providing professional learning and coaching to teachers and by interacting with students. The school was fortunate that the Literacy Coach had previously worked in a school as a Teaching and Learning Coordinator and successfully introduced a similar program.

The program received additional support from three Support Officers, as well as from the Principal, the Deputy Principal, the Literacy Coordinator, the Librarian and Literacy Mentor.

The mentor was a trained Reading Recovery and year 1 teacher, which enabled her to tutor and coach students in years R–1 and assist with other program activities. This allowed the tutor to spend extra time with reading groups in years 2–7.

Identifying the value of data collection

Teachers recognised the value of collecting baseline reading data and putting benchmarks in place so that teaching and learning needs for each student were clearly identified and specific goals were set.

> 'Once teachers saw the relevance of data collection and improvement in student reading outcomes, they wanted to learn how to take an informal reading inventory themselves.' (Literacy Coach)

Building trust

One of the main challenges for the Literacy Coach, who was new to the school, was the need to build trust among the staff. Working initially with one teacher provided time for word to spread and for the coach to build relationships and gain trust before making further changes.

Advice to other schools considering a similar program would be to have lots of discussion between leadership, teachers and parents about the initiative before starting so that they accept and embrace the project from the beginning.

Next steps

Continuing the program

Funding to continue the program is no longer available, so some modifications to the program were required; however, the key elements of the program have been maintained. These indicate that with the right motivation, professional learning and whole-school support, a significant level of funding may not be needed for any school considering undertaking some components of the program.

> 'Although Bronwyn Phillips, the Literacy Coach, left the school at the end of Term 1, 2011, the whole school remains motivated to continue to implement and develop the literacy program.' (Beth Mahony, Principal)

Staff support

The school has an active literacy committee led by Suzie Mitchell (Secondary English and Literacy Coordinator). Susanne Neu is Literacy Mentor; this is a DECD–funded position that allows a teacher a small amount of time to make a difference to R–3 literacy. She has gone on to develop a whole-school literacy agreement with the committee and is working with teachers to use running records in a more detailed way.

Features of the program for years R–1

- The 'Star of the Day' program is a very successful and rigorous program, which has also reduced lateness in our younger students. It starts right on 9:00 am and students are active and engaged, despite the repetition. They seem to love the predictability and will instruct relief teachers in the process.
- The 'first, fast and furious' letter-introduction program continues in the first term with a new letter every day.
- The phonics and phonemic awareness programs have been developed into a complete R–1 program resourced with worksheets and activities. It is stored on the school server so that new teachers can pick it up and run with it. This has taken many hours of hard work from our junior primary teachers (one of whom gained credit for two units of study through Charles Darwin University last year for part of the program).
- Students' writing skills have shown a dramatic improvement as they move into year 2. They write more clearly, keep on the lines and differentiate well between small and larger letters.
- Last year an experienced teacher came into the Reception class and shelved all her own work to trial the program. This was fantastic, because it meant the junior primary group were all continuing the same process and working together. This year a graduate teacher has come in and known exactly what to go on with, as the program has proven to be so successful.

Features of the program for years 2–7

- The comprehension strategies posters are still up in the staff room and used across most classes.
- The four spelling knowledges approach is still used widely across years 2–7 classes, ie phonological, morphemic, visual and etymological knowledge.
- Book club has continued to be successful for years 4–7, with teachers using reciprocal reading strategies. The clubs have more impact if used in a block each term rather than running continuously.

- The small withdrawal group reading program was great but expensive to run as it involved teacher time to assess comprehension levels and come up with on-the-spot strategies to suit students' needs. However, the school has started using the Multilit program for students in these older classes.

- Bronwyn introduced WRAP testing to year 4–8 teachers and they have continued this practice. Teachers collect running records and WRAP levels to assess students' reading at the appropriate level. In 2011, the school had 82 per cent of students reading at their chronological age at the various levels, and we now have reached 88 per cent. Next year we may revise the way we view the benchmarking of levels at each year level.

- We support literacy by funding School Services Officers (SSOs) in the literacy block for 50 minutes a day in each class. They are also funded for training, given time to implement Multilit, and to provide release that allows the Literacy Mentor to help others with their running records.

Statistics indicate that the reading strategies and processes are maintaining results. At the end of 2010 the reading success rate according to PM Benchmarks was 72 per cent; early in 2011 it was 81 per cent. NAPLAN results support the trend.

'Another unexpected outcome was the interest that secondary teachers showed in my work at the school. I occasionally demonstrated reading strategies to support secondary student learning in various curriculum areas.' (Literacy Coach)

Research base

Research supports the use of informal-reading inventories for diagnostic information to inform the teaching of reading. The National Reading Panel Report (2003) from the United States notes that:

a number of informal procedures can be used in the classroom to assess fluency. Informal reading inventories (Johnson, Kress & Pikulski 1987), miscue analysis (Goodman & Burke 1972), pausing indices (Pinell et al. 1995), running records (Clay 1972) and reading speed calculations (Hasboruck & Tindal 1992). All these assessment procedures require oral reading of text, and all can be used to provide an adequate index of fluency [...] To ensure that students do not focus solely on fluency at the expense of comprehension, the student is expected to summarize or answer questions about the text.
(*NRP Reports of the Subgroups*, April 2003)

Further reading and links

Cunningham, P and Hall D 1997, *Month-by-month phonics for the first grade*, Carson–Dellosa Publishing, North Carolina.

Multilit 2007, *The MultiLit reading tutor program* (rev.), MultiLit, Sydney

National Reading Panel 2003, *Reports of the Subgroups: Fluency* , United States.

Nelsons Cengage Literacy Directions Exemplar Cards .

Pearson, PD & Gallagher, MC 1983, 'The instruction of reading comprehension', *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, no. 8, pp. 317–344.

PM Benchmark Kit to assess R–3 students .

WRAP, 'Orbit WRAP: an informal writing and reading assessment profile (Intermediate)', *Literacy Learning: The Middle years*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 65–66.

Contacts

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