Reading Connections: A classroom strategy for improving reading

Background - Summary

The Reading Connections classroom strategy was developed in collaboration with the Catholic Education Office Sale, National Partnership’s Success in Literacy initiative and Sacred Heart Primary School located in Morwell Victoria. Sacred Heart primary school is a small Catholic school in a low socio-economic area with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Of the 44 students involved in this project 7 have been identified for social and emotional learning disabilities.

The Sacred Heart professional learning team met regularly throughout the year. The meetings included a whole school professional learning day and regular school-based meetings (2-3 per term). This was a year-long learning and teaching initiative.

The Reading Connections classroom strategy was developed by two Grade 3-4 classroom teachers as part of a whole-school learning initiative within the school’s Annual School Improvement Plan. The overall aim of the learning initiative was to:

- Improve student reading comprehension, and
- Improve student engagement in reading.

Goals were initially established at the school level and followed with more focused goals at the classroom teacher team level. The literacy focus was based on evidence of student performance from a range of assessments including NAPLAN and class based formative assessments. The Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas & Pinnell) was administered at the beginning of the year and teachers became aware that a high percentage of students, although able to read texts accurately, were not easily able to comprehend the texts they were reading. Too many students were having difficulty with all three levels of comprehension; Within the Text, Beyond the Text and About the Text. Teachers also identified that students had a general disconnect from reading in general. There was little engagement in reading across both grades with Independent Reading and Home Reading being particularly problematic. Reading was generally viewed as a chore and there was little pleasure involved.

The CEOSale support team, through the National Partnerships initiative, consisted of two Education Officers, the Literacy coach and Leadership coach. The coaching model could be described as a personalised coaching approach. The teachers determined the literacy focus of each meeting and the coach/es facilitated the discussions drawing on research and evidence-based practice to challenge the thinking of the group. The coaching included:

- an analysis of student learning,
- modelled teaching with a clear learning focus,
- feedback on teaching and
- shared observation of focus students (students making slower than expected progress).
The key school leader provided additional coaching support for the team by facilitating feedback conversations following teaching using collegial feedback protocols.

Student data was collected throughout the development and design of Reading Connections. There was evidence that indicated significant growth over time in reading comprehension and improvement in text reading levels. Students also demonstrated increased engagement in learning. In fact the Reading Connections time became a favourite time of the day for the majority of students.

The range of professional learning conversations that teachers engaged in over the course of the year was significant. In summary the professional learning included discussion on:

- Improved student engagement could be achieved with a high level of student independence
- Student independence required student decision-making and confidence
- Reading abilities and skills required explicit teaching
- Guided reading enabled a teacher to focus on comprehension
- Guided reading enabled teachers to have extended conversations to support inferential comprehension
- Selection of texts that supported further learning would engage students
- Selection of texts and teacher facilitated conversations would support vocabulary learning
- Guided reading supported the demonstration of comprehension strategies
- Teacher/student discussions about books supported Comprehension - Go deeper into the text and making links to prior knowledge
- Non-fiction texts supported building vocabulary and supported building world knowledge
- Reflective practices for students to articulate their learning

Specific focused goals

Building on the school-based literacy learning goals, the two Grade 3-4 teachers developed three specific goals to focus their teaching and learning practice:

1. To develop a routine for individual, independent reading where children are reading for pleasure
2. To develop a formal structure for Guided Reading focus groups that will allow the explicit teaching of reading strategies, develop a shared language and model and engage children in conversations about, within and beyond the text.
3. To organise a structure for reading groups that would allow children to engage, make connections to the wider world, and think beyond the text
4. To empower children to work independently, in groups and individually.

Actions taken in the classroom

To achieve the learning goals for the students a range of classroom management strategies and classroom teaching strategies were established in order to facilitate the learning goals for students. A description of the key changes to practice included:
Stage 1

- Routines and expectations were established for independent quiet reading.
- Visual tools were developed with the class. They were used to set expectations and to evaluate and monitor the classroom environment.
- Classroom space was made comfortable for reading with cushions, a couch, reading tent and quiet music.
- Quality reading material was made available including magazines with a range of fiction and non-fiction texts.
- Reflection time was introduced following independent reading. Children were encouraged to reflect on their reading in small informal groups.
- Independent reading time was slowly extended each week to support a more sustained concentrated reading. This was possible as students began to read for enjoyment.

Stage 2

- Teachers researched ‘Guided Reading’ strategies from several sources and sought advice from coaches and experienced teachers.
- Groups of students were established in each classroom based on Running Record analysis.
- Teachers formulated a structure for guided instruction that modelled the thinking required for deep understanding/comprehension.
- The skills for literal and inferential questioning were explicitly taught in the whole class context.
- Teachers modelled the language and questioning required of a good reader and this established a shared language for reflection and discussion.
- The focus of each Guided Reading session was driven by student learning needs with an underlying emphasis on comprehension.
- Fluency was identified as an important factor in comprehension based on research and further professional conversations. Fluency was modelled by the teachers and explicitly taught, unpacking phrasing, expression, use of punctuation and speed and accuracy. Texts were chosen carefully and introduced in the Guided Reading session. These texts then become the basis of the literacy activities that followed across the reading cycle.

Progress in the development of the Reading Connections strategy

1) The teachers discussed and researched activities in the literature that would engage and support children with extending their comprehension skills of the Guided Reading books. The teachers developed their own activities that supported students to go deeper with their understanding/comprehension. The premise was that the children were exploring the books and stretching their learning by learning new things about the world. The activities were opened-ended and applicable to a range of books. The texts, activity outline and necessary resources were stored in easily accessible Reading Baskets. Resources included art equipment, a range of technology including ipads, microphones – the aim of using a variety of materials was to provide children with engaging equipment so they could express their
learning and capture their thinking in a variety of ways. The children were asked to manage their own learning and there was a degree of decision making and problem solving involved at the group level. They activities included areas that had a learning focus on:

- a. Building world knowledge and vocabulary (Semantics)
- b. Grammar of the books / structure / genre (Syntax)
- c. Word study, spelling strategies, decoding, similarities and differences in word patterns (grapho-phonics)

At all times the activities had a focus on the deeper levels of comprehension they also included a focus on reading fluency (recognising the relationship between fluency and comprehension). Examples of activities:

**READING GROUP ACTIVITY – following Guided Reading of the text**

Individually or as pairs choose an interesting topic from the book to research on the internet. Create a presentation that you can use to share with the class. Use technology and your creative talents to showcase the information and engage the class.

**ACTIVITY**

Turn your book into a play or puppet show. Share with the class.

**ACTIVITY**

Choose three-five of the most interesting sentences in the book. These sentences should highlight the key message or information in the book. Write them in your neatest handwriting and illustrate these sentences using a variety of mediums. Share with your group.

**ACTIVITY**

What is the most important sentence in the book? Type the sentence on the computer. Select the font wisely and explain why you selected this sentence. Enhance your sentences with appropriate photos or diagrams.

**ACTIVITY**

Record yourself reading the book (or a selection of the book) on the ipad. Use the Fluency Rubric to evaluate your reading. Be prepared to read aloud to the class.

2) Teachers developed a range of reflective practices that supported students to be more aware of their learning e.g. rubrics developed in collaboration with the class. The reflection time at the end of each reading session was a key element in the student learning process. Children were asked to share and articulate their learning at the end of each session and this practice encouraged student engagement, generating significant enthusiasm.
Results

Text reading data

The Benchmark Assessment System was used at the end of the year to evaluate text level gains. All text levels were determined based on accuracy together with comprehension of the text. All students made significant text reading level gains across the year. Individual students, who were identified at the beginning of the year as significantly below standard reading level, made outstanding progress.

There was a significant shift in children’s comprehension levels. Teachers were impressed with the quality of responses given when reflecting on their reading.

Attitudes to Reading

There was much anecdotal evidence that attitudes to reading improved over time including:

- Individual quiet reading was a great success in terms of student engagement. Children increased in their reading stamina and were able to read for 30mins+ without interruption (5-10mins at the beginning of the year) by the end of the year.
- The extended time for independent reading allowed teachers to spend more time on individual reading conferences for additional explicit teaching.
- Student comments collected included: ‘I find silent reading relaxing and I can really enjoy the book’ Kate
- Teachers report a higher number of children reading at home.
- Children request to visit the library more often to get books to take home or to research information.
- There was a general excitement in the classes when they are introduced to a new book in Guided Reading.
- Students reflected on the ACTIVITY section of the reading program.
  - They enjoy the freedom to learn more about topics and
  - are more engaged in finding out about words.
  - They enjoy the variety of activities.
  - They were also eager to share their learning with the class each day.

‘I like to read the interesting books that have interesting words and it makes me want to find out more.’ Jake

Teacher practice - evaluation

Teacher practice has been developed and refined over the year. Teachers have expressed that they are more in control of the reading program, more organised and feel that they are making a difference to student learning. They are more focused for the Guided Reading because there is more time to evaluate the student’s learning in reading conferences and the sharing time. Planning for the guided reading sessions is now more student focused. The structure has provided teachers with more uninterrupted time with the guided reading groups. The students recognise the importance of guided reading in their learning so respect that time. This has made it easier for the teacher to facilitate the learning.
This model has provided the teachers with more time to focus on preparing the guided reading sessions rather than preparing isolated skill-based rotation activities. There is more time for ongoing formative assessment as the teacher is able to take regular weekly Running Records on each student.

**Lessons Learned**

The Reading Connections program has illustrated the positive impact on student learning that can result from teacher collaboration and professional advice from a coach. The teachers shared a willingness to design and trial new teaching strategies based on clearly articulated goals.

Students learn in a structured environment where routines are established.

‘The Reading Connections program has allowed me to develop my skills in the teaching and learning of reading in the classroom. The program is flexible enough to differentiate learning for students. It accommodates for different learning styles, different text reading levels and allows me to explicitly teach reading strategies.’ Teacher 1

‘The Reading Connections program has brought the love and excitement of reading back into the classroom. I love seeing the children engaged and developing an affinity with books. It allows me the time to know exactly where every child is at in their reading.’ Teacher 2

**Next Steps**

The school has made a commitment to the teacher learning by supporting the staff my continuing to use this model next year. Future literacy assessments will allow for tracking of students involved in this project to determine the maintenance of comprehension levels.