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Independent Studies Endorse Superior Strategies for Teaching Reading and Spelling: Hilliard's Journey

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> *Nearly 1/3 of Prep students fail to fully realize the phonemic structure of words. This skill is the "raw material for reading and writing".*

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Of the many educational outcomes to be achieved in the primary years of schooling, research demonstrates that learning to read is the most significant. The precise way in which the complex processes combine must be understood and demonstrated by teachers in order to identify their students' needs and to teach most effectively. The activities initiated at Hilliard Christian School to enhance achievement of this goal are shared here to support others with the same aim.

A background

There have been numerous large-scale reviews of research - both nationally and internationally - to provide education systems with independent, evidence-based guiding principles for the teaching of reading and spelling.

Consistencies across the findings of the research has identified five essential components of an effective reading program:

1. **Phonemic Awareness** – understanding that words can be broken into separate sounds (phonemes);
2. **Phonics** – learning and using the relationships between sounds and letter-symbols to sound out (decode) written words;
3. **Vocabulary** – the words students need to know in order to comprehend and communicate;
4. **Fluency** – the ability to read accurately, quickly and expressively;
5. **Comprehension** – extracting and constructing meaning from written text using

knowledge of words, concepts, facts and ideas (DEST, 2005; NICHD, 2000: Rose, 2006).

Each component is briefly expounded below.

Phonemic awareness

Replicated, evidence-based research findings demonstrate that reading development requires well developed phonemic awareness. Identifying the separate sounds is necessary before letters can be attached to the phonemes (symbol to sound relationship) and therefore provides the foundation for reading the English alphabetic code.

Nearly 1/3 of Prep students fail to fully realize the phonemic structure of words. This skill is the "raw material for reading and writing". It is impossible to correctly relate a letter to a sound if the sound cannot be perceived (Konza, D. 2010).

Phonics

Scientific research indicates that initial synthetic phonics instruction is the single most effective decoding approach for students. It is not only the seriously 'at-risk' students who achieve greater success under such a phonics regime; those students in the average and above range, as well as students who are making slow progress, will benefit from this approach.

Synthetic phonics has proven to be effective and more efficient than other forms of phonics instruction. Five and seven-year follow-up studies demonstrate that the superior effect of the synthetic approach does not diminish. The enhanced performance of girls over boys in early reading development appears to disappear when a synthetic approach is used – studies have shown boys do much better with this methodology (Johnston, R.S. & Watson J. E. 2005).

Vocabulary

The research is clear regarding implications for instruction that will enable the development of comprehensive, useful vocabularies. Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to being an independent and successful reader, writer and communicator and learner. Perhaps one of the greatest assets teachers and parents can provide their students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the ability to use those words well. Capacity to function in today's complex social and economic world is significantly affected by our language skills and word knowledge. Learning to read and write effectively and with fluency affects the long-term trajectory of a student's life. Limited vocabulary can trap students in a cycle of low achievement, poor communication

and disengagement (Konza, D. 2010).

The dependence of both academic achievement and reading achievement on vocabulary growth has been clearly established for decades. Unfortunately these findings, generally, have not influenced the practice of teachers.

Current research indicates that there is very little emphasis on the acquisition of vocabulary in school curricula (Beck I. & McKowen M. 2007).

Fluency

Fluency is another vital component of the reading process. It will develop without conscious effort when all the elements of reading are in place. Fluency enables the reader to focus on the meaning of the text. Fluent readers are able to maintain their skill over very long periods of time and can generalise across texts (Konza, D. 2010).

Fluency is among the most difficult component to rectify among older struggling readers. Intervening early when a student displays slow progress in oral reading fluency is more efficient and effective than later attempts. It is generally accepted with grade level text, fluency should occur between the first and third year. Screening and regular monitoring are critical pre-requisites for ensuring the development of fluency over this period of schooling (Spencer S. A. & Manis, 2010).

Fluent reading is a particularly important skill for students as they move through the year levels – they read increasingly longer texts, lengthier narratives and in-depth research topics.

Comprehension

Each of the above elements contributes to comprehension (the ultimate goal of reading) and the extent to which each is developed will affect the level of understanding that can be accessed by the reader (Konza, D. 2010).

Allocated instructional time to teach explicitly comprehension strategies is essential. Teaching comprehension strategies must begin in the early years of schooling and continue to be taught systematically and explicitly. These strategies take students to a new level of active understanding and insight as well as enhancing language and vocabulary knowledge.

It should be acknowledged that some children will learn to read regardless of the method used. These are the children who arrive at schools with the great advantage of an extensive vocabulary and regular and positive experiences with conversation, books and print.

Nevertheless, it is the unequivocal conclusion of the major national and international reviews into effective instruction, that most children benefit from

The dependence of both academic … and reading achievement on vocabulary growth … [is] established … [but] these findings … have not influenced the practice of teachers.

systematic and explicit teaching and the application of the five essential elements of reading – sometimes referred to as the "five pillars" of reading:

- Phonemic Awareness,
- Phonics,
- Vocabulary,
- Fluency and
- Comprehension

The School's "Reading Journey"
The School

The Hilliard School is situated in a suburb of Hobart and provides schooling for 110 students ranging from Kindergarten to Year Ten. The school is part of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist School System and prides itself on providing students with a Christ centred, Bible-based education.

Approximately, one third of students have English as Another Language (EAL) background and approximately three quarters are from a lower socio-economic status (SES).

Project background

In 2016, the Association of Independent Schools, Tasmania, offered Literacy Projects where schools could embark on a "Reading Journey" - *The Big Six* elements required for the effective teaching of reading and spelling from kindergarten to grade six.

An outline mapping

Each term, two after-school sessions were dedicated to understanding and implementing the essential components to teach reading and spelling. Prior to each session, teachers were required to read two researched articles (Konza, 2010 and Bayetto, 2012). Learning was supported by podcasts (Australian Primary Principals Association, APPA) and a power point presentation drew together the essential features of each component. At each session, teachers commented on the readings and opportunities for embedding the components into everyday practice.

The Big Six professional learning included **oral language** as a sixth component adding to the "five pillars". Oral language provides the foundation for learning to read, and is related to overall reading achievement throughout primary and secondary schooling (Snow et al, 1995; Wise et al 2007). As well as being essential for literacy learning, successful oral language is critical for student well-being since:

- Almost all classroom-room based learning relies on oral language. "High quality talk is a key factor in improving student engagement and outcomes" (Communication Trust, 2013, p.16).

> *High quality talk is a key factor in improving student engagement and outcomes.*

- Low literacy skills have been related to poorer outcomes in school achievement, measures of self-esteem, physical and mental health, housing, employment, socio-economic status, illicit drug use and criminal activity.

Thus, an individual's oral language and therefore literacy level has a major impact across personal, social and economic domains (Konza, 2010).

A specific 'topicological' mapping

Known words and comprehension
The Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) was introduced providing a framework for *The Big Six*. This assisted teachers to understand that reading has two broad sets of sub-skills that contributes to successful reading – *language comprehension* (vocabulary, background knowledge, reasoning language structures) and *word recognition* (decoding, sight recognition). Skilled reading involves the fluent coordination of both processes.

Phonemic awareness and phonics
The *Letters and Sounds* (K-2) framework commenced at Hilliard in 2014. *Letters and Sounds* was founded on the principles of the *Independent Review of Teaching Early Reading* (Rose, 2006). The review led to significant changes in approaches to the teaching of reading in the UK with a strong emphasis on the inclusion of the systematic teaching of phonics.

Letters and Sounds is structured in six overlapping phases requiring at least 30 minutes daily of direct (explicit) teaching. Each phase recommends activities for teaching *phonemic awareness* and *phonic* knowledge and skills systematically and incrementally. Throughout the activities, students apply, practise and consolidate their skills and knowledge, generalising across curriculum areas.

Students' progress is tracked through a reliable assessment process. Informed by objective data, teachers discern the rate at which students are progressing and adapt the pace accordingly. Assessment and tracking identifies learning difficulties at an early stage and additional support can be provided for struggling readers.

> *Implementing the Letters and Sound framework, has given me confidence to provide my students with thorough and explicit knowledge and understanding to be competent readers and writers. The structure allows for the development of students' speaking and listening skills, in preparation*

for reading and writing, by developing their knowledge of phonics and skills with blending and segmenting.

With a synthetic approach to teaching and learning, Letters and Sounds provides students with ability to decode words rather than rely on guess work and using pictures for cues. It is an explicit, step by step method of teaching, that also allows for flexibility in the way that it is delivered. This permits teachers to find interesting and engaging ways for their students to learn. My students have developed a strong understanding of letter and sound knowledge and with blending and segmenting. This has enabled them to become successful readers and writers.

The Letters and Sounds framework enables effective teaching and when used in conjunction with decodable texts, students are building solid reading and spelling skills and are enjoying positive learning experiences.

Angela Robertson, Prep Teacher.

Oral language and vocabulary
The *Speaking and Listening Strand* of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2008) was used for planning *oral language* and *vocabulary*. Teachers were encouraged to plan for a range and depth of oral language experiences, setting times for whole class, small group and partner activities.

Teachers were presented with a range of vocabulary activities, particularly for teaching domain specific vocabulary, morphological clusters, semantic clusters and etymological word webs.

Teachers were introduced to the *"Super Six" comprehension* (NSW DEST, 2010) strategies – definition of comprehension strategies; descriptions and examples of the repertoire of the *Super Six* comprehension strategies; a process for explicit instruction of comprehension strategies and teaching ideas to support the teaching of comprehension strategies

The six elements were consolidated by reviewing research on *What Effective "Literacy Schools" Do* (Konza, 2010) and a self-reflection on the teachers' own environmental and instructional practice.

Differentiated meeting of needs
Prior to introducing *Response to Intervention*, a podcast, *The Evidence That Principals Need to Lead the Planning for Improvement in Reading* (Bayetto, 2012) was viewed. The podcast explained tracking and assessing students on the elements of *The Big*

Six. Subsequently, the Response to Intervention (*RtI*) Model (DSF Literacy Services, 2014) was introduced to teachers. Over the past decade, *RtI* has been identified as a model where the needs of all students can be catered for in instruction, assessment and intervention. Primarily it encompasses a multi-tiered approach with the provision of increasing levels of support.

Tier 1 Students are provided with high quality teaching (whole class) that includes a rich oral language program, structured synthetic phonics, alphabetic knowledge, decodable reading books; emphasis on blending and segmenting; accurate and fluent word reading and spelling skills.

Tier 2 Assistance is provided for students who are failing to make adequate progress and are supported by an additional 30 minutes of small group instruction 4-5 times per week. To assist teachers with their planning and assessing progress for targeted second tier students, a proforma was developed by an IST Literacy Consultant.

Tier 3 If these students fail to make progress and are resistant to high intensity/evidence based intervention, they are supported by Multilit – Making Up for Lost Time in Literacy. This is a one-on-one program based on rigorous research.

A flow chart was presented (ACT Government, Education and Training, 2010) to explain clearly the pathway for the school to follow. The earlier and more systematic introduction of intervention for students struggling to acquire basic skills has the potential to reduce the number of students who present with learning difficulties. Persistent reading problems can be reduced to 5% of "at risk" students with early, appropriate and intensive synthetic phonics (Hempenstall, K. 2016).

Targeting intervention
In subsequent sessions, the *Simple View of Reading* framework was used to plot students in the quadrants so that intervention could be targeted to specific needs.

Teachers from grade 3 to grade 6 implemented *No-Nonsense Spelling* (Babcock, 2016) which provided a seamless transition from *Letters and Sounds*.

No-Nonsense Spelling Program (2016) was developed to offer teachers a comprehensive and

> *Persistent reading problems can be reduced to 5% of "at risk" students with early, appropriate and intensive synthetic phonics*

accessible progression in the teaching of spelling. Guidance is provided on how to teach the strategies, knowledge and skills students need to learn. The focus of this program is the teaching of spelling but integral to the teaching is the opportunity to promote the learning of spellings, including essential word lists for each grade.

Over the last two years the teachers have implemented the No-Nonsense Spelling Program. They have observed an increase in student performance in spelling over this time and students have enjoyed the activities and lessons in which they have participated. The program is well structured and there are many resources available to assist in the implementation of the different spelling units covered within the program.

No-Nonsense Spelling is an excellent follow on from Letters and Sounds in which the students within our Early Years have been participating. The program allows us to assist students become more effective and proficient spellers, which then enables them to become more fluent writers. The program has a systematic approach, teaching the different rules and conventions associated with spelling and requires explicit teaching when learning these skills. The strategies that students are taught assist them to recognize these and they can implement each in their writing to develop their own spelling skills.

Damien Rabe Grade 3-4; Kristy Baker Grade 5-6.

> *In school professional interactions involving consultants with broad expertise has led to teacher implementation of superior strategies*

Conclusion

In school professional interactions involving consultants with broad expertise has led to teacher implementation of superior strategies in teaching reading and spelling consequently benefiting students in Hilliard Christian School. **TEACH**

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