

How one school made the transition to evidence-based practice

In his acceptance speech for the 2019 Bruce Wicking Award, Steven Capp, Principal of Bentleigh West Primary School in Melbourne, outlines the road he followed in adopting evidence-based practices in his school.

To be awarded the Bruce Wicking Award is very special.

The honour I feel is growing with my understanding of the contributions that Bruce Wicking and his family have made to education and more broadly the contribution that LDA has made to countless communities around Australia.

I am relatively new to the principalship of Bentleigh West and to LDA, and I believe my experience highlights a problem in the profession, particularly relating to how we are initially trained as teachers in university teacher training courses.

I have been drawn to LDA in my pursuit of evidence-based practice, something driven by a need to achieve better outcomes for all students and guided by sheer luck in meeting with Sarah Astone, our reading intervention specialist, on my appointment to Bentleigh West Primary School in 2015.

I believe that my experience of not understanding the evidence relating to initial reading instruction is a reasonably common one, and that understanding the evidence should not be left to

chance. I would like to briefly share our story to highlight the importance of organisations such as LDA to make the evidence accessible to instructional leaders to enable them to use evidence-based practice to support instruction for ALL students in every classroom. I would also like to share key successes that were transferred from our reading instruction experience to other subjects such as mathematics.

At Bentleigh West Primary School, the road to evidence informed instruction started with reading.

I had been working in some schools in disadvantaged areas and the learning data that I was analysing showed large percentages of students well below the expected level in reading and spelling. I had assumed that disadvantage was almost entirely to blame for these results, and that disadvantage was a major obstacle to learning to read.

... catering for learning difficulty is synonymous with best practice...

However, NAPLAN data at Bentleigh West indicated that 15 to 20 per cent of students were performing one year or more below the expected level in reading and spelling at Grade 3, with an increase in this percentage by another 5 to 10 per cent at Grade 5. Bentleigh West has significantly less disadvantage than my previous schools, leading me to shift my attention to instruction being a factor in poor reading outcomes.

My thoughts on instruction being the problem were confirmed in discussions with Sarah when she outlined the importance of oral language, the role of phonemic awareness in reading success, and the missing ingredient of systematic explicit instruction in phonics, along with fluency and vocabulary, that lead to skilled reading and good reading comprehension. The

big six of reading.

She further explained that we had good Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading interventions in place but that our Tier 1 approach, based on a balanced literacy program, did not match. I was curious as to the impact on our high performers if we changed our Tier 1 instruction. Sarah suspected it would improve or have no impact on their performance.

The answer to many of our reading and spelling issues seemed quite simple: design our Tier 1 model to systematically and explicitly teach important elements of reading, including phonics, to align with our Tier 2 and Tier 3 approaches. However the big six was somewhat new to me and I had barely heard the terms phonemic awareness and phonics, let alone acquired the knowledge as to how to systematically and explicitly teach this content, and to lead teachers in this area. If this was true for me, an experienced educator who had risen to the position of principal, I was almost certain it was true for every teacher at Bentleigh West and perhaps Australia!

We began building a vision to have every teacher at Bentleigh West trained as expert teachers of reading and spelling and to have the knowledge and understanding to support any child that walked into their classroom.

We would start at understanding systematic, synthetic phonics and explore what explicit teaching meant to our teachers.

Evidence informed reading instruction was to become our complete, whole school focus.

We implemented training in systematic synthetic phonics teaching and sought advice on constructing



scope and sequences via organisations such as the Australian Dyslexia Association and Yoshimoto OG.

We changed our assessment practices by moving away from multi-cuing and running record assessments, and implemented DIBELS and the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check to better understand how well we were teaching this content, and also to cut down on assessment time.

I immersed myself in the training that the teachers were receiving and in familiarising myself with the reading research, so that I could more ably make sound decisions around resourcing and development and how best to support courageous teachers integrating new knowledge with new teaching skills all at once. I felt the need to be with them and to share in the failure, success, fear and frustration that inevitably occurs when professionals push for improvement. I needed to keep the focus and the belief that the cause was worth it, as our students were the beneficiaries, and to get reading right can change life trajectories in line with our Victorian DET initiatives of closing the gap.

In reading the Rose Report I noticed the references to the Simple View of Reading, which provided one of the best frameworks I have seen to help guide our work. The simple view of reading is based on the formula $RC = D \times LC$. That is, reading comprehension (RC) depends on both decoding (D), which enables students to convert written text to spoken words, and language comprehension (LC), which is the ability to understand the spoken language.

We felt that we now understood how to develop both word level reading and to implement practices that supported the development of comprehension. These practices included rich text exposure and discussions.

Our goal of understanding explicit teaching of systematic synthetic phonics was part of the decoding element and

decoding was about accurate word reading. Language comprehension was about understanding what was read. Both these areas need to fire in the brain and support each other to bring about skilled readers.

Explicit teaching was another area that we needed to ensure was implemented consistently throughout our school. Observations undertaken by our teachers indicated inconsistencies in our practice that were contrary to an explicit teaching model.

We reached out to Dr. Lorraine Hammond who transformed my view of teaching in one powerful day of professional development when she took us through the art of explicit instruction and the mountain of evidence that supports it. This led us to seek out readings on Cognitive Load Theory and Rosenshine's principles of instruction, and to design professional development to support the momentum that Lorraine had given us. At last, we had a consistent teaching model to subscribe to and we were beginning to see that systematic and explicit teaching in most areas of the curriculum was resulting in enhanced learning growth. Our maths team was also adopting similar changes in their teaching practices, so that this enhanced learning growth was also evident in our maths results.

By 2018, we had a cohort that had been exposed to four years of evidence informed reading instruction. This Year 3 cohort had also received systematic explicit instruction in mathematics. The Year 3 NAPLAN results were really interesting to us, in order to check whether our internal assessments and observations aligned with a standardised test that was comparable to schools within a similar context.

The results were outstanding, and we saw higher results than like school groups in almost all areas. These results are summarised in Table 1.

These results have led to much interest and collaboration with many

schools and have contributed to sharing success and learning with others.

In conclusion, I have mentioned the names of some esteemed researchers and members that are part of or associated with LDA. I haven't mentioned the countless others whose work I have read that has built my ability to know more and to be a better principal. To sit next to Anne Castles and to receive awards with Professor William Tunmer, and also to meet and converse on a semi-regular basis with Professor Pamela Snow and Jennifer Buckingham, is something I treasure.

The work that LDA does is inspirational and we need to work together to ensure that all practitioners cease to see intervention as being separate from good teaching and to understand how the research into learning difficulties has provided us with a better understanding of how ALL brains learn.

Our brains are more similar than different and catering for learning difficulty is synonymous with what is simply best practice.

I am humbled, honoured and grateful for receiving the Bruce Wicking Award from LDA who have already contributed so much to my professional learning.

Steven Capp is the Principal of Bentleigh West Primary School in Melbourne, which has become recognised for its adoption of evidence-based teaching practices, particularly in the area of reading. He has worked across the primary and secondary school sectors as an educational leader for the past 15 years. He has a Masters of School Leadership from Melbourne University and has worked with schools and across Australia in bridging the gap from research to practice. He served on the expert advisory panel to the Federal Government for Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Checks in 2017.

Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar and Punctuation	Numeracy
2011	470	440	424	456	434
2012	465	442	435	460	422
2013	457	446	432	457	410
2014	465	420	433	446	433
2015	472	447	436	469	442
2016	459	441	429	478	437
2017	467	453	438	497	452
2018	496	473	498	527	496

Table 1 Bentleigh West Year 3 NAPLAN Results, 2011 to 2018