



From the rock comes the sculpture



Ray Boyd, recipient of the 2018 Bruce Wicking Award, explains how explicit instruction has lifted the performance of disadvantaged students at his Perth primary school.

West Beechboro Primary School is located in a working-class suburb in the eastern metropolitan region of Perth. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), a scale that represents levels of educational advantage, places West Beechboro slightly below the Australian average, in the sixth decile relative to other state public schools (one indicates the highest socio-economic standing, while ten is the lowest). The school has moved from a decile of 8 where it was placed in 2012. The staff cohort, since becoming an Independent Public School, has been very stable. The school population, for the same period, has consistently been at approximately 480 students from Kindergarten through to Year 6; however, the recognised success of the educational programs indicates that these numbers will continue to increase as it becomes a school of choice for its local intake population. Of the 475 current students, 11% are indigenous and a further 48% are from homes where English is a second language.

West Beechboro, over the years from 2010 to the current time, continually revisited its teaching pedagogies and there has been a marked improvement

in student achievement across all the domains of national testing (NAPLAN); a gain predominantly credited to the implementation of an explicit instruction model across the school. Running parallel to this is a content-specific curriculum guide that incorporates the broader Australian Curriculum requirements, providing a detailed and prescriptive working document for teachers.

Moreover, West Beechboro has invested considerable time, money and leadership energy in ensuring that any instructional programs utilised in the school are sequential in nature, support the prescribed instruction model, are resourced appropriately, and are research-based in terms of proven academic success, thus promoting the belief of 'No Failure Learning' (NFL) within the all staff. All staff have engaged in professional development to embed a common language and understanding about implemented approaches in order to create what Fullan (2001, p. 64) refers to as a "school-wide professional learning community", where collective intelligence is built into the school's learning community. A potential issue for West Beechboro was that, while these structures existed, there was still

the possibility that a 'patchwork quilt' mentality could permeate the school's culture, with professional development becoming more reactive than proactive. It was imperative that we ascertained whether understandings were being applied and that teacher efficacy was at a level whereby student success was guaranteed. Furthermore, West Beechboro's espoused desire to become a leading state public school meant that the focus has to be on both personal mastery and team learning if there is to be ongoing and sustainable improvements.

In 2012 the leadership team developed a professional learning operational plan that outlined a succinct timeline for professional learning in relation to curricular content and pedagogic knowledge. This plan was underpinned by seven principles of highly effective professional learning that were adapted from the Victorian Department of Education. These were that professional learning was: focused on student outcomes (not just individual teacher needs); focused on and embedded in teacher practice (not disconnected from the school); informed by the best available research on effective learning and teaching (not just limited to what they currently know); collaborative, involving reflection and feedback (not just individual inquiry); evidence-based and data driven to guide improvement and to measure impact; ongoing, supported and fully integrated into the culture and operations of the school; and an individual and collective responsibility at all levels of the system.

Understanding that leadership does not "function in a vacuum" (Sorenson, Goldsmith, Mendez, & Maxwell, 2011, p. 8), we realised that to ensure high levels of teacher efficacy, we needed to foster highly effective and reflective professional growth structures that not only encouraged teachers to look outward, but also inward at themselves. We believed that coaching, instructional rounds and mentoring provided the necessary structures for professional growth. However, we felt that it was crucial to gauge their effectiveness in order to clearly "identify and solve curricular problems that negatively affect instructional programs and student achievement" (Sorenson et al., 2011, p. 156), and which may potentially impede teachers' efficacy and ability to operate at the highest of levels as a classroom practitioner. We continue to reflect on the way that this is carried out across the school.

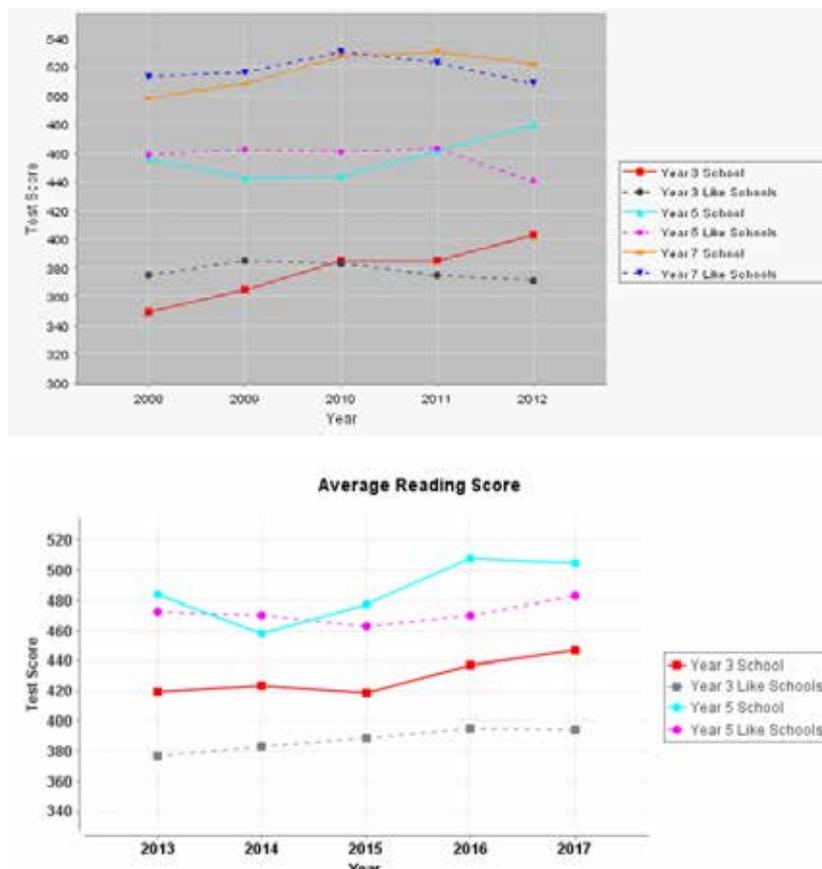


Figure 1. Longitudinal Summary of Reading Achievements according to NAPLAN against state Like Schools

As a leadership group it remains critical in guaranteeing that a productive, collaborative culture is maintained through these processes and that they do not simply become a compliancy process. We work to ensure that the model is “driven by the powerful paradigm that we are much more effective together than we are separated” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 112). With this in mind, West Beechboro Independent Public School teaching and teacher assistant staff have continually participated in professional development to refresh, update or learn about how to identify significant reading difficulties in reading and options for intervention to implement when significant difficulty in reading is identified.

This recognition complements the school’s current use of Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar in the Early Phase of learning, MultiLit and MiniLit in the Early through to Senior Phases of learning, and Spelling Mastery from Years 1 to 6, which are used to complement and strengthen the information contained in the ‘Teaching & Learning Handbook’ that provides our staff with very clear structures to support the development of reading from an early age.

Our approach is based on evidence from research papers about phonemic awareness used in the Inclusion Online course called Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading, specifically Big Ideas in Beginning Reading, published by the University of Oregon Centre on Teaching and Learning.

“One of the most compelling and well-established findings in the research on beginning reading is the important relationship between phonemic awareness and reading acquisition.” (Kame’enui et al., 1997).

There is an expectation of our teachers that they should know the following:

- Definition of phonological awareness (PA)
- Definitions of key PA terminology
- The relation of PA and phonemic awareness to early reading skills
- The developmental continuum of PA and phonemic awareness skills
- Which phonemic awareness skills are more important and when they should be taught
- Features of phonemes and tasks that influence task difficulty
- Terminology (phoneme, phonemic awareness, continuous sound, onset-rime, segmentation)

We work hard to ensure that all our staff are able to:

- Assess PA and phonemic awareness and diagnose difficulties
- Produce speech sounds accurately
- Use a developmental continuum to select/design phonemic awareness instruction
- Select examples according to complexity of skills, phonemes, word types, and learner experience
- Model and deliver phonemic awareness lessons
- Link phonemic awareness to reading and spelling
- Evaluate the design of instructional materials

Source: modified from Moats (1999).

More importantly, we assist and support staff in identifying what a lack of phonemic awareness looks like so that our students who require it are supported at a level which enables them to establish this precursor to being successful in literacy.

Our staff are aware of what the research says in relation to PA and know that, “The best predictor of reading difficulty in kindergarten or first grade is the inability to segment words and syllables into constituent sound units (phonemic awareness)” (Lyon, 1995), and that there is considerable evidence that the primary difference between good and poor readers lies in the good reader’s phonological processing ability. As a direct result of this we invest a great deal of time in the early years establishing this grounding. We do not leave it to chance and we do not make any assumptions about a child’s background when they walk through our gates, again working into building a NFL attitude.

In late 2009 we identified, through various data sources, that our students in some cases were leaving school illiterate. In addition to this we had children who were spending 3,4,5 and even 6 years in intervention programs but they were not moving academically in terms of improved literacy or numeracy levels. Further to this, analysis of our behaviour records clearly indicated that behaviour in the classrooms was actually impeding the teachers’ abilities to teach.

It was apparent after conducting classroom audits that there was limited consistency across the classrooms. This was both across year levels and within year levels. In this respect we did not have a common instructional language within the school.

A presenting challenge was teacher buy-in which was the first and most significant challenge. When it comes

to teaching, everyone has their own philosophy about what works best. In many cases this is the first pedagogy that the teacher was exposed to when they undertook pre-service teacher training. It became important to move teachers from a stance that was underpinned by a philosophical belief, to one that was backed by proven research that had identified practices that were deemed to be effective. There was in addition the ‘toxic culture’ of a knowledge poor teaching and learning community, as described by Kent Peterson (2016), and a system that did not support what we were intending to do.

As a school our purpose is to ensure that we provide the children who step through our gates with the best educational foundation that we can, and that we provide them with the necessary literacy and numeracy skills that will enable them to apply these to more complex problems. This we believe will ultimately provide them with the necessary skills that will allow them to pursue further learning. We understood that if the kids left their primary years illiterate and/or innumerate then it was highly likely that they would be playing catch up, if they ever caught up, for the rest of their lives.

Shaping the Rock

To support the implementation of a whole school approach that we believed would bring about significant student improvement in literacy levels, we used a variety of methods:

- Initially an analysis was undertaken of longitudinal and comparative school data in relation to our local and state schools.
- From here we were able to present internal comparative school data that clearly demonstrated, on a small scale, the significant impact that teacher instruction and instruction methods had on student outcomes in the formative years.
- Light house classrooms were then established using teachers who were eager to adopt and implement the suggested changes. To support this coaching was used to provide support and ongoing feedback to the teachers who were working to bring about the changes.
- The second stage involved a natural adoption of the new approaches as staff observed the clearly visible improvements that were occurring in various classrooms.
- The third stage involved using in-school examples of the changes

that were taking place. These were positioned alongside the research. This then provided the theory behind the reason for the changes as well as real time improvement that was contextual that supported the theory.

The rationale behind the method was that as a general rule teachers learn best when they can see something actually working. Everyone comes into the profession with a personal philosophy about teaching. It is this philosophy that shapes their teaching style and the various approaches that they have used. In some cases teachers adopt the method of teaching that they were first exposed to, either at University or at the school that they were appointed to.

If we look at Michael Fullan's (2010) change train analogy, the least amount of change would be required in the case of those teachers who had already bought into the belief to change. It therefore made sense to work with them first. This action would then assist in moving those teachers who only needed further verification that the change would be effective. This group needed no further energy expended on their change other than to provide the same support structures the first group had access to. The final group, the real resisters to change, were the ones who would need the most energy expended on them to bring about change. In regard to this, what we did as a school leadership group was to mandate the changes. The leadership group then went about ensuring these changes were implemented in the resister's rooms. On a simpler level we could say

we applied Hersey and Blanchard's (1977) theory of situational leadership. Through this approach we aimed to:

1. Establish whole of school instructional language.
2. Create a structured and sequential learning journey from K-6 that provided clear instructional expectations for teachers as well as being able to be articulated to the wider community.
3. Implement instructional practices that had a proven research background and had resulted in positive student improvement relative to academic achievement and/or social emotional development.
4. We gave ourselves five years to see a significant whole school turn around. In some cases, especially around the behaviour domains of schooling, we saw improvement within the first year.

We have now developed a clear and concise instructional language from K-6. This has continued to be refined and further developed. The following data sets, which have been shown to staff, shared with the school board and communicated to our community, illustrate significant and ongoing improvement:

- PIPS
- NAPLAN
- PAT
- State Mandatory On Entry testing.

Instructional rounds, which are carried out in the school, clearly demonstrate to everyone involved that there is a common approach that is being used across the school and behaviour data also indicates that the

changes have been successful.

As a direct result of this work:

- Academic achievement has improved.
- Students who leave our school are now gaining access to academic scholarships into private and independent high schools.
- Because students are achieving success in literacy and numeracy, and support structures have been put into place to assist those that require additional support, our students are in intervention programs for considerably less time.
- Our students are now achieving success on the sporting field.
- Our students are entering and winning STEM awards and science competitions.

The instructional model that we advocate across the school draws on research from many current and past education researchers. We have demonstrated that a whole of school approach is important not just for the students but for the teachers. In creating a common instructional language, it enables everyone to talk about the same practice and in doing so help each other. This in turn helps the school grow as a teaching and learning community.

West Beechboro's recognition by LDA through the Bruce Wicking Award is a public acknowledgment for our staff that we are making a difference for every child that steps through our gates. The teaching of reading is not a serendipitous event, nor should it be. Rather it is a deliberate act that every one of our staff understands and because of this our students are given every opportunity to be successful. Our

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	
Colour Scheme Red & Green <input type="button" value="Submit"/> Alternate view: Results in graphs									
Year 3	Reading 348 330 - 366		Narrative Writing 385 370 - 400		Spelling 387 370 - 404		Grammar and Punctuation 342 323 - 361		Numeracy 346 331 - 361
	SIM 374 365 - 383	ALL 400	SIM 394 386 - 402	ALL 414	SIM 377 368 - 386	ALL 400	SIM 374 364 - 384	ALL 403	SIM 375 367 - 383
Year 5	456 438 - 474		461 444 - 478		467 451 - 483		464 445 - 483		452 437 - 467
	SIM 461 452 - 470	ALL 484	SIM 465 457 - 473	ALL 486	SIM 464 456 - 472	ALL 484	SIM 469 460 - 478	ALL 496	SIM 452 444 - 460

Figure 2. 2008 My School data for West Beechboro Primary School vs similar schools (SIM) and all WA schools.

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar	Numeracy
Year 3	447	455	489	475	447
Year 5	505	459	533	511	495

Figure 3. 2017 My School data for West Beechboro Primary School vs similar schools (SIM).

staff know that if you are passionate, reflective and a learner, you can become an outstanding teacher; that our job is to teach - not facilitate learning and not to be curriculum designers; that every student must be accountable; that teachers must have high expectations, including the expectation that every child can read, write, spell and be proficient in maths; and that differentiating the curriculum is not dumbing it down!

In 2008, as indicated by My School, our data sets showed that we were significantly lagging the performance of similar schools (SIM in Figure 2).

In 2017 the My School data showed that West Beechboro was outperforming similar schools (green in Figure 3 indicates higher scores than similar schools).

This change did not come about because we taught to the test. It came about because we changed what we did. We looked at what we needed to do to ensure that our students were successful readers and we altered the way we taught and the methodology we used to do this. More importantly, we moved our understanding of the teaching of reading from an ideological stance to one that examined what the science of teaching reading was saying. The rest, as they say, is history.

Ray Boyd is Principal at West Beechboro Primary School in Perth, WA. Ray was 2014 WA Primary School Leader of the Year and is the 2018 recipient of the LDA Bruce Wicking Award. He is also a successful distance runner who has represented Australia at the World Track and Field Championships (marathon) and the World Cross Country Championships.

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