



Raising the Bar in Reading

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present strategies and discussion about how teachers can adapt the curriculum in order to provide authentic needs-based programmes. Identifying students' strengths and needs gave us clear directions as to what we needed to teach. In this article, the research team discuss how they successfully raised the reading achievement of target students by attending to classroom practices such as guided reading and taking running records, as well as giving specific focus to targeted assessment, goal setting and inclusive support programming.

Practice Paper

Keywords

Differentiated instruction, effective practices, inclusive classrooms, needs assessment, professional development, reading achievement, school effectiveness, teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The rationale for our professional development was to embark on an action research project which focused on teaching and learning, more specifically directed towards changes in practice. Using the techniques of action research, we drafted questions, collected data, analysed data, and acted upon it. The key focus of our involvement with our facilitator in the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE) project was to develop an understanding of and build confidence in adapting the curriculum to provide authentic needs-based programmes that enhanced student learning. The main context was literacy. A secondary context was afternoon topics where it was harder to accommodate the struggling students.

The suggested objectives were to:

- increase teacher effectiveness in collecting and analysing data, in particular, running records
- increase effectiveness in using data to inform programming and provide appropriate instruction at the instructional curriculum level
- increase effectiveness in using strategies to accommodate diversity in the classroom
- become involved in the process of reflection, and consider our own attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about our students and our own practice.

The suggested intervention programme involved workshops and learning conversations around the process of:

- needs assessment/data gathering
- providing students with literacy experiences at their instructional level
- using strategies to accommodate diversity in the classroom
- inclusive classroom support programmes
- ongoing monitoring and adjustment of programmes
- reviewing and reflecting on our practice.

METHOD

The action research project required us to work collaboratively with the facilitator and was carried out in three phases.

Phase 1: Needs Analysis

Pre-intervention data were collected in order to identify the target students. This information was gathered from the school's reading profile cards which contain children's chronological reading ages. The data revealed that two students, one aged eight in Year 3, and the other aged nine in Year 4, had reading ages of 5.5-6 years, and 6.5 years respectively. These students were reading at least two years below their chronological reading ages. Other assessments, such as the ability to recognise and sound alphabet names, read high frequency sight words commonly used by students of the same age, and spelling ability were then tested. Our professional development was aimed at these two students. However, to monitor the broader effects of the programme, we also included an additional 3-4 children from a non-English speaking background in each class.

TABLE 1

Initial literacy assessment data for target student of Year 3 adapted from the pre-intervention programme

Name	Date	Letter ID sounds reads	Letter ID sounds records	Blends reads	Blends records	1st 100 words	2nd 100 words	3rd 100 words	Teacher comments
Student A	30.8.05	18/28	28/28	14/23	14/21	75/100			
Student B	22.11.05	21/28	25/28	21/23	17/21	94/100	93/100	81/100	

Once the initial assessments were completed and collated, the results were analysed with the help of the facilitator. We identified the common errors and difficulties that children experienced when reading and writing. The analysis revealed that:

- children were grouped at incorrect instructional levels and therefore some texts were too easy or too difficult
- children needed an understanding of strategies they can use to assist them in the learning programme
- teachers needed to monitor effectiveness by using data to inform programming and provide appropriate instruction at the curriculum instructional level
- teachers needed to provide more opportunities for practise.

With this assessment information at hand, the next step was to identify each student’s strengths and weaknesses. The strengths were tasks the students accomplished independently and the weaknesses were areas where they were experiencing difficulties. We then progressed to drawing up an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each student. These plans focused on what the student needed to learn and related directly to their specific needs. These plans guided our teaching for the next five weeks.

TABLE 2

An example of a Strengths/Needs profile

Strengths/Needs profile		
Student: A	Subject: Reading	Term 4: Week 1-5
Strengths		Needs
Graphophonic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • records 26/26 letter sounds • records 14/21 blends 		to write letter blends for example fl, gl, pr
Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognises 75 out of 100 first sight words 		to attend to short vowels when reading 2-4 letter words (often misreads) to consolidate knowledge of first 100 sight words

TABLE 3

An example of an IEP

Short-term IEP		
Student: A	Subject: Reading	Term: Week 1-5
Teaching target		Outcome
Process objective: Indicate letter sound relationships		
1. To give the sounds for these written letters/blends		Achieved some. Can give sounds for
Week 1: a, u		
Week 2: y, i		
Week 3: c, s, sk, sc		sk
Week 4: sm, sn, st		sm, sn, st
Week 5: ch, th		ch, th
2. To recognise and read words: Game: Bingo		
Week 1: away, after, as, up, under		
Week 2: yes, with, him, yesterday		achieved
Week 3: came, some, school, skate, sky		achieved
Week 4: smoke, smell, smile, snip, snow		achieved: smoke, some

Activities included in these IEPs were:

- matching games, which helped children to develop an understanding of word patterns and improve spelling
- spelling games such as bingo and snap
- the repeated reading programme which increased reading speed and fluency
- tracing over letters and numbers such as d and b, p and b, 5 and 3, to consolidate alphabet names and numbers, and to reduce confusion
- a four-minute writing graph where the aim is to write as many words as they can in four minutes with the teacher dictating the story, usually from a text at the writer's instructional reading level.

Phase 2: Action

This phase required us to put our plans into action both in planning and teaching. We incorporated these IEPs into our daily teaching programme. We discussed and explained the set goals with the target children. Sharing these intentions meant that students knew exactly what they needed to learn. During our student/teacher talk time, one student remarked: *I know more about what I'm supposed to be doing. The teacher tells us more now.*

Another student remarked: *Before I didn't know that well (what to do) ... the teacher is asking me more questions and I get to learn more.*

They continued to work on the set targets independently, with peers or sometimes with a teacher aide. Both teacher and teacher aide monitored progress through the use of a tracking sheet.

TABLE 4
An example of a tracking sheet with tasks

Support programme recording chart		Term: 4				Date: 29.8-2.9
Date repeated reading		29.08	30.08	31.08	1.09	2.09
Letter/blend focus	practise					
	memory					
	pairs	✓	✓	✓	library	✓
Short vowel words	practise					
	bingo	✓	✓	✓	✓	computer suite
Four-minute writing	reading		✓	✓	✓	✓
	recovery					
Spelling						

We reviewed the goals after a five-week period in order to assess whether they had been achieved. Students built confidence and self-esteem through regular practice and were given opportunities to reflect on their learning on a regular basis. Student A said:

I didn't like reading because it was a bit too difficult... you had to copy all these big words out of books and it took ages to write it...now we have more fun activities. They help us learn spelling words and you can have fun as well as learn.

This process of assessment, analysis and planning continued until the student reached the goals.

Phase 3: Results and Discussion

The repeated reading programme proved to be the most effective. This process required the children to read at their instructional level twice a day for one minute. The listener (a more able reader) was responsible for time-keeping, assisting with difficult words, and counting and graphing the number of words read correctly. Once the student read a total of 120 words per minute they moved onto a new text. The repeated reading programme enhanced student participation. Students also became more competitive by comparing graphs and took greater responsibility for their learning.

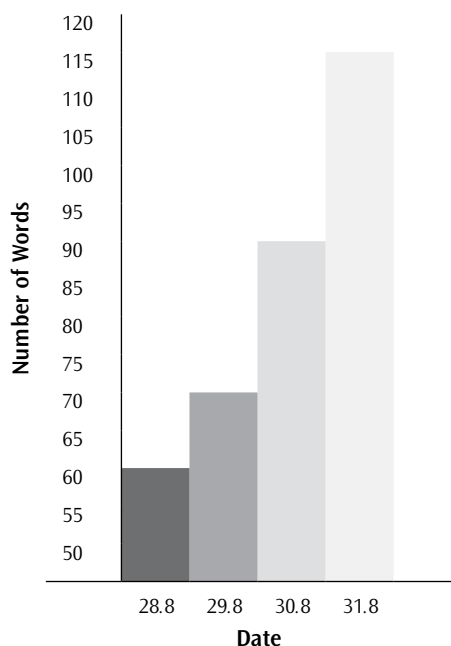


Figure 1. A repeated reading graph showing reading progress

In establishing the students' correct instructional level we realised that it was necessary for teachers to take more than one running record at any given time. This may seem daunting and time-consuming but it is absolutely essential if it is to inform planning. As regular practice throughout the professional development activities, we continued to analyse strategies which students were using during reading. In doing so we were able to make more informed decisions and general statements about student reading behaviour. In response to taking running records student B said:

I was feeling a bit excited about getting a bit higher. I went up quite a lot. It was cool. I felt a bit proud.

TABLE 5

Running record data showing pre and post-intervention reading levels for target student

Student	C.A	Date	Reading Age	PM level	Accuracy	Self Correction	Comp%	Intervention plan
D. O. B.	7.6	29.06.05	6.5-7	15	97%	1.3	NA	pre-intervention
6.11.97	8	1.12.05	8.5-9	24	95%	1.4	90	post-intervention

CONCLUSION

Our participation in the action research project has enabled us to reflect and question our decisions about best practice. As mainstream classroom teachers one of the greatest challenges we face is to cater for the diverse needs of the students we teach. In this journey we learned that it is possible, irrespective of the range of student ability, to cater for all students. We adapted our practice by:

- examining the way we teach
- lessening written reading tasks
- carefully selecting tasks that match the learning goals
- examining the guided reading lesson structure and student involvement
- planning for diversity
- developing supportive classroom practices.

If we expect our students to succeed it is imperative that all teachers understand the critical factors for effectiveness in teaching literacy, which include teacher expectations, teachers' knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, effective use of instructional strategies, and the quality of interaction between students and teachers. Children enjoy challenge; teachers can set higher goals and therefore have children achieve at higher levels. Teachers can raise the bar!

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