

**Building Bridges to Success  
ALEA Conference 2009**

**Setting the Scene**

Work within ACT Public schools has been dedicated and committed to building teacher capacity and improving student outcomes through a variety of programs and approaches. These have been modified and refined over time to ensure that they reflect current initiative and policy development. Our work is supported by the implementation of the ACT Curriculum framework – Every chance to learn and the Quality Teaching model. It ensures the diverse needs and abilities of all students are acknowledged and all students are supported to achieve in literacy and numeracy.

Students in ACT public schools and colleges demonstrate a range of abilities and come from diverse language, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our work recognises that teachers need to be able to draw on a flexible repertoire of skills, resources and professional knowledge to meet each student's needs. With the launch of the most recent *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2009 – 2013*, system-wide targets are identified and each school has set literacy and numeracy targets within their own school action plans to reduce achievement gaps and ensure continued excellence in student learning outcomes.

We recognise that there is no one answer to improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. Similarly there isn't a single approach or resource that is effective in improving the literacy and numeracy skills of students. The work we have done is based on evidence on school leadership, the role of teachers in improving student outcomes and the effectiveness of support programs. It is the permutation of these factors that is most powerful.

The COAG National Reform Agenda is central to Australia's ability to increase workforce productivity and participation to meet the future challenges of an aging workforce and a continuing skills shortage. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has identified a need to deliver sustained improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students, especially those who are falling behind. This National Partnerships (NP) will fund a range of reforms which will support the educational needs and wellbeing of students in schools in low socio-economic status (SES) communities.

The ACT Department of Education and Training has also signed a National Partnership that relates directly to Literacy and Numeracy. All schools and colleges are expected to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students. The priority focus will be on primary aged students most in need of support.

This NP is designed to build outcomes in literacy and numeracy and will focus on:

- effective and evidence-based teaching of literacy and numeracy
- strong school leadership and whole school engagement with literacy and numeracy

- monitoring student and school literacy and numeracy performance to identify where support is needed.

All public primary schools are covered under this National Partnership, with schools required to develop specific targets in literacy and numeracy.

Evidence-based practice is a term referred to throughout the education arena. Accountability and a need to demonstrate improved and sustained learning outcomes have made it crucial to work from a strong evidence base. Our programs and work is strongly linked to best practice and ensures we are building teacher capacity to improve student outcomes at all times. Evidence-based practice utilises empirical evidence but also acknowledges the value of professional wisdom built over time (see diagram 1 below). To harness individual experiences across the ACT system a range of approaches have been employed. These include supporting teachers to undertake action research projects, engaging in a lesson study approach and developing focus groups to build learning communities.

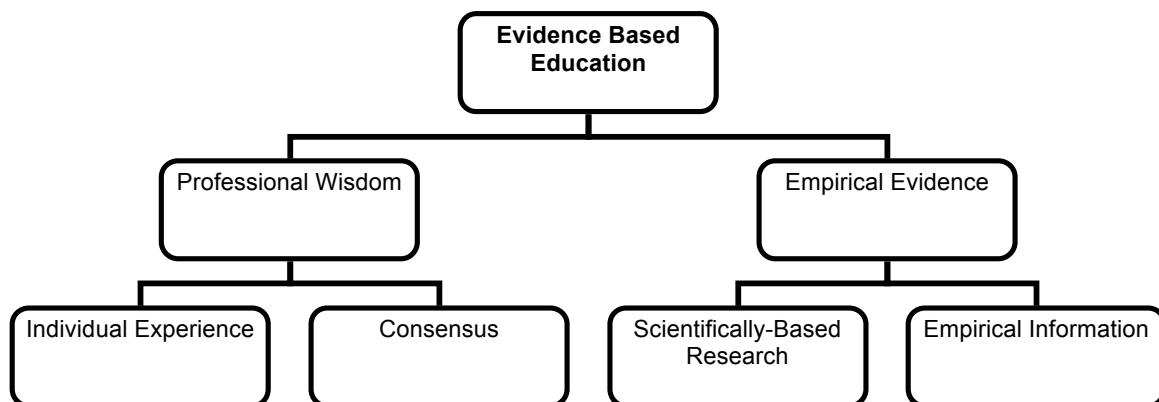


Diagram 1: Evidence Based Practice – Linking approaches and beliefs

### Planning the Approach

Prior to engaging in professional learning due consideration is required to ensure that the needs of the adult learner are addressed. All professional learning opportunities whether they were formal in-services, induction programs or the facilitation of professional learning teams attend to the principles behind and the needs of the adult learner. The way we work with schools varies from one context to the next. Our role will depend on the identified need, where the school is on their journey, their capacity to embed the change and how they would like us to work with them.

### Who is the adult learner?

Teachers are pragmatic learners who seek purposeful learning opportunities. They are self directed learners who set the bar on the professional learning they undertake. In this sense they are personalising their learning based on their priorities. Teachers are goal oriented learners. The choices they make are precise and focused. These principles as espoused by Fogarty (2005) link with the Triple P Core Components of Professional Learning advocated by Fullan (2006).

### **What does the adult learner want?**

It is of paramount importance that new learning is scaffolded. In some instances this is providing a step by step guide to the process while in other scenarios there is need to amend the process to suit the experience of the teacher. The ongoing role of targeted feedback is valued by the adult learner. It is essential that the feedback is more than an affirmation but a combination of support and challenging suggestions so that they are able to continue their learning program safe in the knowledge that they are heading in the right direction. Similarly any new learning that has been undertaken needs to have an immediate application for their context. Transfer needs to be mediated and the most effective way to begin this process is via automatic transfer through careful facilitator planning of anticipatory and retrieval tactics (Perkins, 1986). In education this means a change in teacher behaviour and gains in student learning (Speck & Knipe, 2001, Guskey, 2001).

### **What does the adult learner prefer?**

Collaborations! Collaborations! Collaborations! With a slight change to the widely recognised real estate mantra the slogan certainly rings true for teachers. Engaging in professional learning with a peer ensures a higher uptake of the new learning. It also encourages didactic discourse between colleagues, a creation of a shared vision and abstracted high level transfer. The professional learning presentation itself needs to be an eclectic mix of styles and integrate many information and communication technologies. In order to gain deep learning there needs to be recognition that 'less truly is more' and that revisiting the learning in as many forums as possible should be valued and accommodated. When these principles are addressed, transfer is more likely to occur and the wealth of knowledge that is brought to the opportunity from the adult learner is honoured and embraced.

### **Teacher Level's of Transfer**

Transfer of learning is a topic that has generated research specific to building teacher capacity and improving student outcomes. Amongst the researchers a common trend has been identified acknowledging that transfer is simple and complex. The terms have been modified and built upon over the past 25 years but the essence remains the same, as seen below.

- simple and complex – Fogarty
- near and far – Whittock
- horizontal and vertical – Joyce and Showers
- automatic and mindful – Perkins
- low road and high road – Salomon and Perkins
- similar and cued – Beyer
- practiced and mediated - Feuerstein

Fogarty and Pete (2004), Salomon and Perkins (1988) and Beyer (1987) amongst others encourage facilitators to engage in processes that embed and sustain change. This requires an in-depth understanding of this process and the roles learners take on their journey. Fogarty and Bellanca (2005) have created a continuum that maps the course learners take from training to transfer. It identifies the various learner situational dispositions and the need to address these in collegial discussions and practical applications. Fogarty describes six categories of learner behaviours that range from simple (overlooks, duplicates, replicates) to complex (integrates, propagates and innovates). Facilitators for programs such as BEE Spelling, First Steps and the ELNO Focus Group are taught about the implications for the different learner behaviours and the ways to support simple transfer to a "creative divergence and more complex transfer" (Fogarty and Bellanca, 2005: p250).

Similarly teachers are encouraged to embrace transfer theory and actively teach their peers about the different theories surrounding the embedding of new learning. This ensures that learning is not separate from what is needed in the classroom. It is deliberate, precise and personalised (Fullan, 2006).

### **Mentoring and Coaching**

Recognising the importance of providing explicit training in the provision of mentoring and coaching skills, all programs developed by the Literacy and Numeracy Section (ACT DET) have a three levelled approach. This approach embodies quality professional development, quality resources and ongoing support. We know that without the ongoing support in the form of mentoring or coaching, professional development has the potential to be a 'tick in the box' with minimal transference to the school context. Joyce and Showers (1998) in their book Student Achievement through Staff Development provide this interesting statistic on what the outcome of Professional Development is and its sustainability;

90% - Do nothing  
10% - Do something  
After 3 months, only 1-2% of the 10% still do something.

In order to counteract this alarming statistic programs such as BEE Spelling, First Steps Reading and Writing and the Early Literacy and Numeracy Officer (ELNO) Program all have modules that allow facilitators to engage in active problem solving based on transfer and managing the change process.

### **Case Study One – Sustaining a Change in Teacher Practice**

One school in the ACT that had received an Early Literacy Officer (ELO) has a very powerful story to share. This school worked hard on aligning practice from K-2 in both reading and writing. Support staff (LA and ESL), were actively involved in the program and at many times were the driving force behind the program. At this school the ESL teacher was instrumental in moving the school forward. Many teachers were happy continuing with a range of ineffective practices and approaches that did not align. The early childhood team met as a professional learning community on a regular basis to explore specific identified areas of need. The ESL teacher with the LA teacher took carriage of these meetings and encouraged reflection and open discussion in these forums. Careful analysis of system data and school based assessment records identified spelling as a need across their school. Data obtained through the ACT Assessment Program / NAPLAN and classroom tools indicated the school hadn't improved student outcomes in this area for several years. One teacher decided it was time to make a difference. She knew she couldn't make a difference on her own and so began an exciting and at times challenging journey.

After careful analysis of data and determining a specific need across the school this teacher first worked closely with the executive staff in the school to ensure everyone was on the same page. Providing executive with a careful analysis of the data over several years, analysis of the range of practices occurring across the school – Jolly Phonics in kindergarten, THRASS in years one and two, and very hit and miss approach to spelling in years three to six allowed an action plan of how they could move forward to be developed. This was an incredibly powerful place to start.

After executive were on board time was set aside to analyse data with the staff and explore how they were currently addressing the needs of their students across the school. All staff were actively involved and had a voice. Through this collaborative approach where the staff were involved in analysing the data and current practice they came to the conclusion themselves that practice wasn't aligned and they needed to work on actively improving student outcomes. There was buy in by the staff. They owned what would be happening.

As there was a range of practice occurring staff decided the first step was to analyse the various approaches happening across the school as well as other alternatives. Each teaching team provided a short presentation to staff about what they were currently doing. Consensus was reached that as a staff they needed to find an approach that provided diagnostic information that could be used to plan an effective and meaningful program that met the diverse needs of their students. Teams then went on a mission to explore what else was available. After careful consideration of what was available agreement was reached to try a new approach to spelling developed by the ACT Department of Education and Training – BEE Spelling.

BEE Spelling is an innovative approach to spelling based on recent research conducted both internationally and nationally. It has built on the historical elements from both the traditional and transitional perspectives of spelling. This approach effectively looks at how we can plan and teach spelling to meet the diverse and specific needs of the children in our classrooms. Through the use of a sound assessment tool (a spelling inventory) we are able to determine the instructional level for each student. This assessment tool forms an integral part of the teaching and learning cycle.

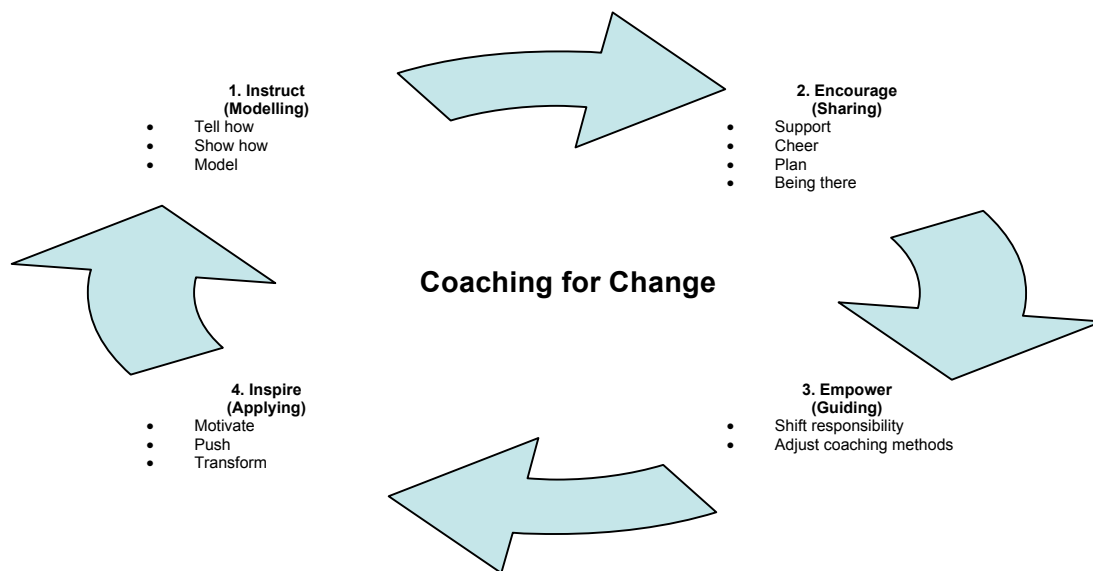
The spelling inventory was used as a diagnostic tool to determine the instructional level for every student in the school. The ESL and LA teacher collated all of the data and mapped where all the students were. From here like groups were formed across the school for explicit and targeted teaching at the point of need for each group. All staff were involved in planning and delivering a program for a specific group of students with identified needs. Students were grouped K-2 and 3-6 based on their need. After recess each day students went to their group and spent fifteen minutes in very focused, targeted and explicit teaching. This looked different for different groups.

ACTAP data for the following year clearly showed there had been an improvement in student outcomes in spelling. This was reflective of the data for the following year also. Unfortunately after the initial two years of improvement classroom teachers decided that they had fixed the problem and no longer needed to have these explicit focused groups. Needless to say the following year results were down again. The school has realised the need to return to explicit focused teaching groups and is working hard to regain the momentum to ensure improved learning outcomes continue for their students.

### **Case Study Two – Building a Cadre to embed change**

Teachers in the Early Literacy and Numeracy Officer Focus Group Program attended eight whole days of professional learning over the school year. The workshop series covered content related to action research, teacher levels of transfer, and coaching and mentoring. The coaching focus embraces the work of Fogarty who suggests a cycle that aligns the coaching process with the

Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson and Gallagher). The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model is more often associated with the explicit teaching of skills and strategies but in this instance the process of releasing control from the teacher (facilitator) to the student (teacher participant) is the focus. The Model moves from modelling to sharing then guiding and applying. Teachers in the Focus Group were shown how to coach teachers, then shared ideas and sought feedback, were guided through the application and ultimately independently coached the teachers they were working with. The merging of the two approaches has been represented in diagram 2 (below).



**Diagram 2: Coaching for Change – Linking the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) with Coaching Strategies.**

To ensure that the coaching and mentoring remained dynamic the Lesson Study Approach was utilised. Lesson Study originated in Japan and is known as *jugyoukenkyu*. This approach provides a coaching focus and also supports the establishment of trusted mentoring relationships between teachers. The collegial process provides a focus for detailed feedback on teacher performance and the modelling of best practice. The lesson study team engages in cycles of planning, observing, reflecting, reviewing and reteaching, each time focussing on a pedagogical and content focus.

The literature describing lesson study defines the process by a set of steps ensuring a systematic approach to professional development. The progression through this approach has 11 steps that must be adhered to.

The lesson study team:

1. identifies a student learning need, using an evidence-based approach
2. defines a pedagogical problem or teaching challenge linked to the student learning needs
3. engages in a cycle of planned professional learning to investigate and share a range of teaching and learning approaches and resources
4. analyses an existing lesson plan or designs a new lesson in detail
5. teaches the lesson following the jointly developed lesson plan
6. observes the lesson based on the pre-determined and agreed observation criteria

7. evaluates the lesson by jointly reflecting on its effect on student learning
8. revises the lesson incorporating the group feedback
9. teaches and observes the revised lesson (or the next lesson in the sequence, revised in light of feedback from the previous lesson)
10. evaluates the revised lesson and observations
11. collectively documents the results and shares with others outside the group.

The power of the Lesson Study approach is that it is built from within rather than bolted on as an adjunct or afterthought. While the initial thrust is from the Literacy and Numeracy Section the program is maintained by the commitment of the teachers involved. This approach acknowledges the prevalence of external support mechanisms that fail to produce internal capacity and motivation. By undertaking this approach teachers have both the skill and the will to enhance their practice.

Teachers when surveyed over the impact of this approach identified 5 themes. They reported that they level of **reflective dialogue** is enhanced and that they are now able to critique themselves in a structured and safe form. **Deprivatisation of practice** occurred with the added bonus of early career teachers developing new relationships with experienced teachers. There was a **collective focus on student learning** and a normative experience where expectations became clear although at times these were challenged. The professional learning team formed in a **collaborative** way or became more collaborative so that the link between learning, assessment and teaching was enhanced. Finally through the development of the professional learning team **shared norms and values** emerged and strengthened the focus of the team.

It was evident that the schools undertaking these journeys as part of the ELNO Focus Group were embarking on long term significant change. It was therefore necessary that they plan their course strategically and with the support of their schools. Workshops addressing how to engage in action research, whether it was traditional action research, appreciative inquiry or most significant change theory, allowed teachers to link their ideas with current literature and systemic trends. While initially hesitant at the prospect for fear it would be another job in an already busy day, the teachers embraced the approach with many engaging in further research cycles at the completion of the program.

### **Case Study Three – Raising the Bar for all**

Embedding system endorsed resources such as First Steps Reading and Writing involves long term strategic planning that addresses both bottom up and top down reform agendas. In the case of one school that realised that their expectations were too low in regards to reading skills and strategies the pressure to change the status quo came from 3 teachers who only realised that they had been working in isolation when they engaged in an action research project. The need to complete a review of current literature and system benchmarks on a local and global scale acted as the impetus for changing teacher practice. The school then recorded their journey and presented it to the other staff members that weren't part of the focus group. The staff members had been involved in the data collection and information gathering process but were not acutely aware of the implications of the data trends. The leadership team at this school concluded that a change in their priorities was needed and channelled extra staffing and resources to target this area.

Teachers have a shared understanding and expectation in regards to implementing this resource. The leadership team ensured all teachers and learning support assistants were aware that the First Steps resource would form a major component of their programs when planning for reading. Similarly student growth was measured using the Map of Development and other assessment tools from the resource. The expectation of embedding this resource was supported on many levels.

As with any commitment to change the teachers and leadership team knew that the change would take time and would need several key commitments to ensure uptake was high. Alignment to staff professional pathways allowed staff to share candidly with the executive the amount and type of support they required. Some teachers felt that they needed to revisit key components of the initial professional development course; others felt they needed to observe a peer implement a specific approach while some indicated that they were ready to implement the approach but would be seeking guidance and feedback from their peers. The leadership team took carriage of this responsibility and ensured that teachers were matched according to their needs and level of identified transfer as espoused by Fogarty and Bellanca (2005).

The school also accessed ongoing support from their First Steps facilitator through mentoring of the action research project and in-class modelling of the endorsed approach. This support is offered to all schools undertaking the PD but it is often not utilised as schools struggle to manage the implementation of multiple resources at any one time. In-class modelling and collaborative planning with the facilitator allowed all teachers to see this quality resource at work. Within four sessions teachers saw an improvement in student results which allowed there to be a change in beliefs and ultimately teacher practice. The school also focused on First Steps in their Professional Learning Team meetings. Teachers were expected to bring student work samples and programs to the meetings. Teachers have been encouraged to share highlights (newly constructed knowledge) and insights (reflective comments) in the PLTs. This structure ensures teachers are working both cognitively and metacognitively with the resource. By considering both domains teachers are able to engage in collegial discussions that are both supportive and challenging. This resulted in a whole school approach to First Steps.

### **Building Bridges to Success**

While the way forward for each school will be different as they travel uncommon paths they will all reach a common goal – improved literacy outcomes for their students. Just as students learn in a variety of ways so do the teachers who passionately teach them, they too continue to learn just not in the same way or on the same day. Building bridges to success requires the provision of relevant, authentic and meaningful experiences that encourage teachers to assume ownership for their own learning. This enables us to build teacher capacity in supportive environments and in turn reap the rewards of improved student outcomes.

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