PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

TITLE

An investigation of programmes and practices in a range of schools that have effectively raised student achievement for students who are under-achieving in reading.

AUTHOR

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SCHOOL

Pyes Pa School, Tauranga.

SABBATICAL TIMEFRAME

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was to:

1. Investigate programmes and practices schools used to raise student achievement in reading
2. Identify if there were any specific programmes or practices that make a greater difference than others
3. Enable us to better meet the needs of students in reading at Pyes Pa School

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

For a number of years, our end of year school-wide reading data has shown approximately 85% of students reading at an appropriate level. The remaining 15% has comprised two groups:

1. A small number of student with high needs reading anywhere from 2-4 years below the appropriate level
2. A group of students reading anywhere from 1-2 years below the appropriate level

We have a variety of specific programmes or support systems in place for the high needs students. These students, because of the nature and severity of their needs, often attract targeted support e.g. ORS, LSF, SLS, RTLB support. The students in the second group generally do not qualify for any of the available support because their needs are not so great or because the resources available are not sufficient to cater for all students. Regardless, they do have needs and we struggle to shift them in their reading. We have a broad range of initiatives in place including normal class programmes, parent reading programmes, buddy reading, Reading Recovery, Toe by Toe, Rainbow Reading, 5 minute box. However, we still struggle to move these students or, if they do move, to see that progress sustained.

Our aspirational goal within the school is to have 100% of students reading at the appropriate level. We understand that with the small group of students with very high needs, that this goal, in some cases, is unrealistic. For the students in the second group, we are less willing to accept failure to have them reading at their level. It is with respect to this second group that this research is targeted.

METHODOLOGY

1. Visits to specific schools.
   I emailed the Waikato and Western Bay of Plenty Principal's Associations and asked if anyone had reading programmes or practices operating in their schools they found particularly effective in raising student achievement in reading. Based on the responses I received, I arranged visits to a number of schools to discuss what they were doing.

2. Discussions with adult reading tutors.
   These were people who have been engaged in parent reading programmes on a regular basis. Some of the tutors were part of structured parent reading programmes. Others were engaged on a more informal basis as parent help in individual classrooms.

3. Related reading.
   References for the majority of reading material considered stemmed from discussions with principals or searches of relevant topics.

4. Consideration and correlation of findings.
   This was carried out to see if there were any obvious trends or commonalities found through the school visits or related reading.

FINDINGS

As a result of the school visits, it became clear that initiatives or programmes identified as being successful in raising student achievement in reading tended to be either formal or informal. Formal programmes were more structured and systematic and tended to be run by people who had received training of some significance. Informal programmes tended to be less structured with fewer guidelines as to what was to be done and tutors were not necessarily trained or training was quite basic.

Formal programmes included:

1. MultiLit
2. The Five Minute Box
3. Rainbow Reading
4. Toe by Toe
5. Reading Recovery
6. Pause, Prompt, Praise
7. S.A.R.R. (Supporting At Risk Readers)
8. Resource Teachers of Literacy
9. General phonics-based learning that did not come under the umbrella of a specific programme

Informal programmes included:

1. Buddy Reading programmes with tutors being:
    a. Students
    b. Parents
    c. Community helpers

IMPLICATIONS

Most schools used a variety of the programmes or initiatives noted above. All of the programmes or initiatives identified were successful in raising student achievement in reading. No single programme or initiative stood out as being more effective than any other. Formal initiatives were not necessarily more effective than informal initiatives.

With respect to formal initiatives, while schools may have been using different programmes or practices, there were obvious commonalities that appeared in many, if not all, initiatives. These included a focus on:

1. Phonemic awareness (letter-sound correlation, word attack skills)
2. Recognition of sight words
3. Reading assistance i.e. listening to children read

With respect to informal initiatives i.e. the various forms of buddy reading, in most cases, reading buddies or reading tutors were not trained to the same or even similar level of those implementing formal programmes. Similarly, the content of buddy reading sessions was in most cases nowhere near as structured and targeted as that in formal reading programmes. It is important to note, however, that in no way did this lack of training or less formal structure of the buddy reading programmes diminish the value and quality of the learning that was taking place. Data clearly indicated that children receiving buddy reading support were making as much progress as those receiving more formal, structured support. As part of her M.Ed thesis on a summer reading intervention, Shanti Tiruchittampalam discussed a range of possible solutions to reading problems. She referenced one study which identified that reading support provided by volunteers could make a significant difference to improving reading outcomes for students with poor reading skills.

The idea that informal buddy reading can be as valuable as formal tuition is not new. Many of our children start school ‘ready to read’. They have been ‘tutored’ by their parents who have, in most cases, had no formal training in the teaching of reading, and certainly not in the specific strategies noted above i.e. phonemic awareness, recognition of sight words. Nonetheless, their children have a high level of readiness when it comes to reading. This confirms that a trained, systematic, structured approach to teaching reading is not the only way to learn to read. The importance of this observation will become clearer later in this report.

Above and beyond the content of the initiatives noted, other significant commonalties were observed that were evident in all initiatives, both formal and informal. All initiatives were characterised by students:

1. working on a 1:1or very small group basis with a teacher/tutor i.e. 1:3 at most
2. being engaged for a set period of time ranging from 15-30 minutes per session
3. meeting with the teacher/tutor regularly, 4-5 sessions per week
4. staying involved in the initiative until the desired target had been realised

I think it is important to note at this point in my report, that I believe the four points listed above are not only commonalities and therefore of interest, but that they also comprise a core recipe for success in helping children learn to read.

(1) Reading practise within the school environment

At Pyes Pa School, we need to continue the various interventions currently running within our school, but somehow strive for greater consistency and regularity with those interventions. Too often, and usually for sound reasons e.g. ensuring equity or lack of resourcing, programmes or interventions may not take place with the frequency or duration we would like. We need to consider how we can implement these interventions with the desired level of frequency and continue them until a satisfactory level of achievement has been reached and sustained.

With respect to formal interventions, it is desirable to see a continued emphasis on structured programmes that focus on phonemic awareness (letter sound correlation, word attack skills), recognition of sight words and structured reading assistance.

As noted earlier, the place and value of informal support i.e. buddy tutoring, should in no way be underrated. This is a key source of reading mileage! As discovered through my reading, it would be desirable to try and make great use of peer buddy readers, given the clear and positive influence they can have on learners. Shanti Tiruchittampalam in her M.Ed thesis referenced one study which identified that in buddy reading initiatives, college students who served as tutors had the greatest effect while paraprofessionals and community volunteers still made a difference but had less of an effect. The study put this difference in effect down to tutor qualifications i.e. the more qualified the tutor – in this case, the college students – the greater the effect.

Based on observation and experience with peer tutoring in primary schools, I consider the 'younger' age of the college tutors may also have had a significant bearing on the effect. Younger children relate well to older school peers providing tutoring. This has been proven through experience in schools with the paired writing programme. I believe that buddy tutoring in reading, something we currently do on a more casual basis, is an avenue well worth exploring more comprehensively. The powerful influence of peers in providing positive role modelling should not be underestimated!

Within the school environment, we need to be doing all within our power to assist children with reading learning. However, providing the desired level of consistency and quality time that struggling children require is a difficult and generally impossible challenge for teachers who are working with large groups of children. The simple reality is that the larger the class, the lower the amount of 1:1 time a teacher can spend with a child. As noted earlier, the children who are the focus of this research generally do not qualify for special education support because their needs are not 'serious' enough, so they miss out on teacher aide and other specialist support. This gives focus and emphasis to my next point, that support from parents who are better placed to provide consistent and quality 1:1 time with children, is essential in the learning of reading.

(2) Reading practice within the family

With respect to informal support, the role that parents/caregivers can have in helping children learn to read needs to be highlighted and should not be underestimated in terms of importance.

Kerri Friar, Resource Teacher at Gate Pa School in Tauranga, in her literacy education research paper references a number of studies that highlight the place, value and importance of parents in helping children learn to read and the bearing this has on later educational success. Specifically, Friar references an international study that shows fifteen year old students whose parents often read to them in early years, outperformed fellow students whose parents read to them rarely or not at all.

Unfortunately, there is a barrier that needs to be addressed as part of ensuring consistent parental support happens. In the past, educators have been charged with subscribing to the 'deficit thinking' theory. Deficit thinking blames the child or the child's family and/or environment for failure to learn and achieve. Advocates of this model argue strongly that the focus should be on what schools can and should be doing to raise student achievement, rather than deficit thinking i.e. blaming the family.

I would not dispute that deficit thinking was, and still is, an issue in some schools. All those involved in education – Boards of Trustees, school leadership and teachers – need to be vigilant in striving to ensure that deficit thinking does not get in the way of ensuring that educators do the absolute best for children in their care. This is our moral, ethical and professional responsibility! However, I believe there has been a dangerous and negative spinoff of the deficit thinking model. My belief is that the pendulum has swung too far. An unfortunate trend has arisen in recent years to hold schools and teachers *solely* responsible for whether a child achieves or not. Without a doubt, schools and teachers have a huge part to play in this scenario. But I believe that the role and responsibility of parents/caregivers in fostering and supporting student learning and achievement, particularly in learning to read, has been downplayed to the point where it has become a significant barrier to some children learning and achieving.

Schools must *not* be seen to be solely responsible for teaching the child to read! The place and value of parents must not be underestimated or undervalued. As noted above, on a simple practical level, parents are far better placed to provide 1:1 support for their child than the class teacher who may be working daily with anywhere from twenty to thirty plus children.

I am not pointing the finger and saying these children are failing because of lack of parental input. What I am saying is the school *and* family must be involved together in ensuring the learning takes place. There is a well known proverb that says, "it takes a whole village to raise a child." I am convinced that in education in general, and specifically with regard to assisting children to learn to read, there is a clear need for the 'whole village' to be engaged. Within the school environment, we need to do all we can to support and assist children in learning to read. Equally, parents/caregivers need to be actively engaged and involved in reading to and with their children. There also needs to be clear liaison and communication between school and family to ensure the learning is powerful, positive and as effective as possible. Teachers and parents should not be working separately; rather, it should be a team approach, the "village" in action.

As a school, we need to look at ways we can better engage families of children struggling with reading. In doing so, we need to beware of making assumptions these parents are confident in helping their children read. Kerri Friar, referenced a reading project in Pennsylvania that provided practical support to assist parents with helping their children to read. Friar commented on the relevance of this support given her belief that teachers can be prone to assuming parents know how to read and read with, and to children, when this might not be the case.

The benefits that can be gained from schools supporting parents in reading with their children are clearly evidenced in New Zealand in the use of *The Reading Together Programme* as promoted by the Ministry of Education. The programme was developed by Jeanne Biddulph in 1982 at the University of Canterbury. The focus of the programme is to help parents to support their children with their reading in the home environment.

(3) Holiday slide in reading

One of the key challenges teachers face at the start of every school year is that, in many cases, children's reading levels will have dropped from between six months to a year from where they were, at the end of the previous year. This slide in reading is also evident, though to a lesser extent, following breaks during the school year. The reason for the slide is the lower profile that reading tends to have in the school break. During most school weeks, reading is a focus in the class programme for at least four out of five days and is part of most home learning activity for a similar number of days. During the break, this focus and intensity is not there. This is confirmation, again, that consistency of practice is crucial to children not only learning, but also retaining what they have learned.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, references research carried out by Johns Hopkins University sociologist Karl Alexander. As part of his research, Alexander focused on reading scores for low, middle and high socio-economic groupings for 650 students. Over a period of five years of schooling, Alexander tracked the progress of students. At the start of their first year, the difference between low and high students was 32 points on the scale used, with more affluent students scoring higher. Four years later, the gap between low and high had more than doubled, with a difference of 73.

Gladwell notes that at face value, this would seem to confirm beliefs that disadvantaged students don't have the same ability to learn as much as privileged students and/or that schools are failing poorer children. Deeper investigation of data by Alexander showed otherwise. Alexander's analysis showed that during the course of each school year, progress by poorer students matched or exceeded wealthier students. Further, based on data, the difference in achievement was determined by what happened *during* the summer break not the school year. Averaging out progress during summer breaks over the five years, reading scores of poorer students only rose by 0.26 points whereas reading scores for better off students rose by 52 points. Gladwell notes that this evidence indicates that poorer students learn little when school is out whereas richer students learn significantly more. Richer students, it appears, have greater encouragement, opportunities and resources available to them.

The summer slide in reading in New Zealand is a major, regular hiccup in reading progress for many children. Addressing this issue is a matter for both school and parents. Though the break is not 'school time', I consider that schools and teachers can be engaged in challenging, encouraging and motivating children to maintain levels of engagement in reading. Ensuring this happens, however, is primarily the domain of parents. Parents need to be actively prioritising reading during break times; it should not be perceived as something that only happens during the school term. This prioritising is even more important for children who are struggling with their reading. Addressing the holiday slide in reading is a prime case in point of the value and importance of the whole village being engaged in "raising the child." Schools have a role to play in supporting parents; parents need to commit to supporting their children with reading.

CONCLUSIONS

My focus in this research was to see how we could improve what we were doing within our school in relation to raising student achievement in reading. My research, while not being extensive, has identified a number of clear indicators for success consistent for all schools visited. In education circles, it is often stated to the point of becoming a cliché that children learn to read by reading. My research, informal as it is, supports this notion: any skills to be learning are best learned though regular and consistent practise, in and out of school. Consistent, quality reading mileage is paramount!

With respect to teaching within our school, it has highlighted a number of areas that can be reviewed with respect to greater effectiveness of current reading practice and other areas that could possibly be developed to enhance reading practice. My findings have also highlighted the need to look further afield than simply what we are doing within the school doors. If regular, consistent practice and quality reading mileage are the keys to reading success, then *all* key participants in the child's life need to be actively involved in the process. This includes all members of the school community (Board of Trustees, school leadership, class teachers and support staff) *and* the child's family.

With respect to helping our children learn to read, we need to be continually asking ourselves what we can do better or differently. Self evaluation is essential! If this drives us toward being better and doing the best by our children, then that is great. It is not great if such self evaluation is predicated by the notion that it is up to us, the school, to be solely responsible for the learning of the children. *All* parts of the 'village' need to be fully committed, engaged and involved in the process! We need to do the best we can as part of the village. We also need to encourage all other members of the village to be engaged in the process of helping our children learn.

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