In January 2008, I attended the Literacy and Numeracy Summer School (AGSS) in Wollongong, NSW. This experience both required and inspired me to explore and enhance my professional practice through the process of Action Research. It saw me refine my skills and abilities in teaching many aspects of literacy and numeracy, but through the workshops I participated in I enjoyed a special focus on how to teach reading. I was also enabled in my ability to work productively with my peers to enhance their understandings and inspire them to further their own learning in this area.

Why Reading?
As a teacher I struggled with the teaching of reading. I was an avid reader myself, kept up with current technologies and practices, remained informed of curriculum changes and could explain the aspects of an effective reading program within the classroom. However, despite my best efforts students were not reaching the benchmarks expected of them. This was not just in my classroom; it was school-wide and was causing concern amongst the staff. Many were concerned that this lack of reading ability would create greater problems for the students than just being unable to read. Likely problems were;

- Implications for success at school, occupational opportunities, socially and for satisfaction across most of life’s endeavours
- This includes comprehension as well as decoding
- Childhood depression, acting out and long term stress (Faulkner & Konza, 2007)

While reviewing the study modules at AGSS I came across The Four Resources Model (once called Luke and Freebody’s Four Roles of a Reader) describing the four resources students need to access to be literate: code breaking resources, text participating resources, text using resources and text analysing resources. I further investigated this concept and realised that this could be effective in my classroom to support literacy. This was a very different approach to reading from what I had used in the past and incorporated the use of old strategies as well as some new. New strategies incorporated into the program included:

- The need to keep accurate records of student progress to motivate students to keep working. This information also informed my classroom practice and pedagogy and allowed me to properly scaffold student learning.
- The benefit of exploiting students’ interests when designing the reading program. High interest material encouraged their reading and provided connectedness.
- The use of a student interest inventory to establish student interest areas.

The reading, Instruction and Development of Reading Fluency in Struggling Readers (Pressley, Gaskins & Fingeret, 2006) also influenced me by demonstrating that fluency is not just reading clearly at an age appropriate pace with good expression. I learnt that fluency is reading accurately, expressively, and with a good level of understanding. This reading indicated that a child’s fluency can influence their comprehension of a text. For example a child with a high level of fluency is able to slow down and interpret troublesome texts to suit their needs, but a child with poor fluency cannot. Likewise, poor comprehension levels can influence levels of fluency so the two are intertwined entities and should be targeted simultaneously.

I concluded from this text that I should combine multiple methods to teach fluency because not
every method would suit every child. I proceeded to incorporate these techniques into my literacy block as part of my Code-Breaker strategies to assist my students in becoming more fluent in their reading. Such methods included:

- Systematic Decoding Instruction,
- Frequent Student Oral Reading, and
- Developing Sight Words.

The course notes provided during my literacy modules also provided me with specific detail on how to implement different reading strategies (Guided Reading, Reciprocal Reading) in the classroom. I was able to combine information about fluency with these reading strategies to create a reading program that would allow my students to 'learn' the skills of reading rather than to absorb them through chance. My previous experiences in the classroom had shown me that immersion works on few occasions so this information was valuable to me.

I continued to explore Luke and Freebody’s Four Resources Model after AGSS by reading a number of journal and online articles. One journal article, A Map of Possible Practices: further notes of the four resources mode, (Luke & Freebody) further explained the Four Resource Model and described it as a map of possible practices, or, a family of practices. After reading this article I realised that I wasn’t necessarily using the wrong techniques in my classroom but was teaching an incomplete repertoire of skills and practices. I realised that my current practices were working but I needed to focus on additional practices in order to improve the literacy skills in my classroom. From this realisation I did an analysis of what I was teaching and complemented what I was already doing with extra activities that would provide the skills necessary to perform the four roles of a reader. This then became the project that was implemented in my classroom.

The Project

The action research project was devoted to determining the effectiveness of incorporating the Four Resource Model into the literacy block to improve reading and comprehension abilities in all year levels from prep to seven. I decided to deal with all aspects of reading using the Four Resource Model because they are integrated roles and should be addressed together rather than individually. Additionally reading is not just deciphering the scratches on a piece of paper, it is the understanding, the using of information and the application of knowledge.

Professionally this meant that I had to re-evaluate the way I taught literacy, considering my teaching methods, the resources I used and the activities I utilised to consolidate student learning. I had to re-examine what it was I knew about my students and how they best learn. Finally I had to combine all these aspects into a workable program that was suitable for our particular school environment. This project was also a considerable adjustment in thinking for the other teachers working to implement these new practices; however we all found it to be a beneficial process.

The Context

This project was undertaken at Kentville State School, a small three-teacher school located in a rural residential area of South-East Queensland. The school itself was located approx 50 minutes from Ipswich and 40 minutes from Toowoomba. The Literacy block had been in place at Kentville for three years; however, it was focusing on reading skills only, leaving other literacy skills to be taught in the student’s regular class.

Of the student population:

- 10% of students were in foster care
- 5% of students were Ascertained/Eaped
- mix of socioeconomic backgrounds
- approx. 5% of students were indigenous
- more girls than boys in the school

In addition to this the staff observed that underachievers were disengaging with the literacy curriculum and achievers were getting bored in literacy block waiting for the other students to catch up.

After analysing our student testing we found that the 2007 3/5/7 tests showed underachievement in comprehension and the 2007 school based tests showed underachievement in reading and comprehension.
Stage One

Stage one was implemented during the entirety of term one, 2008 and commenced with the development of a thumbnail picture of each student which contributed to the baseline data of the project. This was developed by administering standardised tests, running records, and a Reading Interest Inventory to ascertain the student’s reading interests. Students were also observed informally to ascertain their interest in reading. This data was recorded and combined to present a sketch of the capabilities and interests of each student. Historically, standardised testing was the sole form of data gathering utilised, however, I modified the school’s accepted testing regime to present the results in conjunction with the Reading Interest Inventory. This new practice provided a more complete picture of the students’ interests, skills, strengths and weaknesses together as one whole being rather than many small individual beings working side by side.

As part of this initial stage, tasks and activities were developed that would introduce and focus on each role of a reader individually. Posters were put up in classrooms and students were given the correct terminology in a staggered approach to learning the roles. This applied to all year levels from prep to seven. We wanted all staff and students to communicate with the same language and therefore the same understandings. This proved to be difficult but not impossible as first we as a staff got these understandings to a point of clarity and confidence when discussing concepts openly with each other. This was new information for all involved, so it was extremely important to ensure that the staff had a shared understanding of all aspects of the language concerned.

Stage Two

Following stage one an observation/assessment was completed to ascertain how well the students understood the roles of a reader. Staff also frequently reflected on classroom practices and consulted each other to ensure that individual classroom practices were accurate. It was at this time that minor changes were implemented in the early years’ classroom to ensure that students were being exposed to all of the Roles of a Reader. A whole school approach was desired to promote continuity within the school as students progressed in their learning. Thus reflection and consultation promoted this approach.

Once students were familiar with the Four Resources, lessons and activities were created that would mirror the multiple roles of a reader as they were utilised simultaneously. This allowed students to experience real world activities, not just one off tasks involving isolated skills. The activities developed also used the previously mentioned metalanguage, ensuring that students were
immersed in the same language from the initial stages of the project. Activities ranged from the simple decoding of texts, to the application of textual understanding, to achieve a realistic goal. Such activities presented to students involved

- analysing and creating cookbooks
- preparing and presenting recorded news reports
- reading and sharing groups
- editing and presenting of fairytales
- preparation of food items and paper crafts.

Although these were higher order activities they were achieved through the explicit teaching and scaffolding of the skills necessary to achieve the task. Students participated in preparation tasks that allowed students to complete the overall goal to be achieved.

It was when I realised that the students wanted to participate in stimulating and life-like tasks. I realised that although I was teaching the children were not always listening, and if they were listening the tasks had to be high interest, hands on and within their range of interests to keep their attention and focus. I became more aware of what it was the students wanted and this is when they became more involved and showed an increased interest in the activities presented.

Term 3 was a huge turnaround in the progress of my students where I was able to see a complete unit of work in my middle primary literacy block. After completing a unit studying recipes and cooking my students were excited about learning and were showing a definite improvement in the amount of work achieved. They were connecting with the topic, working toward all four roles of a reader and were able to produce their own cookbooks at the end of the term as evidence of what they had achieved.

I found that once I focused the learning around a topic that would interest my students they became better learners. They took more control of their learning because they knew I was listening to their needs and wants, but they also became more engaged in the activities because it was what they wanted to do. My students want to be heard, and they want to acknowledged, and when that happens they feel empowered in their learning and start to become more involved.

Results

Through the process of action learning, I was able to work in conjunction with the other staff in the school to continuously re-evaluate the project to determine what was and was not working and how to improve it.

Student results saw an overall improvement in the results for the areas tested although individual student results varied. Student attitudes toward reading, writing and comprehension also improved with student involvement within the literacy block showing the greatest improvement.

Professionally I was also able to improve my own skills and abilities extensively allowing me to feel more confident in my abilities as a teacher. I saw success from the students which have removed feelings of inability in teaching this area of the curriculum.

Reflection

This project was an excellent way to improve not only my own abilities, but the abilities of other staff in the school because we were working collaboratively as a team. I learnt a great deal about my students and about how to teach them, and would recommend this way of learning to any practising teacher.

References


Kirsty Cochrane is currently the Early Childhood Intervention Advisory Teacher based in Katherine, NT. Prior to this she taught for 6 years in Queensland in a variety of capacities. Most recently she taught at Kentville State School in a 3/4/5 composite class.