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Improving reading comprehension: What works for 10 to 12 year old students?

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Background

Children who read well in the early years of schooling do not automatically continue to develop sound comprehension skills (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Comprehension must be taught explicitly at all school levels and the expertise of the teacher is critical (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2006; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). For this to happen teachers need ongoing professional development in the teaching of reading comprehension and schools need to measure outcomes of students at every stage of the student's learning (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

 It has been shown that when students reach the middle years of schooling reading progress drops off, thus adding to the complexity of improving reading comprehension (Brozo, 2005; Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Hattie, 2007; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Furthermore, there has been a growing concern at the lack of time spent teaching reading once students move into their middle years of schooling. This is exacerbated by teachers not providing opportunities for the explicit teaching of reading comprehension and by not using a diverse text types to engage students (Brozo, 2005; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, & Lei, 2007; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Research Questions

This article draws upon five case studies representing a range of New Zealand schools demonstrating exemplary practice in the improvement of reading achievement of young adolescent students. The study explored the types of explicit teaching strategies the teachers were using and investigated the literacy leadership facilitated within the schools which together were bringing about improved student outcomes in reading. The underlying aim of this investigation was to inform teachers and teacher educators of strategies that make a difference in raising reading comprehension and achievement for 10 to 12 year old students.

Methods

Case study was used to explore the interweaving and complex aspects and conditions involved in improving reading comprehension. Five case study schools identified by literacy stakeholders as having regular, sustained and effective reading programmes by the research project's advisory committee were selected. This was further confirmed by the most recent Education Review Office (analogous to inspectorate) reviews of the schools which gave positive reports on the teaching of reading. Also, each school provided documentary evidence of reading achievement for their students in Years 7 and 8 using standardised test results which showed overall improvement in reading or positive achievement in comparison to school populations of similar school types. The principals and literacy leaders were interviewed using a semi structured interview schedule. Nine exemplary teachers of reading in years 7 to 8 were selected by the principals to be involved in the study.

Each teacher was interviewed and observed teaching instructional reading by researchers. In addition, each of the nine teachers selected two to three students representative of a range of reading levels and gender. The students from each class were interviewed together.

Open coding was used initially as the transcriptions were read and analysed for emerging themes (Strauss, 1987). Second order analysis of interview transcripts used axial coding to look for linkages between concepts or themes that cluster to identify a denser web of support (Neuman, 2003) and examined patterns of similarities and differences across the case studies. In the third stage of

analysis selective coding scanned the data and prior codes to begin to organise overall analysis around several core ideas (Neuman, 2003).

Frame

Repeated interactions where the intended meaning of the text is debated and interpreted can improve comprehension (Paris, 2009). Socio-cultural learning theory, as in the work of Vygotsky (1978), aligns with this idea of learners working together. Therefore teachers need to provide opportunities for students to reach their "level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p86)". Implicit within this is that learners together construct, discuss and debate their differing understandings of text.

As students comprehend text they build a mental representation "at multiple levels across units of language: word level (lexical processes), sentence level (syntactic processes), and text level (Perfectti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2007, p228)". These different levels interact with the reader's conceptual knowledge creating a mental representation of the text. Readers with good comprehension monitor comprehension whilst they read, make inferences which support the necessary coherence, have a sensitivity to story structure (Perfectti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2007) and have a range of strategies to deal with comprehension failures, such as re-reading, adjusting reading speed, using background knowledge and have an awareness of whether they have comprehended text or not (Van Keer, 2004).

Research findings

The literacy professional development in each of the schools led to professional collaborations with regular whole school and team meetings where students' standardised test results were analysed to identify areas for explicit teaching in reading and reading comprehension. A common finding across all schools was that students were often able to decode but many lacked skills in comprehension. To counter this, the students had regular reading group instruction that involved explicit teaching. The teachers' pedagogical knowledge and learning was supported by professional conversations with their teaching colleagues about what works in improving comprehension in their specific school environment, research readings and the long term literacy professional development within their schools. A range of teaching strategies were used to build vocabulary knowledge, develop a desire for students to comprehend a range of texts, question the necessary coherence of the texts to gain inferences and build supports to develop a sensitivity to story structure. Other significant strategies imperative for teachers to implement for the improvement of reading comprehension are discussed in this article. We suggest that these findings are relevant to reflective classroom practitioners, teacher educators and educational leaders who are exploring strategies to improve reading comprehension.