

Reducing reading failure in adolescence: Implementing direct instruction in a high school context

Jessica Colleau Terradas provides a report from a school that has implemented an 'Intensive Learning Team' strategy to rise to the challenge of meeting the literacy needs of adolescents who have difficulty accessing the high school curriculum.

I teach at Como Secondary College in Perth, where a disturbing proportion of students entering the high school have difficulty reading. This reflects nation-wide trends with respect to Australia's declining literacy standards: In Australia in 2016 it was reported that one in seven 15 year-olds failed to meet OECD basic reading standards (Thompson et al., 2016). Adolescent literacy remains a critical problem and a major contributor to low achievement in high school. High school students who cannot access the curriculum adequately due to literacy difficulties are at a major disadvantage in terms of employment prospects (Lamb et al., 2015). Literacy difficulties are often associated with oral language weaknesses (McLeod & McKinnon, 2007), and there are clear flow-on effects related to students' self-advocacy, coping mechanisms and self-esteem (Snow & Powell, 2005; 2008).

In response to this problem, Como started screening incoming Year 8

students in 2009, and since 2015 the screening has moved to Year 7. It is important to intervene as early as we can, rather than using a 'wait-to-fail' strategy (Gaab & Ozernov-Paalchil, 2016). We use Progressive Achievement Test (PAT) scores to ascertain levels of achievement, and it has been found that about 15% lack the basic literacy and numeracy skills to access the secondary curriculum. For students identified as needing support, additional diagnostic tests are administered to determine the nature and extent of each student's learning difficulty.

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The school has developed an Intensive Learning Team (ILT) consisting of two specialist teachers and a special need education assistant. The ILT runs an intensive, highly structured, evidence-based literacy intervention program that targets the points of educational need for each student. We have turned to strategies that have been supported in the research literature, involving direct and explicit instruction (Stockard et al. 2018; Liem & Martin, 2013). We use scripted Direct Instruction methods, such as Corrective Reading (Engelmann et al., 2007) and Spelling Mastery (Dixon et al., 2007). We also use unscripted Explicit Direct Instruction teaching methods (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Hollingworth & Ybarra, 2018) that incorporate principles of effective instruction that have been shown to be highly effective in large scale evaluations such as Project Follow Through (Meyer, 1984).

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concerning the design, organization, and delivery of instruction. A key element of the program is to have students experience immediate and ongoing success, by minimising misconceptions and the chance of failure. Based on the 'I do, we do, you do' gradual release model, the teacher first demonstrates and practises with the students until they master the concept or skill being learned. The goal is to have students able to work independently. The teacher needs to break the learning into sub-tasks to reduce cognitive load and set tasks that are '*not too hard, not too easy, just right*' – the Goldilocks zone. Tasks must be at the right level of difficulty for students to be challenged while also experiencing success. This approach also demands a high level of student engagement so students cannot avoid work and cannot fly under the radar. A systematic, fast-paced, and explicit model of instruction, implemented with fidelity, is critical to accelerate struggling students in secondary school.

Our approach to errors made by students as they learn is based on Dehaene's (2020) approach. In Dehaene's (2020) model, errors are a fundamental part of the process of learning new skills, and when quick feedback is given, errors are generative of change. As Dehaene suggests: "The quality and accuracy of the feedback we receive determines how quickly we learn" (p.200). Our teaching approach at Como therefore involves quick error correction. Students must, of course, feel that it is safe to take a risk and



make a mistake; Dehaene's point is that "neutral, informative feedback about errors should not be confused with punishment" (p. 207).

Automaticity is very important in the reading process, and we also take into account Dehaene's (2020) focus on repetition to aid learning. Repetition has positive impacts on our brain: it automates our mental operations until they become unconscious (Dehaene, 2020). During lessons, students receive the multiple exposures they need to build accuracy and automaticity in reading words. Faultless communication is used to minimise confusion. The consistency of wording helps students focus on the content to be learned and allows the teachers to use very effective, well-designed and precise language, with the support of the script. We are careful that when the teacher shows students a set of items that includes examples and non-examples arranged so that similarities and differences are readily apparent, there is no more than one interpretation possible.

At Como, students are typically removed from their usual English class for small group instruction (up to 15 per class), in which they participate until they can learn alongside their peers. The students do the reading components during their normal English periods while the spelling/writing program is usually done during Science or Social Studies periods. We cannot make this compulsory, but many parents choose this option for their children. We have found that, rather than being disadvantaged when they return to their regular Science and Social Studies classes, students perform better because of their improved literacy.

Our evaluation of our intervention is generally formative rather than relying on high-stakes testing. As such, the following comments about student progress are based on our informal testing rather than standardised test results such as NAPLAN. Progress of students working with the Intensive Learning Team is constantly and systematically monitored. Ongoing curriculum-based assessments and repeated low-stakes testing helps students determine whether they have understood or not, and if not, to realise what those gaps in their learning are. The minimum aim is to make one year of academic progress for one year of teaching in the program. This is considerably better than the progress students have made in primary school. We have noticed, however, that many students do much better than this and

can make several years progress in just one year. The students have consistently demonstrated a fluency rate 1.5 to 2 times faster than when they first started the reading intervention. In spelling, progress as measured by the *South Australian Spelling Test* was an average of two years growth in one year of instructional input. Teachers consistently report that students graduate from the ILT program better able to cope with the literacy demands of mainstream classes. It is most satisfying to see the positive effect on the lives of students, who might otherwise have disengaged and dropped out, never having received the opportunity to explore their full learning potential.

After years of failure, motivation is a particular concern with struggling older readers. The Intensive Learning Team takes care to give students an early positive experience to reduce anxiety, and we ensure that students are conscious of their own improvement.

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Effort, concentration and progress is recognised and commented on with positive specific reinforcement such as "*You participated very actively today. Good effort*". We take care not to overwhelm students, and practice activities are timed and short, with every bit of new information presented in manageable chunks.

The work of the Intensive Learning team has had ripple effects beyond our particular students. In parallel with the development of the ILT, the school as a whole has been implementing a model of Explicit Instruction based on Rosenshine's work (2012). This would help with the transition of ILT graduates into mainstream classes. This year, Como has joined the three-year Fogarty EDvance School Improvement program, to accelerate the implementation of Explicit Instruction across the school in order to improve student outcomes. The EDvance program is an initiative of the Fogarty Foundation, which focuses on building the capacity of school leadership teams to make informed evidence-based decisions and to plan strategically, improve educational outcomes in challenging communities across Western Australia ([https://](https://fogartyedvance.org.au)

fogartyedvance.org.au). Furthermore, the Como initiative has since attracted considerable interest from schools across WA and interstate with teachers wanting to see the program in action. The ILT has developed a reputation for meeting the educational needs of students with learning difficulties. Many schools use Como's ILT as a model for implementing their own evidence-based literacy intervention.

Effective remedial program design is complex, and the level of training required is extensive. Current teacher training does not always expose teachers to the science of reading (Buckingham & Meek 2019), and professional development in the area is important. Como Secondary College's initiative, however, has in our opinion shown that, when done properly, a successful intervention program can improve employment prospects, and for some students, divert low-achieving adolescents from the 'school-to-prison pipeline' (Snow & Powell, 2011).

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Book review

Reading Success in the Primary Years

Reviewed by **James Chapman**, Professor of Educational Psychology, Massey University, New Zealand.

Reading Success in the Primary Years: An Evidence-Based Interdisciplinary Approach to Guide Assessment and Intervention, by Marleen F. Westerveld, Rebecca M. Armstrong and Georgina M. Barton. Springer Open Access, 2020.

Open Access available at: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-15-3492-8>

Most teachers of reading in the junior primary school work hard to continually improve their teaching in a desire to achieve better literacy learning outcomes for their students. Many teachers are frustrated with not knowing what to do better, especially for those students who struggle with learning to read. These teachers are aware that Australian children should be doing better in reading and literacy in general, but they feel they don't have the necessary tools to make a significant difference for their students. The research reported in this book should be of interest to all teachers who want to improve the literacy outcomes of their students. The authors have

undertaken challenging research in real Australian classrooms. Working with teachers, speech pathologists, school leadership teams and students, they describe and present results from a carefully designed research project that spanned two school years. Using a mixture of methods involving statistical analyses of results as well as in-depth interviews, the authors present findings that are important and relevant for teachers of reading and literacy in Years 1 to 4. Teachers who are motivated to do a better job for their students will find compelling approaches that can be adapted in their own classrooms. The authors provide excellent examples of up-to-date research and how this can be translated into practice. I recommend this useful book to all teachers of junior primary school students.