

**Dreams to reality: Closing the reading achievement gap with a focus on fluency**

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# DREAMS TO REALITY:

## Closing the Reading Achievement Gap with a Focus on Fluency

Willemina Mostert & Kathryn Glasswell

**A**s teachers we dream of classes filled with actively engaged fluent and thinking readers who are both capable and competent in 'reading to learn'. The reality we encounter each day however is often quite different. Many of our classrooms are filled with a range of readers, and some need extensive support to succeed. In this article, we discuss how when we work with readers in targeted ways, we can close the gap between our dream and the reality.

For the past three years [2009–2011], our team of Griffith University researchers has been engaged in a literacy innovation partnership project working with two clusters of schools in a culturally diverse, low socio-economic area south of Brisbane. The project is a research and design collaboration funded in part by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. In 2011 we worked with 133 classroom teachers and 3149 students in 12 schools. Our goal was to close the achievement gap by helping teachers develop extensive knowledge about reading so that they might design best-fit literacy instruction for each and every reader in their care.

### Recognising challenges and developing solutions

Student data from NAPLAN provided a collective picture of readers in project schools that was challenging. The partner schools in this project were identified as among the lowest in the area in terms of NAPLAN reading scores. Student performance on the project assessment (TORCH: Test of Reading Comprehension) indicated that large numbers of students were achieving at levels close to 3 to 4 years behind where we might expect. In addition, on examination of the test papers, many students appeared to have had trouble reading the test all the way through. Teachers expressed empathy for students because of this. Indeed, many teachers resisted the idea of testing because they felt that it was unfair to expect students who were struggling with reading to read extended texts (300–400 words) with difficult words and concepts and with no pictures to provide visual support. As we began our work, confidence was low for students and for teachers.

### First things first: We all need to understand what's going on

*'Our kids won't read, don't read, can't read.'*

Integral to our research and design process, was collaborative inquiry around student data and classroom instruction. As teachers, principals and researchers talked together about student assessments for reading comprehension and teachers' experiences with students, a more detailed profile of students as readers began to emerge. Teachers reported that the majority of students in their classes had little or no interest in reading books, or even in listening to stories read aloud in class. Their efforts to have students read aloud in upper grade levels were met with resistance and often disruptive behaviour. Put simply, teachers reported that students would not, did not and could not read. In Year 7 and Year 8, teachers reported it was only the 'rare' child who would read enthusiastically and only a few who would borrow books from the school library for home reading. Some teachers complained that the school library collections were out of date and shabby. They said that it was easy to understand students' lack of motivation. The Partnership clearly needed to address these challenges if there was to be any improvement in students' reading performance.

### Fluency: The missing link

We believe that accelerated growth in reading requires a balanced approach to print processing and thinking in meaningful contexts. In the project schools, we quickly became aware that many students had issues processing print quickly and accurately. What's more, they had trouble mustering up the motivation to want to read, keep at it, and succeed.

In designing solutions to the challenges our readers presented, we drew on the significant existing body of research on fluency as a key component of skilled reading (e.g. Allington, 1983; LaBerge & Samuels 1974; Rasinski, 2010, 2006, Samuels 2006). Research on fluency suggests that readers who process words in a text effortlessly have more mental energy for thinking about the meaning of those words in context (Samuels, 2006). The message in our schools was explicit: the meaning

connection in reading is made when words are read accurately and effortlessly and when meaningful phrases or chunks of language are read expressively.

In our conversations around student data and instruction, teachers said that they wanted to know more about fluency, (i.e. what it was, why it was important and what explicit fluency instruction in the classroom actually looked like). Many felt that their initial teacher training had not prepared them to teach this aspect of skilled reading and others reported that they had thought that kind of teaching was now out of date.

### **Digging deeper into fluency**

To enhance teacher capacity for effective fluency instruction, professional learning was shaped around developing teacher knowledge and skill in the following aspects.

**Accuracy:** *Readers need to be effortless and accurate word-readers*

LaBerge & Samuels (1974) suggested that 'automaticity', (recognising words automatically without need for decoding) frees up a readers' cognitive space to consider meaning making. The reverse is also true. If readers struggle with decoding tasks not just at word, but further at sentence, paragraph and text levels (Logan, 1997 cited in Therrien, 2004) then comprehension levels remain low. As Rasinski (2010) points out, when a reader spends too much time and energy decoding words, it can be exhausting and can derail the reading process.

**Speed:** *Fluent readers read at a rate that is conducive to thinking.*

Skilled readers read words quickly and effortlessly. They have a large bank of known words in long-term memory so they don't have to concentrate on decoding and can focus on what the text means instead of laboriously figuring out each word. All this said, faster reading is not always better reading. Speed in reading holds to the Goldilocks' 'just right' principle. Readers should read at a rate that allows meaning to develop easily. Too fast and students may just be saying the words without meaning. Too slow and decoding struggles can cause an impediment to thinking.

**Prosody:** *Fluent readers read with phrasing and expression. Even in their heads, their rendition of the text is similar to authentic spoken language.*

Key to the idea of prosody is the concept of expression: Readers use their voices to support and extend the meaning of texts. Reading with expression requires active comprehension to take place so that the text can be read meaningfully. For example, a skilled reader may get louder or softer to create atmosphere in a text, read more quickly

or slowly to indicate the speed of action in a story or vary the pitch of her voice to represent different characters in a story or to indicate surprise or anger in a dialogue. All these add meaning to the reading. An important aspect of being an expressive reader is knowing when and how to vary the voice for best effect (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

Prosody also includes a consideration of phrasing. Skilled readers read language in natural chunks of meaning. As readers become more skilled they learn to read words that go together just as easily as if they were reading them individually (Rasinski 2010). For example, the phrases 'Once upon a time' or 'Good evening ladies and gentlemen' are read as single units of meaning. Readers who are fluent recognise these word groupings, processing and expressing them smoothly.

### **Powerful practices for enhancing fluency**

Mindful of our pressing need to engage and motivate the students, we chose to focus on instructional variations of repeated oral reading (see Table 1) because research supports its effectiveness. Through reading texts repeatedly, readers can develop skills in automatic word recognition, and develop a speed of processing for words that is conducive to thinking. Moreover, we knew that having students engage thoughtfully in reading texts for real purposes would be new kind of fun!

As well as introducing the powerful fluency practices, our professional learning workshops focused on the need for teachers to TEACH fluency through a combination of explicit teaching, modeling and supported practice. Rasinski (2010) suggests four key ways to build reading fluency:

- 1. Model good oral reading:** Read aloud to allow students so they witness fluent and expressive reading. **YOU ARE THEIR BEST MODEL!**
- 2. Provide oral support and assistance:** Provide support for students as they read alongside you. Use choral reading, paired reading and tape-assisted reading to provide scaffolds for developing fluency.
- 3. Offer plenty of opportunities for practice:** Practice is required to gain proficiency. Readers need to read wide and deep, orally and silently and most importantly- often.
- 4. Encourage fluency through phrasing:** Use 'think alouds' as you read and chunk a text into meaningful phrases. Emphasise the changes in meaning that occur when words are read in different patterns.

### **Fast forward to December 2011**

Project schools using these fluency practices soon reported great improvements in student

## FLUENCY: Four Powerful Practices for Diverse Readers

Practice	What is it?	The Research base	Differentiating Instruction and Motivating Readers
<b>Tape-assisted Reading</b>	Readers gain exposure to recorded models of expert reading while reading themselves. Because the reading is supported by an expert model through repeated exposure, the texts used can be challenging. Using the recording flexibly in a combination of listening and following along, reading with the tape (choral), re-reading for practice allows students to make gains in confidence, accuracy and expression	Repeated readings are highly researched and report huge impact (Samuels, 2006) Repeated readings builds sight word vocabulary (automatic word recognition – AWR) Repeated readings provides an authentic way to increase a reader's exposure to words (We learn to read by reading!) Increased reader self-confidence (Kuhn & Stahl 2003)	Any level of text may be recorded for use with any level of reader. Success in challenging texts is supported. Small groups, pairs or individuals can be kept on task using prompt cards to remind them when to listen and when to read along. Learning objectives and performance criteria make learning clear and allow for reader self assessment.
<b>Poet's Corner</b>	Poetry READING can provide an authentic purpose for reading aloud to others (Rasinski, 2010). For Poet's Corner, teachers and students can select poems to read and discuss and to develop a performance reading for a peer audience. Playing with rhythms, rhymes, tones and volumes increases awareness of meaning making. Poems for reading can vary enormously in difficulty, key themes, language and length.	Repeated readings are needed for a polished performance reading. This repetition enhances automaticity (Samuels, 2006). Key to poetry reading is the link to oral language and meaning developing phrasing and expression (Rasinski, 2010).	This instructional practice is very flexible. Poems can be matched to readers of any level. Students enjoy the performance aspect and this gives a REAL purpose to reading- something they might previously have rejected. High levels of group work are needed. Performance is affirming to struggling readers who through repeated reading (not memorisation) feel safe and successful.
<b>Reader's Theatre</b>	Students read and perform plays or skits that are scripted. Scripts are not memorised, but are read in the manner of a live script reading one might hear on radio or see in 'behind the scenes' footage of animated movies. Any level of text may be used to suit the needs of any group of readers. Scripts can be found online or students can write their own (e.g. rewrite a scene in the novel that was exciting.)	Repeated readings are highly researched as having a huge impact on fluency (Samuels, 2006). Key to performance reading is repetition that builds AWR. phrasing and expression, needed for dramatic readings of play scripts, to link fluency to meaning success in a supportive environment builds reader confidence (Millen, 1996 cited in Carrick, 2006).	Students work together and are active in the process of reading for meaning. Group work provides opportunities for peer support and modelling. Struggling readers find a motivating, and supportive way to develop their skills in an authentic motivating context. They must read and re-read the scripts to ensure a flawless performance. Work in small groups or individually.
<b>Timed Repeated Readings</b>	Students develop a fluent reading of a text through repeated practice. Texts are introduced and read by the teacher who discusses meaning and tricky vocabulary before the students work on the texts through repeated readings, which are timed to get an optimal (not fastest) reading. Usually 4–5 readings allow the maximum learning to occur.	Timed Repeated Reading builds AWR (Samuels, 2006) and provides opportunities to gain exposure to texts in a motivating context. Readers can gain confidence and set their own goals are able to tackle more challenging texts because the teacher orientation and repeated exposure provides a scaffold for accessing difficult material.	Many students respond well to the achieving of personal bests in reading accurately and quickly. They enjoy the active stopwatch and graphing dimension of tracking their own performance. The reading needs to be at a rate that maintains expression and it needs to be ACCURATE.

Table 1: Repeated Oral Reading practices

achievement, motivation and engagement in reading. The first change teachers reported was that many students, after experiencing success as readers, quickly became enthusiastic about reading. Books were off library shelves and in hands, desks and bags. Groups of readers rehearsed in far-flung corners of playgrounds during lunch breaks, getting poems and plays ready for performance.

Student assessment results for 2011, showed that this was more than just having fun. In fact, 89% of the year level cohorts in these schools demonstrated a rate of improvement on TORCH that was greater than the gain expected in a national sample. For 65% of the 2011 cohorts, significant acceleration was evident. Gains were tracked showing year level cohorts making between 1.5 and 4.0 times the expected rate of progress. In 10% of the cohorts, gains were in excess of 4.5 times the growth expected. The 2011 NAPLAN results told a similar story. In Year 5, the cohort gain was greater than the national cohort gain in 88% of project schools in reading and 77% of project schools in writing. In the Year 7 cohort, 100% of project cohorts showed acceleration on NAPLAN reading and writing. This is a significant achievement for schools that have traditionally experienced a widening achievement gap in literacy and low levels of student and teacher confidence.

### Final thoughts

Applegate, Applegate & Modla (2009) in researching the comprehension ability of fluent readers found that not all fluent readers were good comprehenders of text and so warn teachers to not judge the reading proficiency of their students based solely on accuracy, speed and prosody divorced from thoughtful comprehension. We would agree with this. We do not advocate fluency instruction as a substitute for thoughtful and engaging comprehension instruction, but rather consider that for many of the students in our schools, low levels

of fluency, self-confidence and motivation were disrupting their ability to make meaning. When this kind of profile exists for cohorts of readers, a place to get some traction is to develop fluency in engaging and focused ways.

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