



Learning Conversations that Strengthen Teaching Practice

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Learning conversations are a key strategy used at Vardon School to strengthen teaching practice and improve learning outcomes. Such conversations have been used to good effect by staff at the school around analysing reading data collated from the Six Year Observation Survey. As a result of these conversations a range of strategies has been established at the school that all teachers use with students as part of their instructional reading programme. Principal Marcus Freke outlines the school's learning conversations framework in this project report.

Using learning conversations to strengthen and enhance teaching practice and student learning fits into the pedagogical leadership area identified in *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* (2008). The document notes that principals need to “foster an environment where there is an expectation that students experience learning success.” More specifically it requires principals as educational leaders to “understand what teachers do and build a professional learning community that supports, challenges, and inquires into its own practice.”

Viviane Robertson (2007) also identifies five key dimensions in which educational leaders can positively influence student learning:

- establishing goals and expectations
- strategic resourcing
- planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
- promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and
- ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

Facilitating and participating in learning conversations with teachers is an effective strategy for principals to both incorporate these dimensions and have a positive impact on teaching and learning as pedagogical leaders.

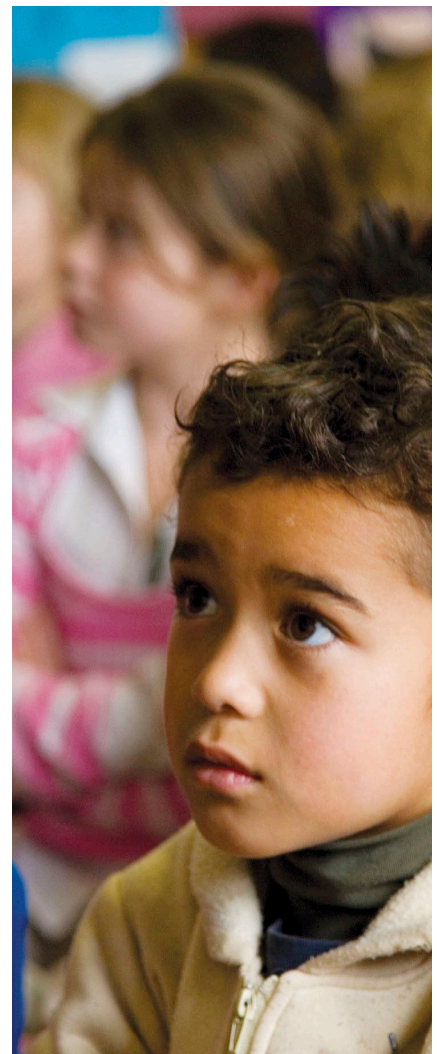
Vardon School's process

At Vardon School we use data about student reading as a starting point for our learning conversations. The process has evolved in the following way.

When we analysed reading data collated from the Six Year Observation Survey, we identified that a significant number of students were achieving well below expected levels. For example, in one group of students more than 40 per cent were still reading at Magenta / Red levels. We knew we couldn't just collect data and admire the problem – we needed to make shifts in our practice that would accelerate the learning of these students to ensure they caught up.

One of the things we determined as a staff was that we had to identify these “hard to shift” readers sooner so that we could put in interventions as early as possible. We added impetus to this decision by including it in our annual goals. We set targets for percentages of students to achieve “at” or “above” the expected level and also set an annual target to reduce the percentage of students reading at Magenta / Red levels.

Though this may seem an obvious goal, when it was clearly established as a target it created more urgency and an expectation (accepted by everyone) that we would shift the lower-achieving readers.



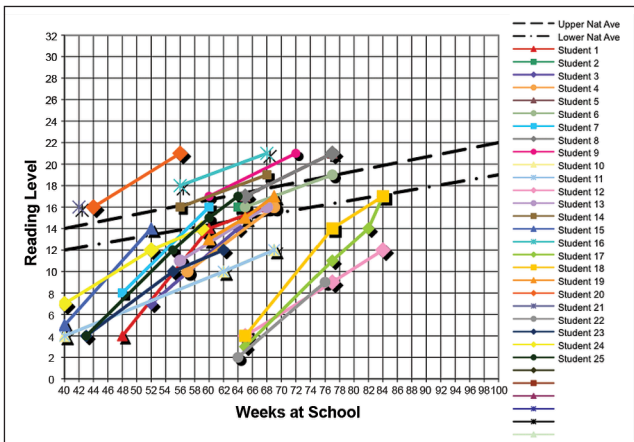


Figure 1: Wedge graph showing levels of achievement and rates of movement in student reading over time.

Through our involvement in a Ministry of Education literacy contract our teachers use wedge graphs as a method for displaying student progress (Figure 1).

These show the levels of achievement and also the rates of movement in comparison to the expected levels. It is important to remember that “hard to shift” readers must not only make progress, but that their progress must be accelerated if they are to achieve at the expected levels.

Having learning conversations

Learning conversations are a key strategy that we use to strengthen teaching practice and improve learning outcomes. Before teachers can be expected to talk openly about their practice high levels of trust need to be established. At our school teachers are used to sharing their thinking and ideas because syndicates work closely together planning and assessing units of work. Even so we had to put in place a clear framework that helped teachers to be open about what they were – or were not – doing in the class.

Our conversations start by looking at the information presented on the wedge graph and by celebrating the successes of the students to date. The conversation then shifts to focusing on what teaching actions have made a difference. For example in the graph, we can see that around Week 82 Student 17 suddenly accelerated upward. As a group we explore what changed for Student 17 at that time. The student’s teacher may share a new strategy they have employed, why it worked and how can it replicated for other students.

Lipton and Wellman suggest this type of conversation “promotes a greater understanding about what is working, who is learning, and what teachers might do to improve instructional practice” (Lipton & Wellman, 2007, p.31). This is certainly the experience at our school.

Our attention then turns to those students whose lines have remained “flat”. A conversation is held to establish what the barriers are to their learning. This approach can be referred to as identifying “causal factors” (Lipton & Wellman, 2002, p.1). A range of potential

strategies is explored and an approach is often identified that has been successful with other students and that might be suitable for students who are not progressing at the required rate.

To support this process we also use a range of resources to inform our thinking. For example, *Effective Literacy Practice Years 1-4* (2003) has been very valuable. The principal can support by supplying additional resourcing through outside agencies or engaging additional support in the class.

As a result of these conversations we have established a range of strategies that all our teachers use with students as part of our instructional reading programme. What we consider to be effective practice is embedded in our everyday teaching.

My role has been to be a part of the conversations. Having the principal attend the conversations signals to teachers that the topic under discussion is a priority and enhances the sense of urgency. Though I am not expert in junior reading programmes, I have contributed by asking reflective questions and challenging the teachers to reflect on their practice. Robertson (2005) suggests that effective questioning provides opportunities to “explore their knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and values...” (p.119).

This has certainly been the experience of our teachers. Through the analysis of the assessment data, and conversations about their practices in teaching reading, teachers have been able to identify the needs of the learners and use deliberate acts of teaching to address these needs.

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