Accelerated reading comprehension in students arriving at Tamaki College from Manaiakalani cluster Primary schools

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a. Findings

Six Manaiakalani schools sent students with above-average gains in reading comprehension on to Tamaki College. Three schools accelerated 1 in 3 students they sent on to Tamaki College, two others helped 27% and 23% of their Tamaki-bound students to improve faster than NZ's norm, and one caused 17% to improve. By interviewing these teachers I hoped to discover what their reading practice looked like in 2018 and whether there were any similarities between them.

Reading - groups

Two of six schools used mixed ability groupings, two always streamed their groups and the last two employed both strategies: one streamed students for guided reading but mixed them back up again when reading 'multimodal' texts, the other streamed for reading but occasionally mixed them for activities based on a class-wide text. One of the teachers who used mixed ability groups explained "*I firmly believe though that progress was… supported by getting students to watch those who were self managing and active in discussion sharing their ideas and responding to each other.*" The teacher who streamed and then mixed for multimodal texts explained that streaming was to "*teach to the needs of individuals and be able to drill down with each group, either learn to read (first) then read to learn.*"

Reading - class routines

In School 1, reading was done with a focus on talk and discussion - prompted by one or two questions written by the teacher such as "*justify… explain… what do you think… what do you think the author's purpose was…*" These were written on laminated coloured strips and stuck to group's desks. These discussions were not often interrupted by the teacher. Sometimes students did worksheets or appropriate digital resources for extension, though the focus was on talk and interaction. If there were activities though, students decided together how follow-up activities would be shared and whether they would be done as pairs or smaller sections of their group. The teacher provided feedback and feedforward to each student. This class also went to the school library every week, and this involved finding information in relation to homework or their topic.

At School 2 the teacher read to the class after lunch every day - and sometimes a student asked to read instead. When discussing, they would discuss halfway through the chapter or when something happened. The teacher would

summarise again before reading began the next day. This teacher reported that in their class reading didn't only belong in "reading time" - they also read a lot in math, problem solving, during group inquiries, research work, and to prepare for group presentations. Students also knew they had individual book reviews in assembly that they would present.

In contrast, another school only read during their reading blocks or during SSR. Groups were streamed and were given different texts and questions for small group readings and discussions. The teacher would see an average of two groups per reading lesson, where they discussed new words that arose in the reading. However, independent follow-up activities were similar for all learners and often included asking about students' opinions, their thoughts, and to explain their thinking. Alternatively, groups would complete guided reading and discuss the theme and key ideas before typing on a shared document any vocabulary they didn't know, and added questions they had at the bottom. In 2018 this school was focussing on improving vocabulary as a way to improve comprehension - they found that while vocabulary has now improved, reading comprehension remains low. Therefore, they concluded that poor vocabulary is not an underlying problem for reading comprehension. This year the school is focussing on helping students make connections, inferences and answer literal questions using text.

At streamed School 4, the lower stream started the year with reciprocal reading. Once a reader's confidence had been built, the student was used as an 'expert' to show the 'good' readers how to do reciprocal reading. Lower ability students gravitated towards buddy reading, and they also experienced more explicit teaching; for example, they were taught to look for keywords in questions, go to the text and return to the question with a specific answer. The higher stream spent Term 1 physically in the library then Term 2 physically in Overdrive. In the higher stream, reading was most often silent and individual. Reading out loud was saved for more guided reading. Both streams spent time on Read Theory, where digital texts are randomly assigned to match students' reading levels. Both groups experienced Wide and Deep reading using multimodal texts; the lower group did this twice in the year to 'read to learn.' The theme of the Wide and Deep unit was always linked to the class inquiry topic. Both streams experienced scaffolding through digital activities that guided summarising, forming connections, evaluating text and forming opinions, etc. These activities always followed the same format and the same prompts and activities were used across reading as well as inquiry. The teachers of both streams had a "shared language of instruction" and reading was always "data driven." They never did got students to "*read a book, do this worksheet.*"

Another school that grouped students (or at least streamed the accelerated and remedial learners) had a special programme for remedial readers. Remedial learners spent a lot of time on vocabulary and experienced high mileage in both reading and writing. Other streams met with a range of literature: spoken word poetry, music, blog posts and novel studies. Texts were balanced between on and offline hard copies. When learning about poetry students learnt to analyse, respond, rewrite the poem with an ethnic lens, and incorporate their identity - always with a purpose and with an audience. Inferencing was practiced on messages in music, and blog posts were both read and written. Two novel studies were done, and the movie of each book was watched at the end as a reward!

In School 6 the teacher reported "*I read to the kids throughout the whole year before every reading class. While they initially thought they were too old for it, they grew to love it and would protest if we didn't do it.*" After reading in streamed groups (each group had a spread of about 1.5 - 2 years reading age) there would be collaborative and creative follow-up tasks that were achievable within a week or two. There was also R4R time; reading for recreation. Students completely owned what to read and there were no follow-up activities other than a brief synopsis about what they read in a Google spreadsheet, taking no more than 2 minutes.

Reading - material

A wide range of reading material was used across schools, such as visual texts (videos or images), school journals, short stories such as those by Witi Irimaia, novels such as Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Danny - Champion of the World by Roald Dahl, Dawn Raid by Pauline Smith, Refugee by Alan Gratz, Holes and Narnia. In the school that included R4R, many boys would often choose to read the Guiness Book of World Records while others chose magazines, comic books, novels or online material. One school mentioned poetry, music lyrics and blog posts as reading material. Another school used Read Theory. One teacher mentioned vocabulary banks. One teacher of a lower ability stream said their group did a sophisticated picture book study, film, and listened to a radio NZ audiobook, while in another school lower-ability students spent time on Quick60, word chunking, phonics and vocabulary. An ESOL student at one of the schools spent a lot of time on Study Ladder and reading one on one with a volunteer - their school had over 100 reading volunteers! One teacher commented on the standard reading material of their reading programme: "*Reading material was often short but rich. This made it manageable for the kids to*

get through and they had a better attitude towards reading the material from the start because they knew they wouldn't be spending days reading it."

Reading - integration

Four out of five teachers said that their student's reading was usually contextualised to the theme of their inquiry topic. One school had no integration.

Relationships - home and school

Three teachers mentioned having a relationship with home, either by teaching older siblings and knowing parents well already, or building a relationship throughout the year by phoning home for both good and bad reasons. One also ran a home reading programme, where students took a journal, article or story home with them each night Monday-Thursday.

Relationships - class and teacher

Five teachers of the seven spoke of the relationship they had with their classes. Three teachers had taught their entire class the previous year as well. Two of them spoke about the "*lovely*" nature of their relationships. As teachers they were always "*honest with students*;" they "*held conversations about their data and what level they were reading at and needed to reach before Year 9.*" They "*really believed in their student's potential.*" They were "*firm and fair.*" Many students reported that their teacher was the most likely source of their acceleration last year; making them do their work, believing in them and caring for them!

The individual student

All teachers were able to go into detail about the individual learning needs of their students from the previous years. One said "*student emotions were probably the biggest factor*" in their reading comprehension improvement in class. Another mentioned that the older sisters' of one student were both readers, and were likely a positive influence. One went into great depth about individual needs, such as "*an accelerant reader who doesn't like criticism, but does enjoy group work*," or "*had a real strength in writing, particularly argumentative writing. Needs a lot of encouragement to participate in group discussions.*"