Six easy steps to teach reading

Schools using a teaching plan that focuses on comprehension are producing great readers.

Fiona Villella

It might surprise some parents but the teaching of reading to primary school children can be a slightly random affair, slightly dependent on the method a teacher or principal favours or has been taught themselves.

There is no one system for teaching reading in all Victorian classrooms, despite the statewide angst about literacy levels.

But evidence from the work of a Victorian-based, but internationally renowned, leader in the field of reading comprehension shows that six strategies, pursued from prep to third in year 3, produce strong readers who progress more quickly to more complex texts.

Literacy consultant Diane Snowball’s approach to teaching literacy – which achieved dramatic results in low-performing schools in New York City during the 1990s and more recently at schools in Melbourne’s west – began when she started as a grade 1 teacher in 1972.

“I thought, oh my goodness, I don’t know about teaching reading. I’ll have to resign,” she says. “Either that or go and learn a lot about it. So I decided I’d learn a lot about it.

“I realised that the researchers had done a huge amount of work in figuring out what were the main comprehension strategies but it hadn’t really been passed on to teachers.”

The six comprehension strategies Snowball adapted for teaching reading are: prediction/prior knowledge; think-aloud; text structure; visual representations; summarisation; and questioning.

Each strategy is explained and modelled by the teacher before students apply it to their own reading.

Importantly, students must be reading independently every day to practise using the strategy and also reflecting on how it has helped them with their reading.

Teachers then confer with students individually to assess their reading, help them form personal reading goals and plan their own teaching to meet student needs.

Snowball emphasises the simplicity of this differentiated, personalised, research-based literacy approach.

“If you listen to a child read, talk about what they’re doing then you can figure out exactly what their needs are. If you don’t know that as a teacher, you don’t know what you’re looking for or listening for.”

During the 1990s, Snowball trained principals and teachers at New York City public schools, many of whom knew very little about teaching comprehension. This was, at the time, a worldwide phenomenon.

“Teachers really didn’t teach comprehension. They gave kids questions to answer. They didn’t teach kids to understand or to think about what they’re reading and if you don’t understand, why not, what’s getting in the way, what can I do about it. The more that kids really know what they’re doing, what works, what doesn’t, the more they can fix it.”

In today’s primary and secondary school setting, Snowball’s research-based approach to teaching reading is not commonplace.

The increased autonomy of Victorian state schools over the decades has meant that if principals are not aware of the value of teaching reading then teacher professional knowledge within schools will vary and student learning will suffer.

When Sharon Walker became principal of Footscray North Primary School in 2009, a similar lack of direction existed at the school.

“The teaching of reading was not clearly documented,” she says.

“While there was a focus on it, there were differences in the way it was taught between grades, differences in expectations, student outcomes.”

Over the past six years, the school has overhauled its teaching of reading and the results have been dramatic.

“Our children come with little English, some come from impoverished backgrounds, yet last year our year 3 students were above the state in every NAPLAN area.

“Our kids are starting from a deficit but by year 3 they’re outperforming the state.”

She says the key is all teachers “know how to teach reading” and all are taught the same method – and they are expected to use it.

“There’s no excuse at all. Right from prep, we use that same method of teaching reading. When you’re teaching reading, you’re teaching the strategies of comprehension,” Walker says.

The success of Footscray North Primary was a result of measures taken by the Western Metropolitan Region.

The most improved region in Victorian education history, it went from lowest-performing region in the state in 2008 to third on all year 9 NAPLAN measures in 2012.

Katherine Henderson, regional director at the time, attributes the region’s success to Snowball’s input training the principals and shifting their thinking.
Walker was one of them. “Principals became the leaders of learning in their school. What were our expectations in reading, how do you actually teach it?

“It sounds so simple but it's so powerful. There were no excuses if you like … principals had to know this stuff.”

Walker has seen the success of Snowball's comprehension strategies firsthand and for her there is no going back.

What baffles Walker is why so many in education look abroad for ways to improve student learning.

“We look at Finland, Singapore, people go overseas and yet we have a fantastic model on our doorstep.”

Fiona Villella is a part-time secondary school teacher.