

Beating the Odds through Rich Reading: Success in Reading at Mornington Park Primary School

Diane Snowball, June 2020

The 2020 picture of the school:

Mornington Park Primary School is situated in the Tanti Estate in Mornington, 55 kilometres south-east of Melbourne. The school has an enrolment of 247 and offers a mainstream comprehensive education as well as a Steiner program, with 100 students being in the mainstream classes.

The students in the mainstream program have a diversity of family backgrounds and bring different experiences to school. 10% of those students are in out of home care, 10% are funded (at a high level) in addition to the out of home care funding and 10% are Koori students. 90% of the parents are unemployed. School data indicates that over 80% of families with children in the mainstream program experience intergenerational poverty, drugs, alcohol, mental illness, family violence or a combination of these. School attendance has been identified as an issue with data showing that on average students have 20+ days away from school each year with many of the students late each day and many not having had breakfast. The school has a range of supports including fresh fruit being available throughout the school.

This story is about the extraordinary success of the mainstream section of the school in the improvement of students' reading 2017-2020.

In 2017 Sarah Darling, the founder of *Foundation 59* (a foundation established to help support disadvantaged students on the Mornington Peninsula), asked me to help the school to improve students' reading. The school goals were to:

- *increase the amount of reading* being done by the students,
- *expand the range of reading* being done,
- to ensure that *all students enjoy reading*,

with the ultimate goal being to encourage students to read more in the future, in the expectation that this would improve all areas of literacy and the quality of life in general.

When I visited the classrooms in 2017 it was obvious that a vital literacy practice was missing – there were very few books in the classrooms and the students did not spend substantial time reading each day. One of the main problems was the lack of good books to read. *Foundation 59* immediately donated \$20,000.00 for suitable books and the purchases were based on requests from the students and widely recognised high-quality literature.

Key strategy- Classroom libraries, with high quality literature and students' favourites being easily accessible for daily reading

When I began to partner with the school in 2017, with the newly donated books and selected quality literature already in the school, the teachers established well-organised classroom libraries in each of their classrooms and allowed plenty of time each day for students to read. The school funded the necessary shelving and containers for organising the books in each classroom in ways similar to how they are organised in good bookshops, plus individual containers for each student to have their current collection of personal reading. So great books became easily accessible for the students and they loved this arrangement.



The classroom libraries had an interesting range of books that the students wanted to read and were able to read with understanding, so Independent Reading time became a regular routine every day in every classroom. Students were guided in their choice of books, learning that if they didn't understand the book it was not an enjoyable experience, and also learning that it's Ok to sometimes read easy or more challenging books of

Only when students are actually reading can teachers find out about the students' strengths and needs as a reader and this evaluation is best done during Independent Reading time. Diane Snowball, 2006

personal interest, but most of their reading should be something they wanted to read and would understand and would also give students the opportunity to improve their reading.

Key strategy- Authentic reading assessment through reading conferences

Concurrent to the establishment of these class libraries I worked with the teachers on key reading strategies to add to their repertoire of teaching. Effective 1:1 reading conferences were important for teachers to undertake regularly. Teachers conferred with individual students while they were reading independently, and this became part of the reading work throughout the school. This conferring included:

- listening to the students read (This varied, depending on the purpose, sometimes taking a Running Record to ascertain reading strategies, sometimes to make sure the book was not too difficult, listening for fluency, or perhaps not needing to hear the oral reading at all),
- checking on comprehension strategies, vocabulary and fluency,
- giving feedback to the students about successful strategies being used,
- providing on-the-spot teaching,
- and setting goals for each student to further improve their reading.

The teachers were systematic in this approach and kept a record of what was occurring during the conferences, particularly noting anything that students needed more assistance with or new strategies that needed to be taught. The teachers were therefore monitoring the progress of each student and learning about their strengths and needs. This helped teachers to plan for individual, small group and class work.

The students also had a record of the conferences, particularly about what the student was doing well, what the new goal was and what the student needed to do to achieve this goal.

Teachers realised that the key to student improvement was for the content and quality of the reading conferences to improve. I was able to demonstrate a range of conferences with their children so the teachers could see the importance of not having a precise formula to follow but they should dig deeply to find out anything that was causing a student to struggle and to know what to do about that.

In every year level at Mornington Park Primary School the teachers are now more knowledgeable about how to assess students' reading with much more information than what is provided by the so-called 'level' of book the student is reading. They now can see that 'tracking' students' reading by just giving them each a mark on a continuum is not seen as very useful to help each student's reading improve. These teachers comment that they have never known their students so well. This is important for improvement to occur for each student.

Key strategy- Building teacher knowledge

The focus of professional learning over 2017-2020 was on knowledge about the teaching of reading, making sure that every aspect of reading was included, including the reading process, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, multiple strategies to figure out unknown words, attitude, building reading stamina, and personal response. This was expanded in 2019 to include the teaching of writing, including spelling. Since 2017 all of the practices around students' reading daily have been sustained plus the focus on professional learning and building teacher capability.

Key strategy- Teaching a breadth of reading processes and strategies

As the teachers' knowledge increased, they realised they needed to rethink their 'literacy block' and increase the range of what they were teaching students about reading. At every age group this included the following:

- World knowledge – the understanding of texts is greatly influenced by the knowledge readers have about the content of the texts, so a concerted effort was made to build the students' world knowledge;
- The Reading Process – how a reader works through any text to say the words and understand what is being read (purposefully sampling the text, predicting, cross-checking and confirming or self-correcting, using semantic, syntactic and visual and grapho-phonetic information);
- Comprehension strategies – multiple strategies to ensure understanding, as recommended by the research that details the most important comprehension strategies to teach (setting a purpose for reading, predicting using prior knowledge, using text structures and features, visualising and making visual representations, asking questions, inferring, monitoring/clarifying/fixing-up, summarising and retelling, thinking aloud);

- Vocabulary – knowing the meaning of words and phrases to help understanding, realising the role of vocabulary in understanding what is being read, knowing how to learn and use new vocabulary in reading/writing/listening/speaking and knowing when vocabulary is hindering understanding and knowing what to do about that;
- Fluency – using pace, phrasing and expression effectively to help understanding;
- Word solving, including phonics – knowing how to work out how to say the words using many strategies, including sound-symbol relationships, recognising common spelling patterns (e.g. ea, ai, ou, ear, ow), using onset-rime structures, automatic recognition of words, recognition of base words plus prefixes and suffixes;
- Purpose – knowing how to set a purpose for reading and realising how the setting of a purpose affects the way that the reading is done;
- Metacognition – knowing what processes and strategies are being used when reading and being able to describe what is happening;
- Response – the affective part of reading – how a reader feels about whatever they are reading, how a reader interacts with the text;
- Habits and attitudes – reading needs to be something that students do frequently at school and out of school and this needs to be an enjoyable experience;
- Plus, *for beginning readers* – knowledge about the concepts of print, alphabet knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, understanding connections between oral and written language, beginning reading strategies with a focus on meaning and encouraging students to write (experimenting with letters and sounds).

All of these processes and strategies were taught in the context of students learning to read a range of text genres. There were NO PUBLISHED PROGRAMS purchased because they were not necessary. The teachers did the teaching, not a program.

Key strategy- A common instructional model

A common instructional model that helps with planning the teaching and learning was implemented across all year levels. This model is referred to as the *Gradual Release of Responsibility* (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). In this model responsibility for the use of a strategy gradually transfers from the teacher to the student in the act of reading various types of natural texts. Because teachers were continually monitoring each student's reading during conferences or quick 'check-ins' during independent reading they knew if any student needed additional teaching or support. For example, if a student did not use phonetic strategies well then teachers would know this and be able to deal with it immediately. The teachers would even know exactly what phonetic knowledge each student was able to easily use when reading and what additional knowledge each student needed. The same applied to each of the strategies used when reading.

There was NO DESIRE TO BUY UNNATURAL TEXTS such as those with limited phonetic vocabulary because it was more important for students to learn how to apply all processes and strategies with the type of texts they would be reading for the rest of their lives. It was also extremely important for the students to be immersed in texts with rich vocabulary; most students' vocabulary was usually limited when they began school so it would have been detrimental to restrict the vocabulary in what they were reading at school. The teachers learned about the research re vocabulary learning - that a large percentage of vocabulary is added to each student's language because of the rich texts they read.

Throughout this project the teachers were continually provided with the research base to support the practices they were implementing. This has encouraged teachers to think about what they are doing and why they are embracing it, rather than just blindly following someone's ideas.

Key strategy- Sustaining the change

The principal and teachers saw the positive impact of the class libraries and the students frequently requested more books, so it was important to maintain the ongoing purchase of quality books. Additional funds were provided by the *Children's Foundation* (*Foundation 59* had amalgamated with them) to purchase more books, with advice from knowledgeable staff in great bookshops. The students' input increased and became more valuable because of the interest they had developed in reading. They requested many more nonfiction books and new texts in popular series, and their choices indicated they had also become more aware of a greater variety of writers. They also requested additional copies of some books because they were recommending titles to each other and because they wanted to form book clubs. There is no doubt that the richness of the books made a difference to the improvement in the students' reading and writing so teachers became much more

discerning about the quality of the books in their classroom libraries. The money spent on great literature and fabulous nonfiction books is worth every cent.

Most students at Mornington Park Primary School do not have access to rich literature books at home so it is essential that they are included in the classroom libraries at school. In the school's Foundation classrooms many of the books for students to read are by authors such as Mem Fox, Pamela Allen, Eric Carle, John Birmingham, Pat Hutchins, Linley Dodd and Nick Bland because those authors write books that young children want someone to read to them many times over and gradually the children can read the books by themselves. This builds up the students' reading stamina and the students learn about the structure of written language as well as all the concepts of print. High frequency words are repeated many times over in typical 24-32 page picture books and the students' vocabulary has a chance to increase because the vocabulary is not limited to simple words. With rich class libraries, regular reading opportunities and conferences with their teachers, the Mornington Park Foundation students started to point to words they were reading, making a one-to-one word match, becoming aware of letters and sounds, and they were soon on the way to successful reading.

Impact of the improvement strategies 2017-2020

The project has been underway for just over two years and the impact of the above strategies can be demonstrated through a range of qualitative and quantitative data.

- **Impact on student learning:**

"There are so many results to look at but the main one is the value that we add or the relative growth. We have improved in all areas except in writing, but that is what we are working on now! We have exceeded the State, Network and Similar Schools in most areas, especially in reading. Very exciting!" (Beverley Dadds, Mornington Park Primary School Principal)

Year	2017	2018	2019
% year 5 students in High Growth band	13%	20%	35%
% year 5 students in Medium Growth band	53%	73%	42%
When compared with Similar Schools in 2019, Mornington Park PS had 35% of year 5 students achieve High Growth in Reading. The Similar Schools percentage was 21%.			

MySchool website 2019

It is fortunate that increased independent reading will have a very positive effect on reading scores in standardised tests, but the most important work of the teachers and principal at Mornington Park PS is that they are creating life-long readers.

Comments from grade 3-4 students, 2019

- *I like reading because I get to learn more amazing words and can read other books. I think reading a lot can change how I read. My favourite book is The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane. I like that book because of the character and setting.*
- *I think it's better to have a class library because we can discover new authors. It affects my reading because I can read new books and I can get lost in them and I can discover new adventures.*
- *I enjoy having our library because it's interesting to know different authors and read their books. I also like our library because when I finish a book, I can instantly get another one.*

Impact on teacher self-efficacy:

The teaching of reading at Mornington Park PS has changed dramatically since 2017. At that time the teachers were well organised and worked hard to produce activities for the students to do. All of the students were grouped and the daily plan was for the teacher to work with one group of students in a session called Guided Reading while the other groups were rotated through the activities during the week. There were no classroom libraries and only one grade 5-6 teacher conferred with students while they read, so he was probably the only one who really knew about the students' strengths and needs as a reader. This means that all the activity work being done in other classrooms may not have been helping each student's needs at all.

Compare this with the following description in 2019, from the Year 2-3 teacher:

"Over the past two years, my teaching of reading has dramatically changed. We now begin with a teaching focus through Shared Reading or Read-aloud and then the students use their book boxes to read independently

for a sustained time of at least 30 minutes. During this time, I confer with students and observe their reading strategies, monitor their progress in achieving their current goal, provide any necessary teaching, ensure they are reading "just right" texts and we set new goals to continue to improve their reading. I can easily pull together a group with the same need and work with them until they can independently apply the learning to their own reading."

"During this time, we have experienced great growth in student's reading ability, but even more importantly (I believe), they have developed a love of reading. In the past, some of my students were quite reluctant to read. Some would sigh or complain, and it was a constant battle to keep them focused on the text for ten to fifteen minutes. Now, I have students asking, "When are we having reading time?" and complaining if for some reason, it is cut short."

The research base to achieve the school's goals:

- When books and other reading resources are easily accessible, students are much more likely to read and to read for longer periods of time.
- The most effective way to improve students' reading is to increase the amount of sustained Independent Reading they do. (Note that Independent Reading means reading with at least 95% accuracy and with understanding. This is particularly relevant when students become aware of the importance of choosing books to read that they can read easily, rather than pretending to read books just because some of their peers are reading those books. The students can also choose to read some easier and more challenging texts but they have purposes for doing this.)
- Reading a wider range of fiction and factual books chosen by the students is the most effective way to increase students' vocabulary and world knowledge, which in turn improves the students' comprehension and therefore the enjoyment of reading.

It's also important to note that the principal and teachers did not get bogged down by focusing on one aspect of literacy teaching and learning, such as which kind of phonics program should be used. Instead of that narrow approach they accepted that of course students should learn about phonetic strategies to help them say and write words, but they should also learn many other strategies to help with this, and that all students should learn about EVERYTHING that the most effective readers and writers do in the act of understanding and enjoying the reading and writing of authentic texts.

This School Success Story is a wonderful demonstration of the following Foundation for Learning and Literacy Touchstones:

- A fair and equitable society depends upon every citizen being able to read and write. Being able to read and write gives people equal access to information, employment, enjoyment and further educational opportunities.
- Oral language is the foundation for all meaningful reading and writing.
- Reading and writing are both pleasure and power. They allow us to participate in the real world, escape from reality and to imagine alternative worlds. These purposes should be at the heart of teaching children and young people to tell stories, read and write.
- 'Making sense' is the beginning, middle and end of learning to read and write.
- All children are different. Their experiences are different, their environments are different, their ways of thinking are different. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy learning does not work.
- Students learn through multiple opportunities to engage in reading; the more time students spend on independent reading, the more their reading improves.
- The main purpose for literacy assessment is to provide the child, their teachers, parents and school systems with information that informs all stakeholders of the child's learning and growth.
- The main purpose for literacy assessment is to provide the child, their teachers, parents and school systems with information that informs all stakeholders of the child's learning and growth.
- Teachers teach children. Programs don't.

Congratulations to the Principal (Beverley Dadds), Assistant Principal (Kathleen Lord), teachers (Stacie McCullough, Anna Vevers, Deanne Thompson, Francine Curtis, Nathan Sturma) and students of Mornington Park Primary School for their commitment to improve and congratulations to *Foundation 59* and *The Children's Foundation* for their generous support of this school community. Together we have all made a positive difference.