



Case study

Georgetown State School

Georgetown State School is a small school located approximately 400 kilometres west of Cairns. There are three classes in the school, with 50 children in all. Eight Prep children and twelve Year 1 children work together in a multi-age class. More than 75% of the school population is in the lower two quartiles of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (2014).

Taking action

A recent performance review identified that the staff of Georgetown State School should: 'Ensure all students, including high achieving students are engaged, challenged and extended by designing classroom activities to meet their learning needs, interests and aspirations.' The school's explicit improvement agenda also set out the need to improve reading and comprehension outcomes. With these two goals in mind, a decision was made to develop an action research plan to extend children's higher order thinking skills by using engaging pedagogical approaches within a literature context.

The Georgetown team (principal, teacher, and aide) reflected on their current approaches within Prep and recognised that a period of time that had been set aside several times a week for "free choice" play activities could be used more effectively. A decision was made to use this time to develop the children's higher order thinking skills by inviting them to respond to or innovate on stories selected by their teacher. The plan was for the children to work with their teacher to brainstorm possible activities relating to the stories and then plan and action these. The teaching team hoped that by aligning higher order thinking with children's literature, that this approach may also enhance children's engagement with the reading process.



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Creating Change

With the support of the school's teaching principal, the Georgetown Prep teacher began the process of change by keeping detailed reflections. Four aspects of her teaching and planning were examined in these reflections: opportunities for child-initiated versus teacher-initiated activities; the extent to which the various characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies were being embedded; her ability to promote higher order thinking through effective questioning (based on the Bloom's Taxonomy framework); and how these learning sessions related to the various requirements of the Australian Curriculum. These reflections were also used to support regular discussions between the principal and the teacher.



Challenges

One key challenge identified by the Georgetown team was to determine how much time children needed to engage with a specific story in order to fully exploit its possibilities for higher order thinking. At first the teacher moved the children on too quickly, limiting the time available for them to complete the independent and collaborative activities they themselves had identified. Another challenge was to identify the level of scaffolding each individual child required to support their thinking and planning processes.

Initial findings

Towards the end of the project period, the prep teacher was pleased with the progress she had made in her understanding of how to support and extend children's higher order thinking. Her detailed reflections and collaborative conversations had helped her to determine that children gained most benefit by engaging with the same story context over an extended period. She determined that this longer period ensured that children had more agency in their learning, whilst also giving them more time to engage in complex planning and problem solving. She also noted that towards the end of the year that the journey had made her more confident about engaging efficiently with the Australian Curriculum.

Future Planning

The Georgetown team are planning to continue using this approach in Prep next year, whilst also determining that similar opportunities should be offered to all of the children in this multi-age class. They have also determined that the 11 characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies also appear to be relevant for the teaching of older children and so in future their application across the entire school will be a major focus of ongoing work relating to their pedagogical framework.

