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Characteristics of Teacher Expertise Associated With Raising the Reading Comprehension Achievement of Low Achieving Year 5–9 Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explores characteristics of teacher expertise associated with raising the reading comprehension achievement of year low achieving year 5–9 students. It reports on the first year of a three year research and development collaboration between researchers and teachers in six different schools situated within a New Zealand Ministry of Education schooling improvement initiative. The project's objective has been the deliberate identification of teacher and student needs, the analysis and collaborative use of this information by the researcher and participant teachers to identify characteristics of comprehension teaching that raise student achievement in reading comprehension and identify characteristics of teacher expertise in reading comprehension instruction. In particular, this research is concerned with developing, using and evaluating pedagogical approaches to comprehension strategy instruction in a way that is clearly linked for teachers to the reading comprehension achievement data of the students they teach.

The study developed over three phases using action research methodology. At each phase the researcher systematically observed, analysed and enhanced teachers' expertise and instructional practices associated with improvements in underachieving students' comprehension. Three sources of data were gathered at each of the three phases to inform the action research. These were data from participating teachers through taped, transcribed and coded interviews, researcher in-class observation (videoed and coded); and student reading comprehension achievement assessment data, gathered through the Supplementary Test of Reading Comprehension – STAR; (Elley, 2001a, 2001b).

Data gathered from the first phase indicated a high proportion of students were underachieving in areas of sentence comprehension, paragraph comprehension and vocabulary. By contrast, teachers believed they were doing a "good" job in teaching reading comprehension. Analysis of this mismatch indicated that the following characteristics of teaching and learning in comprehension were not evident: the in-depth analysis and use of student data to inform reading comprehension programs and the successive selection of appropriate teaching approaches, resources and activities; teacher and student analysis and use of formative assessment practices to raise achievement; the importance of taking a strategic approach to comprehension teaching that provided teachers with ways to support and develop both strategic and student centred processing of text, and the critical role of explicit comprehension strategy instruction. This analysis

informed the ensuing collaborative approach to professional development in which researchers and teachers jointly developed an ongoing process of analysing and responding to student achievement data to inform instructional strategies, theoretical ideas and practices.

The study focused on four main areas of teacher expertise identified through research as critical to raising the reading comprehension achievement of low achieving students. These were teacher knowledge of literacy learning in reading comprehension; teacher knowledge of effective reading comprehension approaches with a specific focus on developing teaching practice specific to low achieving comprehenders; teacher knowledge of analysis and use of student reading comprehension achievement data, and teacher collaboration and problem solving associated with issues of low reading comprehension achievement amongst students in participant teachers' classrooms.

The study concluded that each of these four components were essential characteristics of teacher expertise associated with raising the reading comprehension achievement of low achieving students in years 5-9. As teacher knowledge of literacy learning developed so too did teacher expertise in instructional practice and their ability to analyse areas of student underachievement. The study further found that when ongoing professional learning is evidenced based changes can occur in levels of teacher expertise that result in improved levels of student achievement.

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