

*Rani Fairbairn and Belinda Gibbs were involved in Schooling for a Fair Go as a classroom teacher and coach respectively at Grassland Public School. Rani investigated her own teaching practices by asking a research question, gathering evidence and discussing if the changes were making a difference to students' engagement in learning with her coach. As coaches, Rani and Belinda supported others in their own learning journeys focused on a practice-based research question. Katina Zammit was the school's academic critical friend and co-researcher. In this article, we reflect on the influence of the Fair Go Program (FGP) on our roles, our teaching and coaching practices, and the challenges and successes during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.*

## Background

Belinda and Rani work at Grassland Public School in south-west Sydney. Both were involved with the *Schooling for a Fair Go* project – one as a coach and the other as a classroom teacher who then became a coach respectively. Their involvement with the *Fair Go Program (FGP)* started that particular learning journey. The coaching model initiated as part of the project (see Katina's article on the history of *Fair Go* in this Special Edition) has continued to support individualised teacher professional learning which includes teacher-coach conversations that are research-informed and action-oriented through co-planning of activities focused on teaching for improved student engagement in learning. The coaching model especially supports those teachers within their first five years of teaching. Working directly with teachers, coaches emphasise the importance of learning from each other, developing both collective wisdom and collegiality. Engagement is the key for teachers and students as is evident in the statements below from Rani and Belinda:

*It's that collegial discussion and using research to inform what we're doing so we can't just make it up. Something has to be the basis - where did you get this information from? Then we trial it in our classrooms then we talk about what worked, what didn't work and how we can make it a sustainable practice.*

Rani

*We have behaviours that we have to deal with, but when we're in the classroom we are focussed on teaching and learning, the majority of teachers will say that behaviours are happening in the playground not in the classroom. It's just become sort of second nature to staff now.*

Belinda

However, in 2020, COVID-19 added a new complexity to their role in supporting learning as the teachers moved to remote learning for eight weeks and then returned to school, albeit with the restrictions in place that meant the community was not allowed on site. These are their stories:

## Rani: My many different roles supporting quality learning experiences

As a coach, I try to always ask questions that come down to, 'How can we make teaching work?'. Before COVID-19, I had started with a new coachee and I noticed, through observation, that some lessons were quite 'low cognitive'. I felt the students were not being challenged and I asked the teacher, 'How can we

make the lessons more high cognitive?'. I use that [FGP] language consciously and deliberately with the teachers. We were about to start looking at this issue of how we could make our lessons 'high cognitive' and we were collecting data to reflect upon and discuss when everything had to stop as we were forced to adapt to an unexpected new situation with our students trying to learn from home.

During remote learning, my role was technical to begin with: providing parents with technical support in launching *Google Classrooms* and *Zoom* over the phone and sometimes they would even drop into school for support. To begin with, Stage 3 and then Stage 2 needed to be set-up with *Zoom* classes. However, our focus quickly moved into asking, 'How can we facilitate more engaging classes through *Zoom*?'

There were also issues of access and the school loaned iPads to students so that they had the individual technology to undertake learning from home, this was especially necessary where there was more than one child in the home. We found that access to the Internet was not such an issue for the majority of homes. However, sometimes there were situations where a *Zoom* session had only five students and so we were concerned we were not seeing everyone each day. It was also evident that it was difficult for parents to support their children as they may have been at work, had other commitments or had four children at home. In some cases it was necessary for a few children to come back to school to do their work.

The Kindergarten teachers were another of my designated teams. They did a really good job with our newest learners. The whole team put lessons on *Seesaw* and then wrote feedback comments and also left voice comments so the students could hear or read these and load their work back up after editing using the feedback.

For Year 6 students, my role was to provide support around the learning tasks their teachers had provided. To provide scaffolding to help students complete the work, I learned to make 'scaffolding videos' using screen-recording to explain and differentiate the lessons. We talked about the level of difficulty in each lesson as a team. It was exhausting, as I spent a lot of time writing comments and feedback. Frequently, I couldn't tell when my day started and ended as sometimes I worked until six or seven o'clock at night because that was when the students were online working, and I wanted to give them feedback while they were online.

Just as we got into the swing of things with remote learning, students came back to school. However, the challenges continued as, due to the restrictions on visitors, we were still unable to meet with the parents. At this point, my work returned to the Kindergarten teachers who observed of the parents that:

- *I talk to them on the phone but I haven't ever seen them.*
- *I don't know them.*
- *It's an unusual feeling not to see them. You always see them.*

We felt we wanted to welcome parents in and say: 'Come and have a look. This is our community. This is where your children are spending six hours a day, five days a week'. We wanted to have them here.

It was challenging to return to school as a lot of teachers felt like they were back to day one of the school year. However, at the same time, teachers have continued some of the practices with their class that were established during the remote learning phase, such as Stage 3 teachers sharing their programs through *Google Drive* with each other.

As we moved towards the end of the year, my role stayed with Kindergarten and moved to organising Kindergarten Orientation. This was another challenge, as parents still could not come on site. Our idea was to have Year 6 make a multimodal text (a video) to showcase our school for new students and parents. The approach was that I “hired” the students as video editors, and they promoted our school. They interviewed teachers and the leadership team and did a school tour. The class had to think about their audience even though they had not met that audience of all those parents. There was a lot of script writing, looking at visual literacy, for example, looking at fonts, using images and understanding how the images correspond with the text. These lessons were built on the knowledge I had from *Schooling for a Fair Go*, where I completed a documentary project in which students learnt about visual techniques and used a green screen app. I knew that if the students wanted to create quality work then they had to be challenged, take risks, learn together, provide and take feedback, and revise their texts.

Through this project we all learned a lot about film making, often through trial and error. For example, when they initially started to film teachers, they were not using tripods to keep the camera still and they were asking questions that were not resulting in the answers parents needed for the purposes of new parents and students beginning at the school. In some cases, they needed to go back and film again, up to four times for the Principal, and so they learned a lot about what they would do differently next time. The project was about getting feedback and refining their work. Feedback was provided by the whole class when they watched the videos together, which in itself was building a community of learners. All the students participated. We concluded that we would also want to get feedback from a professional videographer.

Throughout my planning of this orientation video and the other technology-based work to support learning to continue outside the classroom, I asked myself the same questions which came from my experience in the Fair Go Program, ‘How can I make learning relevant to them? How can I make this challenging? What will we learn together? How can I make students really care and be motivated?’

And they were; students and teachers alike. They were just so motivated to do it well.

## Belinda: Supporting student voice and choice

The main ‘takeaway’ for me from *Schooling for a Fair Go* was about the importance of investing in the teacher through the coaching model, which I have continued even during COVID. When we invest in the teacher, we are improving classroom practice, which is ultimately improving student engagement and student outcomes. It is about reflecting on teacher pedagogy, but it is also about new learnings and what we can try to do differently. Teachers were, and still are, really happy to open their classrooms up and have anyone walk in come and help. Investing in the teacher is heightening their own enthusiasm and their engagement.

Setting goals and reflecting on learning with students is certainly something that I have continued to try to embed and work with other teachers to embed. As a coach or instructional leader, I do not pretend to have all the answers, but we go and find these answers together. I have questions of them, they have questions of me, and then we find out about them together. The focus is on engagement, not behaviour, providing students with a range of different, high operative activities and opportunities which emphasise student voice and choice.

During remote learning, coaching continued with off-class coaches, instructional leaders and Assistant Principals all aligned to a grade to support the teachers on that grade to try to ensure that we were making things as engaging as possible. Of course, it was different because we were working with a team via *Zoom*. I would join teachers' *Zoom* sessions with their students and we would do a bit of team teaching. In these situations, the whiteboard was used to demonstrate a specific skill or concept that we were introducing or revising with the students. It allowed them to see and engage with the explanation while the teacher (or me) were talking. We also used the screen-sharing feature of *Zoom*. This allowed us to share what was on our screens with the students and parents in the *Zoom* meeting to assist with explanations, to run activities and consolidate learning. For example, I would share my screen and prepared slides with questions such as, 'Which one doesn't belong?' We would use these slides to promote discussions with the students who were in the *Zoom* sessions (and to teach them some *Zoom* etiquette such as taking turns to talk and share by muting and unmuting microphones). I also created some *Kahoots* (quiz activities) for some classes based on what they were learning, to try to assess their understanding of the content. These were shared via screen sharing and allowed us to know what we needed to cover again or at greater depth, while also being engaging for the students.

In terms of technology, the school had one-to-one devices, so we were very fortunate because we could loan iPads to our community for them to be able to engage in the online learning. If we did not have that, we simply would not have had the engagement that we did in online learning. The school providing access to the technology was essential.

If teachers needed support, or they wanted to chat, or wanted to talk, we would talk via *Zoom* or talk via phone about their teaching practices and activities. Teachers did feel stressed through the whole process of getting the work out to students, monitoring the work, evaluating the work and getting the next day's work prepared. It was a really stressful time.

In my role, I was working with the Year 1-2 (Stage 1) and Year 3 (Stage 2) cohorts. I was supporting the Assistant Principals and teachers of these Stages. I was assisting with the work that they were putting up on *Seesaw* and *Google Classroom*, offering ideas and suggestions. I would also provide feedback to students on their work by commenting, such as making 'where to next' suggestions to improve their work. Also as part of such follow-up to their writing, I might develop specific *Seesaw* activities for specific students, sometimes as a response to a teacher's request. For example, for some students, I created *Seesaw* activities on using capital letters, for others on the correct use of homonyms, for others on specific uses of pronouns or adjectives. Teachers would assign these activities for the class, or for groups of students that needed that particular focus, as part of a day's work. I also created short videos explaining features of writing. Stage 1 were focusing on informative writing, so I created videos on paragraphing, using key words to write sentences and pronouns. I created exemplars of published pieces of writing using different platforms, such as *Google Slides*, *Pic Collage* and *Book Creator*, so that teachers could use these to show students and parents different ways to publish work. The Kindergarten and Stage 1 classes were mainly using *Seesaw* as the platform whilst our Years 3-6 used *Google Classroom*. The work I saw on *Google Classroom* and *Seesaw* was really amazing. The teachers worked tirelessly to best support students and to provide timely feedback so that students and parents could grasp concepts and have questions answered almost immediately.

It was evident that the teachers were trying to keep things as normal as possible for the students. For example, they had their usual morning routines and did their literacy and numeracy sessions and these were on *Google Classroom* or through *Seesaw*. Each day, teachers uploaded slides which would be different from the previous day. For example, in literacy sessions, some of the tasks included students reading to

themselves, or to someone else. Then they would make reflections on what they had read, or on what the person they read to had said in response, for example, the feedback they had given to them. This feedback was then written up by the student. Alternatively, students might complete a comprehension activity, in which they would read a passage and the teacher would ask levelled questions to differentiate for the students in K-2. We were also using the *PM* Online reading program. The students also recorded themselves reading and uploaded it for the teacher to hear; then there would be different sorts of activities, or a writing task related to that and some spelling or other activities.

Students would submit their morning's work and teachers would provide feedback, so that students could go in and make changes or do things a bit differently. This did not always happen, but nevertheless, teachers did have the facility to provide immediate feedback in real time through *Google Classroom* and *Seesaw* to keep the students engaged. Frankly, students were not given a lot of voice and choice during remote learning time and this is something that could be improved for future online work (see the Motivation and Engagement Framework article by Geoff Munns for more explanation on these). However, the strategies described above did help to keep students engaged because they knew their teacher was there, was present for them, helping them and providing them with feedback. For Stage 2, we introduced *Fun Friday*, in which all activities were oriented towards fun, while being linked to a KLA, for example, Science or Art, and this was popular.

When we returned to school it did not take long to get back into the swing of things. We were all exhausted and it took a little while to get some of the students completely back on track. However, teachers have changed how they do things now as a result of their experiences. For example, in Stage 2 they are continuing to do reading groups through *Google Classroom* because these worked very well during remote learning and the students were really interested. Students also loved using the iPads, so we are using these more now. Their engagement levels were high as the technology was a bit of a hook for them and teachers went onto design more lessons around collaboration between students using the iPad.

Despite the problems raised by COVID and lockdown, there were lasting lessons not just for students, but for teachers as well.