



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Jenny Williams and Mary-Ellen Betts

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland. I'm the Editor of the JPL, and I'm talking with Jenny Williams and Mary-Ellen Betts. Today, we're talking about teaching reading and comprehension and about how those two things fit together in your teaching practice. Jenny, Mary-Ellen, welcome.

Jenny Williams:

Thanks, Carly. Your thought there about reading and comprehension going together I think is a really good starting place because we really want teachers to understand that reading is not just about learning a set of phonics rules and by that being able to decode text. That's there's a much more important consideration and that is reading for meaning and understanding what you read. So what we want every student in every grade to understand is that reading is about meaning. It's about bringing meaning to print and taking meaning from print.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

That's reflected in the beautiful circle diagram in the syllabus that has, at the heart, make meaning through language. And everything we've talked about with reading is around making meaning.

Jenny Williams:

That's my favourite page in the syllabus Mary-Ellen - I think page 24 of the syllabus - and that circle diagram that puts that notion right at the centre of the syllabus and of what we're doing in classrooms is such a key important feature. And I find it interesting because for Early Stage 1 teachers especially and Stage 1 teachers too, there's such an emphasis on helping children unlock how language works and teaching phonics. That important as that is, we don't want any child to leave the room without knowing that it's just part of the gaining meaning process and that you need your brain switched on to be actively reading and thinking about the text as well as decoding the words on the page.

Carly Boreland:

And this is something that good readers do all the time.



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

Jenny Williams:

Yeah. We want all the time students to understand that there are those layers. If inadvertently, a child takes from an emphasis on the phonics components of teaching a view that reading is about decoding, and they carry that mental mindset that my job is to decode each word on the page, they're placing themselves at a huge disadvantage because ultimately texts become very complex. Our expectation is not just getting to the end of a text, but of using the text, of analysing the text, of unpacking the layers within a text. And so for a child to be successful at that, and an effective reader, what they have to have is a mindset that reading is about meaning and it's their job to maintain meaning as they read. Important as that layer of phonic information is and that source of information that is visual information, important as that is, it's just one part of a whole picture.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

The syllabus has a demand that children read more sophisticated texts as they go through their schooling into Stage 2 and 3. If students come through their whole schooling believing that reading is meaning and understanding, they are able to critically analyse texts at a sophisticated level. If they come through school thinking it is just about the words on the page, they're missing 90% of the text.

Jenny Williams:

I agree with that Mary-Ellen. And I think that's why I've found particularly useful the notion of the Four Literacy Resources Model by Freebody and Luke. And it's unpacked really nicely in the document from the Department, "An Introduction to Quality Literacy Teaching". And that notion of readers using four sets of resources I think really helps us to understand those layers of sophisticated comprehending that we want students to do. So when I think about those four literacy resources, the first one is Code-breaking, which is helping us to monitor, search, self-correct errors, and think about fluency. That layer of being a code breaker is an important layer but we've got to add to that and integrate and use in an integrated way three other sets of resources. One is Meaning-making. The other is being able to use a text (Text- using). And lastly, being a text analyst (Text –analysing). And that layer of being a text analyst is very present in our syllabus documents beginning, even in Early Stage 1 where a lot of our emphasis is going to be on teaching Code breaking resources. The fact that I'm thinking of Objective D and I'm thinking of the last dot point in the syllabus on that page for Early Stage 1, which says that Early Stage 1 students will begin to understand "point of view". And that's quite an abstract idea but quite a sophisticated idea to be able to unpack, within a text they're reading or viewing, the notion of point of view.

Carly Boreland:

So it sounds like you're saying that from a very early age if we want students to be sophisticated, even at that age, but as they get older, that relationship between the writer or the author and what they're trying



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

to achieve and then the reader and how they are maybe being maybe not manipulated but what the intention upon that reader is and how that's trying to work together.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

That draws very nicely on the learning across the curriculum - critical and creative thinking. If we can show students how to understand text at that sophisticated level, they can detect if they are being manipulated. They can detect if they're being entertained. And it's important in terms of going beyond the school setting that students can actually look at text and understand what the text is trying to do to them. So it's multiple levels. Now, the other thing I find interesting is that the code-breaking resource when you look at the syllabus in Stage 3 there are still things in there that kids need to be code breaking. It just looks totally different in a senior grade than it does in Kindergarten. How many of our children can actually analyse an URL? Part of that is code breaking in terms of what each of those components mean. So the Four Literacy Resources Model, as Jenny said, in "An Introduction to Quality Literacy Teaching" is highly relevant, highly pertinent and is something that every teacher should be accessing fairly regularly. It has got excellent information around what we need to be doing in our classrooms.

Carly Boreland:

And how do people get their hands on that?

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Well, it's a Department of Education and Community resource and you Google "An Introduction to Quality Literacy Teaching" and you can download it to your desktop.

Jenny Williams:

I like to think of it as a toolbox. So I think having that visual image of an effective reader's toolbox is a really helpful thing. Inside my toolbox, I've got a range of tools or strategies that I can use to be an effective reader. And some of those tools or strategies relate to being a code breaker, some to making meaning from the text, some to being able to use text effectively, and some to being able to analyse text. And so ultimately I want to think that effective readers are readers who know they have that toolbox and who know the tools that are inside it and can independently rummage through the toolbox to find the pertinent tool - the tool that's going to best solve what they see as their current problem. We need to teach explicitly. And certainly I find in a lot of schools teachers are using the Super Six Strategies and they're doing some very explicit teaching around each of those Super Six Strategies. But we want there to be a point where students aren't just saying the answer is summarising because this is the week we're looking at summarising but where students confronted by a text and thinking, "What can I do that's going to help me understand this text better? Let's find the tool that's going to be of



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

most use here." And so independently they go into their toolbox to find the tool - the most appropriate tool - for themselves at that point in time.

Carly Boreland:

And is that the kind of language you would use with students? So would you say, "So what could we use from our toolbox?" Would you be that direct and even have a toolbox, or--?

Jenny Williams:

I do have a toolbox (LAUGHTER). And I like to use that visual aid when I'm working with students because I think having a visual of that, for me, the idea of rummaging in that toolbox to find the most appropriate tool, even to discussing in class that the tool I might be choosing to use at this point in time might be different to the tool that you're choosing to use at this point in time is I think important in unpacking what it is that effective readers do. And really, what we're trying to think of is what effective readers do lifelong. And it's nice to be in a classroom where a teacher is supporting you by saying, "This week we are teaching summarising," or, "this week we're looking at questioning." But there has to be a point where students own that for themselves and where they have to do that extra bit of thinking about what is the best tool for me at this point in time.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

When we worked overseas we came across the situation where teachers were teaching one of these particular strategies for a week in strict cycles so the kids knew which week they were up to and they knew that if I said, "I'm making a text-to-text connection," that would be the answer this week without actually being able to integrate all of that information and use it appropriately. So yes, we've got to teach these things explicitly but we also need, as Jenny is saying, we need to teach kids to rummage and really think about the strategy, the useful tool, for a particular text. Because I might use a particular strategy on one type of text and then do something quite different on a different text. So it's teaching explicitly but also teaching in an integrated way so that we are asking kids to apply the learning; not just do the talk.

Jenny Williams:

Mary-Ellen you raised a really good point there. You mentioned the word 'explicit'. And a ready reference for this is the book "An Introduction to Quality Literacy Teaching" where it talks about the model of using Modelled, Guided, and Independent teaching strategies. And that model of Modelled, Guided, and Independent teaching strategies is alive and well right across the world. So it's still very relevant to what we're doing in our New South Wales classrooms, where we are modelling an explicit teaching point from the syllabus, related to Reading, in our Model teaching component of the English block. And then we're supporting students, through Guided reading, and looking for opportunity for them to show us that strategy independently, in Independent reading.



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

Mary-Ellen Betts:

We like to encourage independent reading. In terms of thinking about the best way to improve your reading is quite unusually to read (LAUGHTER). And the best way to improve your writing is to write. But Independent reading needs to be something that is built into your English Block that has good scaffolding so that kids know what's expected of them, has had clear teaching in terms of what it looks like - how to question the text, how to get into the text - and put in very clear parameters around the kids. It is not come in after lunch when hot and bothered and pick up the nearest book. It is really carefully crafted time where kids get to think about their choices. Because the best Independent reading allows students to choose their text. You have to monitor it because if you've got someone reading something odd like The Car Mechanics Guide to something, they need to have variety, but it's important that kids have some ownership over what they read, they have some opportunity to read the same thing over a period of time, and they have time to reflect and enjoy what they want to read. So I really think that we underestimate the power of Independent reading.

Jenny Williams:

I think too, making that connection between what I taught explicitly to the class about reading in Modelled reading I'm going to follow through where I have opportunity to do so in Guided reading and I'm going to expect students to be coming to their Independent reading with that focus that came from my Modelled reading. Because that's what I'm looking for them to do independently, whatever it was I taught explicitly in the modelled part of the day.

Carly Boreland:

And so you need to plan out your day then. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the English Block because it seems to me like it's a bit hard sometimes for teachers to find that time. Can you clarify for us, what's the English Block meant to be and how long is that and how much time does it take to do Modelled, Guided, Independent with something like reading? How much time do you need to set aside?

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Well, we would say that just for reading you'd need an hour. And we then like to say that for writing and word work, you'd need another hour. So that we're saying that blocks of time between 90 minutes to 2 hours is really optimum.

Carly Boreland:

Each day?



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Yeah. Well, we actually get a laugh out of teachers when saying that it would be really good if we could do that five days a week (LAUGHTER).

Carly Boreland:

There are some things at school that get in the way I think.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Yeah. I'm amazed at what gets in the way. But it really is important to actually look at how you are spending your time in the English Block and that it needs to have Model teaching, leading into some Guided Teaching, leading into some independent practice in both reading and writing. We should not see it as a luxury to spend two hours of uninterrupted time five days a week teaching kids to read and be critical thinkers around text. Because if we don't get this right, we're really leaving them open to all sorts of, oh, manipulation by the media.

Jenny Williams:

Let's just sort of think about that block for a minute because it's going to look quite different if you're teaching K to 2 to what it might look like 3 to 6. Certainly, we'd have that expectation that it's going, to begin with, some Modelled teaching around a text using a teaching point from the syllabus and teaching that to the whole class. The idea is that you are not teaching reading but you're choosing a particular dot point of content from the syllabus and teaching that explicitly with a view to student's learning so that the next day you can build on that new learning with the next step and the next piece of content from the syllabus. So then Modelled teaching is followed in K to 2 and in 3 to 6 by a component of Guided reading. But it's going to look quite different. That Guided reading components going to look quite different K to 2 and 3 to 6.

So let's pause for a minute and just talk about what it might look like in K to 2. In K to 2, I'm typically going to have my students grouped around their instructional level but I might have to stretch that a little bit so that I don't have 10 groups of students because I'm not going to be able to manage that. So most teachers find four or five groups at the most manageable and they look for a way of rotating their groups so that they are teaching Guided reading to a group of students while the rest of the class is gainfully employed. We suggest that the easiest way to do that is to have students sitting back-to-back and reading - doing their Independent reading - and then knee-to-knee to discuss their independent reading while the teacher is doing Guided reading. If you want to have other groups doing other activities, an independent writing group based around a writing centre, and possibly a group that's working on some kind of a sort or an activity where they are engaged in discussion around a sort of spelling words or types of adjectives or sentence and not a sentence, whatever your grammar or word work focus might be. That way you're keeping what you're doing tight but you're also keeping it



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

manageable. You're not spending an entire weekend designing worksheets for students to do during that time.

So the actual Guided reading then in K to 2 is you working with a group of students around their instructional level. It may be that you're using a levelled text. Some kind of real text instead of a levelled text. Typically, K to 2 we are using levelled texts and keeping that connection between students' instructional level and what I need to teach very explicitly to them very tight. And then in 3 to 6 it can look quite different.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Teachers tend to be quite shocked when we say, "It's perfectly all right for kids to sit in class and read." We sometimes feel we're not working hard enough if students are reading. Well, again, it depends on the quality of that reading. That they've had the choice, that there's a link back to the Model teaching, and that they are reading a range of texts. So in a Stage 2 or 3 classroom, you could have your guided reading, but it could also be a literature circle. It could be a book study. It could be reciprocal teaching. It could be a whole range of things that meet the needs of students. Some kids will still be able to maintain reading. But you can then set tasks where they actually just reflect on their reading. Writing their own Writer's Notebook. Writing in their reading journal. But really, the best way to improve reading is to read.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT:

The Centre for Professional Learning offers a wide range of professional learning opportunities all around New South Wales at a fixed rate for members of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. For course information, dates, location, and registration information, visit cpl.asn.au.

Jenny Williams:

I think Mary-Ellen what you're saying about the reading and discussion around that is really important. And like anything, we've got to teach these skills. If we want Kindergarten, Year 1, and Year 2 to be sitting back-to-back and knee-to-knee, we've got to teach that routine explicitly so that they understand what that looks like and what they need to do. Equally, if we want students to discuss a text that just doesn't happen by saying, "Go over there and discuss it." We have to teach what a discussion looks like. And in some cases, that means starting with turn taking. It means talking about the kind of language that you would use within a discussion, where you might be saying, "I disagree because. I agree with what you're saying. I want to add to what you're saying."

Jenny Williams:

So there is explicit teaching which is outlined in the syllabus in the speaking and listening outcomes that will give our students the skills they need to engage in rich discussion around text. And that is a very



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

powerful learning tool engaging in that rich discussion and learning not just from the teacher but from their peers.

Carly Boreland:

I just want to ask one more question and we can move on from Guided reading. I want to ask about what good readers sound like because I know there's a lot of-- there have been in past questions about choral reading and are they reading one at a time or what are they reading.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Okay. Again, Guided reading looks different across the school. But essentially, the mantra is - every child reads every word in the whole text. So if we have one child reading the first page while everybody listens on and then moves around the group that means that kids are only doing, depending on the size of the group, one-fifth of the reading. If you have ever sat and listened to someone read a page badly you take very little meaning from it. So the mantra is - every child reads every word of the whole text. Jenny, do you want to elaborate on that?

Jenny Williams:

Well, two things, Mary-Ellen, that come to mind while you're saying that. The first is that we want the teacher to start Guided reading by setting the students up to read with meaning. And then saying to them, "Now, it's your turn to whisper read," and they read quietly while the teacher tunes in to one particular child, or several, over the course of that Guided reading session. Maybe has a quick word with them about what's going well or a new teaching point for them, or maybe takes a quick running record. Once students are reading quietly and silently to themselves, which usually happens somewhere in Year 2, then most of the Guided reading is going to be silent reading. Because once reading becomes silent, while there might be moments we want to check in with students and have a reading conference where we are listening to them read out aloud, they like us, as adults, are used to reading silently. And for students like that, as for us, as adults reading out aloud becomes a different kind of skill. It's a presentation skill. And you're perfecting your volume, your tone, and the way you're speaking in a different character's voice - different skills altogether. So certainly if you're looking at a script or you're reading a poem, you might be getting students to read out aloud. But typically, those Guided reading sessions for students, once they're reading has become silent should be silent reading. (CROSSTALK).

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Sorry. Can I just build on that in terms of, if you are looking at a slightly longer text, it is perfectly fine with independent readers to actually say to them, "You need to come to my discussion table having read that text," so that the focus when you've got the group is around discussing the meaning, the intent, the craft of the text. It is not sitting while we all read a paragraph, even silently, to ourselves and then talking about it. The Guided reading, that discussion, is very much book club in notion in the fact



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

that you're talking about what the text is about. So it's perfectly fine to say, "Well, read up to chapter, page, what have you, before we meet next time."

Because as adults, think about it, if someone said, "We're going to read "War and Peace" aloud, a page at a time, over probably two or three years, wouldn't it? You would kill yourself or the person who asked you to do it (LAUGHTER).

Carly Boreland:

So one thing that we've talked about already is that reading is for meaning. Are there other things that students can learn and improve upon when they're reading as well?

Jenny Williams:

I think K to 2 teachers have always known about the reciprocity between learning to read and write. And so in those early years, we've been very clear about - "what I learn in reading, I can use in writing. What I know in writing, I can use in reading."

One of the really nice features of this current English syllabus is the way that that has been established as a key process not just for K to 2, but for all stages. So when I look on page 24 of the syllabus at that circle diagram and I see as Mary-ellen said before that the centre is 'to make meaning through language' that's the aim of this English syllabus. And I look at the next circle out from that, it is in gold, which means it is important, and what it's looking at is the key process. And in this syllabus, the key process is 'responding and composing'. So even though people are listening to this, I'm making a sign with my hands that there's a connection between what I learn in reading and use in writing. And so understanding that there is a very strong connection between reading and writing is very important. And when we're teaching reading and writing, when we've got that two-hour English Block, we know that learning takes place best within a context. So any ways we can integrate the learning from writing, from grammar, from spelling, into what we're doing in reading, and vice versa, is really important. I find it fascinating that the first dot point of content on each of the spelling outcomes, across every stage, relates to the way in which accurate spelling helps us 'to read for meaning'. And so there is that very strong interconnection between reading and writing.

Mary-ellen Betts:

One of the things we talk about right through the school is using mentor texts and reading a text like a writer. So that when you come to a text you're looking at the craft - what has the author done to create this text? That's what you're pulling apart in your reading part of your workshop. And then in the composing part - the writing part - it's, "Okay. That's what the author did." So how can you use what you've learnt about the writer?" Which is why sometimes you come across a whole lot of writing that has been written in the style of Andy Griffiths. More power to Andy Griffiths, but let's diversify as well



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

in terms of allowing students to see a wide range of mentor texts and then applying the same sort of things that that author has used.

Carly Boreland:

And this is something I'm really interested in in high school. I'm a Modern History teacher, I want students to write essays about the Weimar Republic or Conflict in Europe, something like this. And the way they sometimes begin by crafting that argument, like, "Firstly, I will talk about this. And secondly, I will talk about this." It's so self-conscious. And it takes a long time to-- and I suppose you just need to show them good writing. History writers don't write like that. Really, stumbling, self-conscious. And I guess you need to do that right back in the early years as well.

Jenny Williams:

I think one of the things that's interesting about what you're saying there, is that where we've taught things in isolation-- and we've all done it. For instance, I'm thinking about grammar. I'm thinking about pronoun referencing. And when I look at the syllabus, pronoun referencing is something we teach in Early Stage 1. And yet, it is a very key tool in making a text cohesive. So if I look at a well-written text and I go, "How has the author made this text cohesive?" And I show students by pulling out the nouns and the pronoun references they can see at a glance what has made that text cohesive rather than me teaching nouns and pronouns in isolation. It has a function within that text. So if I do that in reading then I can carry that through, as Mary-Ellen says, by using as a mentor text. Even if I'm only looking at a paragraph, or a page, and not necessarily the whole text. And I can look at that and go, "I'm reading it like a writer. What's the strength? What helps me to understand as I read this page of text? Now, how can I use that in my writing?" And it becomes much tighter and there's much more chance of students developing a writing style that's real, rather than stylised, and impractical, formulaic writing.

Carly Boreland:

Sort of the joy of writing or crafting that sentence or that paragraph can come through. Could we talk about right at the end of what we're trying to do with reading and comprehension and synthesising everything together? So how do we bring all of that together in a way that means that students can enjoy the thing they're reading without over studying it, maybe? Is that a goal, or a problem?

Jenny Williams:

No, no. I think we're both thinking about how to do that. There are texts that I've worked with for years and "Mrs. Wishy-Washy" is the one that I use. It's a great big book. But you know what, if it's the 13th year in a row that I've pulled it out of the big book bag to do it with a class and I don't feel excited and enthusiastic, then it's time to put it away. Because the things we are passionate about as teachers are what conveys passion and excitement to our students. And there are so many books. If we're excited



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

about the books we're choosing and reading then our students will be as well. And I think for me that's the key to it.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

One of the things you notice is when you open a book and you read the opening sentence and you hear teachers go, "Oh," you know you've hit a good one. And that is exactly what we want from our kids. So we as teachers need to open books on a daily basis. Get into the library. Pin the librarian's ears back, "I'm interested in these sorts of texts," and actually fund quality texts that make you go, "Oh. I want to read some more." And that's what we want our kids to do.

Carly Boreland:

Jenny and Mary-Ellen, thank you so much for chatting to us about your love of reading today. You've been listening to the JPL Podcast for the Teacher's Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the editor of the JPL. I've been talking Sandra Rowan and Jenny Williams from Trio Professional Learning. And if you'd like to find out more about our podcasts or to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction, by Jason Nicholas.

Jenny Williams has extensive teaching experience including secondary English and primary K-6. In addition she has worked as a support teacher learning difficulties.

Her enthusiasm for early literacy and working with students whose literacy is at risk led her to train as a Reading Recovery teacher and subsequently work as a Reading Recovery tutor. As an educational consultant she has worked in Western Sydney and New York supporting teachers as they developed their literacy practice, quality teaching pedagogy and mathematics instruction. She has supported whole school improvement in a number of schools in Australia and overseas, working with school executive teams and school staff to invigorate teaching practice leading to whole school change. In recent years she has presented at several literacy conferences and co-authored literacy-teaching resources.

Mary-Ellen Betts has over 30 years experience in K-6 schools as a school leader, classroom teacher and consultant. She has developed expertise in literacy education and co-authored a teacher resource book.



www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Teaching Reading and Comprehension K-6

From 2000 – 2006 Mary-ellen worked as a literacy consultant in Australia and New York City. The focus of this work was to support schools in improving educational outcomes for all students. She worked with teachers and principals at school and district level to improve pedagogy in literacy and to analyse data to inform instruction.

Mary-ellen is currently working as independent Educational Consultant for schools in NSW.