Premier’s Sport and Tourism Youth Foundation Special Education Scholarship

Professional Development of Collaborative Strategic Reading

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INTRODUCTION

*Collaborative Strategic Reading* (CSR) is a research based strategy which provides an instructional approach based upon reading comprehension strategies that help strengthen students’ comprehension skills and ultimately, literacy. These literacy skills for youth are the “cornerstone of schooling” for young Australians over the next decade (Australian, 2008, p.5). The acquisition of literacy skills is critical as it enables a person to participate in the workplace, the community and offers high school students the opportunity to continue on to post-secondary education.

The systematic implementation of research-based literacy strategies in high school settings can be a crucial component in helping Australia to achieve the goal of effective elimination of barriers to learning and to improve literacy outcomes for all students including those with learning and behavioural difficulties. Implementing such research based literacy strategies is consistent with National Declaration on the Education Goals for Young Australians (2008) commitment to best practice and the series of action plans developed throughout 2009-2012. However, for students to acquire, develop and refine these skills, which equip them to participate fully as future citizens, high school teachers themselves require access to, instruction in and support with the relevant strategies and resources.

CSR was developed to improve reading comprehension and increase conceptual learning in ways that maximize students' involvement through participation and group work and their learning autonomy, by providing them with the skills to build their own comprehension. It was originally developed to assist students with learning difficulties or those at risk of reading difficulties, but it has also yielded positive outcomes for average and high average achieving students (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, in press).

In the United States of America, CSR is currently used with a wide variety of learners including English language learners (ESL); students with learning difficulties; those reading below grade-level, as well as average and high-achieving students. While CSR is studied in Australia, as yet, it is not used, even in small scale pilot programmes or by individual teachers. There is little research supporting how it might be implemented successfully in the Australian context.

I proposed to investigate the use and modifications of CSR in the classroom environment and see first-hand what support and training teachers received, by taking a study tour to schools in Colorado and Texas, the two centres of CSR implementation and research in the United States.

The specific aims of my study tour were:

* 1. To see CSR in the live environment, across a range of middle schools with students in years 5 to 8;
  2. To collect insights into the ways that CSR is presently and best implemented in the middle school context;
  3. To explore the level and type of training for teachers using the CSR program, their methods and variations to the program and the support they received
  4. To find out how students of mixed achievement levels are helped by applying comprehension strategies in small groups.

With access to the teachers, researchers and creators of CSR, I was able to observe students applying the strategies, teachers applying their approaches, and to question and discuss these in detail, post-observation.

The four stages of CSR and how they work

Stage 1 Before reading

**- previewing the text before reading each section in order to:**

* + Learn as much about the passage as they can in a brief period of time (2-3 minutes) by looking at headings, illustrations and context
  + Activate students’ background knowledge about the topic, and
  + Make predictions about what they will learn.

Previewing serves to motivate students' interest in the topic and engages them in active reading from the outset.

The teacher introduces the topic of the text, usually an expository or a non-fiction text (as he or she would in a standard comprehension exercise), pre-teaching vocabulary and building background knowledge, connecting to students’ prior knowledge or the curriculum content. Next, the students brainstorm this topic, where they might look at headings, words that are bolded or underlined and pictures, tables, graphs, and other key information, sharing this information with other students. They then preview the passage, writing their predictions about what they might learn, in their learning logs. As a final preparation, the teacher sets the purpose for reading.

Stage 2 During reading

A**)** Using "click" (I get it/ I understand) or "clunk" (I don't get it/understand) at the end of each paragraph to break down text.

Students reading each section of the passage divide the text up into Clicks and Clunks. They learn to monitor their understanding and identify when they have gaps and when they understand. Clicks refer to portions of the text that make sense to the reader: comprehension clicks into place as the reader proceeds smoothly through the text. When a student comes to a word, concept, or idea that does not make sense, comprehension breaks down, for example, when students do not know the meaning of a word, it is marked as a clunk.

Students who experience reading and learning problems often fail to monitor their understanding when they read. Breaking text into Clicks and Clunks is designed to teach them to pay attention to when they are understanding – or when they are coming across something unfamiliar -and to write them in their learning logs. The teacher then asks, "Is everything clicking? Who has clunks about the section we just read?" Students know that they will be asked this question and are alert to identify clunks and clicks during reading.

Students then work together, using ‘Fix-up strategies’ to discover what their clunks mean. The fix up strategies involve:

* + Looking for key ideas that make sense
  + Rereading the sentence,
  + Looking for clues to understanding the clunk,
  + Breaking the word apart to look for recognisable smaller words or word roots
  + Looking for a cognate that makes sense.
  + Rereading the sentence without the word.
  + Thinking about what information is provided that would help you understand the meaning of the word.
  + Reread the sentence with the clunk and the sentences before or after the clunk looking for clues.
  + Looking for a prefix or suffix in the word.
  + Breaking the word apart and look for familiar smaller words which are already familiar or understood

B) ‘Getting the gist” of what clunks and the text mean, creating a ‘super gist’

After the initial reading, when those parts of the text which are understood and those parts which the student does not recognize or understand, have been identified and written up in log books as clicks and clunks, the next challenge is "getting the gist" of the most important ideas within each section of the text and, ultimately the complete passage. Here, students find the most important ‘who’ or ‘what’, which may be a person, place or thing, from the each paragraph of the reading and then write out the ‘gist’ for each paragraph in their own 10 words. This is then completed for each of the paragraphs and then students work in groups to compare their gists, for each individual paragraph. Once the gists have been written and decided within a group – to make sure they have the salient ideas from each section, students then work on a ‘super gist’, which sums up the entire text in less than ten words. Strict adherence to the ten word limit focuses the students’ minds and directs them to write concisely.

Getting the gist and the super gist provide a method to check comprehension rather than mere familiarity of singular words, in a context, where the full message and understanding of the text may be incomplete. This also provides practice in writing, and formulating their own ideas. Students’ stating the most important point in their own words can also improve their memory and retention of what they have learned.

Stage 3 After Reading

**– Questions using the text and then collaborating to find the best answers**

This stage works with a more complex level of understanding built on the foundation of comprehension from the deployment of earlier strategies. Students learn to wrap up by formulating questions and answers about what they have been reading and by reviewing key ideas to improve their knowledge, understanding and memory of the text.

The best way to teach wrap up is to tell students to use the question starters Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Students then generate questions that ask about important information in the passage they have just read. Teachers can invite students to think of questions they would ask on a test if they were the teacher, to find out if their students really understood what they had read. Other students should try to answer their peer’s questions. If a question cannot be answered, that might mean it is not a good question and needs to be clarified.

At the most simple level, students devise a question that can be answered directly by a sentence in the text. At the second level, the created question can be answered by several points of information in the text, while at the third, most difficult level, the question cannot be answered by the text alone. Here, only by combining what the reader has read with what the reader already knows and how it all fits together, can the question be answered. Such questions involve higher-level thinking skills, rather than literal recall, so can be a combination of or inference of facts or events.

In the wrap up, teacher reviews and summarises the content of the text and the students’ comprehension, while also recapping and reinforcing the CSR strategies themselves. This improves the readers’ ability to breakdown and understand text when reading alone.

Stage 4 Wrap-up, Groupwork and CSR roles

The two roles – teacher / leader of strategies, and students (collaborating in a group and working alone)

In the course of utilising CSR strategies, teachers assign students to groups of mixed ability, to promote collaboration among students, in addition, there are roles for a single students identified as a Gist Expert and a Question Expert in each group. These lead students ensure all students write their own gists and questions. The teacher nominates a ‘leader’ who is usually the student most likely to be capable of understanding the text or of using the tools of CSR, to arrive at comprehension, who then guides the sharing and reflecting on the gist and the questions within the smaller group and eventually the whole group. Each student within the group plays a critical role associated with the functioning of the group and the implementation of the strategies. (Boardman et al, in Boon and Spencer, 2013, p102)

When the text is worked on as a group, the students help each other to understand, using the fix up strategies and by working together to identify and then remedy the gaps in their comprehension. This provides a structured approach to comprehension; a scaffolding for applying the techniques which assist with comprehension that students, after some practice in the group context, can then use themselves, individually to assist with their own comprehension.

In this peer environment, students who struggle with comprehension can learn from those further ahead – with the assistance of stronger students using the fix up strategies or through their interpretation of clunks. At the same time, stronger students are equipped with a structure for enriching their own approaches to comprehension and a system for organising their understanding in a way that supports them while they assist others.

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| **Destination** | **Purpose** |
| **Department Education University of Colorado, Boulder** | Discussed current research project, CSR Colorado, with organisers.  Participated in and observed training opportunities available in CSR and a variety of special educational areas including collaboration, assessment, and inclusion.  Made adaptations to CSR for students with a mild level of intellectual disability based on my observations and in consultation with Dr. Klingner. |
| **Denver Local District Public Schools (DPS)**  ***Skinner Middle School***  ***Martin Luther King*** | Observed teaching CSR and implementation of CSR in a range of schools.  Made anecdotal notes for research and to assist with the development of the CSR resource kit for NSW DET. |
| **University of Texas** | Inquired about current research and present and future resources for CSR.  Spoke to Dr. Vaughn about areas of note that are beginning to show with the current CSR project grant and effective strategies for professional development of CSR and the implementation of CSR in schools in Australia. Held discussions with the Texan research team about the adaptation of CSR for students with Autism including the creation of computer app |
| **Austin Local Schools** | Observe schools with Dr Vaughn implementing and participating in current research by Dr Vaughn and Dr Reutbach. |

SIGNIFICANT LEARNING FROM THE STUDY TOUR

**CSR in the classroom and research contexts**

On reflection, it was extremely useful it was to see CSR in action with the many iterations and modifications employed, according to teacher needs or the composition of student groups or specific lesson outcomes. In some implementations and variations I saw, there were similar modifications and adaptations to those that I use. It was encouraging to have the flexibility of the programme reinforced and also receive confirmation that my thinking around extension of the strategies is consistent with teachers and research in the USA where CSR has been most widely implemented and monitored.

Where CSR was being used for children who were “reading to learn” it assisted the process of using tools for reading as well as providing keys to *unlocking understanding* (comprehension*)* and enhancing learning. I saw the versatility of CSR across a spectrum of abilities; from children who are behind in reading, as a tool to improve their comprehension and for stronger students as a tool to assist their learning when working with unfamiliar texts or concepts. This led me to conclude too, that there is the possibility to adapt CSR towards the needs of children who have a mild intellectual disability.

While I did not see CSR being used in this way on my research trip, I had conversations with Dr Vaughn who has been considering how to adapt CSR strategies for children with Autism. Drs Vaughn and Klingner’s response to my ideas and suggestions for its use with students with a mild level of intellectual disability was very positive. They were both keen to hear about my current PhD research which, with permission from the principal Ms Virginia Pacey and the Department of Education and Communities, will involve the use of CSR to support the comprehension skills of students with a mild level of intellectual disability enrolled in the IM class at Kogarah High School

The value of seeing teachers in operation was being able to record how each uses CSR according to their students’ own needs and experience. In some cases, I noted that students found it difficult to get the click and clunk working – this seemed to occur only in situations where there was insufficient or unfamiliar background and context. This highlighted for me the role of the teacher in preparing the students for the context of the material and subject matter, in addition to providing instruction and a solid grounding in the use of the CSR strategies at each of the four stages. When this contextual information was available, I consistently saw excellent results in comprehension for students using CSR for reading and understanding for students using it as part of their learning strategies.

There is also value in having iterations and modifications to the techniques over years, as they are flexible and still function in different circumstances. I noticed that results when using CSR were particularly strong when students were taught the full suite of strategies in sequence – before starting on comprehension tasks, and then had CSR reinforced periodically – up to two times a week. This served to keep the tactics in students minds – at the ready to be applied – without making them boring or overbearing.

Seeing so many different examples and context gave me some firm ideas around how CSR can be applied and extended in the Australian context. Given the high rate of success with improving comprehension and fostering literacy skills that CSR has demonstrated in research and situations which I visited, there is scope for the strategies to be implemented in Australia. These could support those who are behind or struggling with reading and comprehension as well as students who are struggling with reading as the result of mild intellectual disability.

**Teacher Training**

Teachers benefited from the close proximity of the CSR coaches and the continued involvement of researchers examining the strategies and contexts in which they are applied.

The teachers were supported by the iterative nature of CSR, especially as there was considerable and continuous feedback over the course of the teaching periods – more than 10 years – so the methodologies have been constantly refined and updated and the elements of best practice have been shared.

The teachers were all familiar with CSR through having studied it. When their interest in it is first aroused, they receive support from more experienced practitioners and theorists and thus gain confidence in applying the strategies. They are then better equipped to adapt the strategies to suit their students’ learning needs and the environment.

The culture of practitioners of CSR is very collaborative; between teachers and researchers and teachers within schools and across states. This contributes to the flexibility and dynamism of the programme and provides considerable support for canvassing and trying new ideas and approaches. This collaboration also reflects the internal workings of CSR, where students work in small groups to help each other with clunks, fix up strategies, generating questions and finding the full meaning of the text as part of wrap up.

Teacher training for CSR includes not only the formal study and familiarisation with the strategies and their tools, but also being mentored and having access to other more experienced practitioners using CSR in the live environment,. I noticed too that ongoing support networks, between and within schools, sometimes informal, also played a part in teacher competence and confidence in using CSR.

CONCLUSION

Students who struggle with comprehension, reading and learning benefit enormously from the use of CSR strategies that provide them with a method to approach comprehension in a systematic, structured and supported way. The strategies of CSR are highly adaptable and can be deployed across a variety of students, school contexts and student ability levels.

Experienced teachers who have received the appropriate skills development, mentoring and support can implement these strategies to foster comprehension and increase literacy using the methodology and group work tools of CSR. Students collaborate to improve their comprehension, work in groups to increase their understanding and acquire strategies that can then use autonomously to improve their reading and their reading to learn.

Furthermore, ideas I discussed about taking the strategies into the arena of special education, for students with a mild intellectual disability, were well received by Dr Vaughn and other the lead researchers and converged with their thinking about the potential for the strategies to students with Autism.

CSR is a powerful strategy for comprehension, literacy and learning that I believe is highly suitable and adaptable to the NSW context. I would recommend that it be implemented in at least a pilot project to canvass the opportunities for implementation.

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