



NSW Department of Education Ambassador Schools research summary report

Introduction

The Ambassador Schools program aimed to deepen the evidence base of effective teaching and learning practices across NSW public schools. The research contributed to the growing evidence of effective practices in NSW public schools to inform ongoing improvement. Ten schools were selected to participate in this research as Ambassador Schools for their strong performance compared with contextually similar schools across a range of measures. These measures included NAPLAN top two bands targets for reading and numeracy, expected growth, attendance, and HSC performance.

This research identified the specific practices and enabling conditions that have contributed to the impact of Ambassador Schools. It adopted a strengths-based approach that recognised that effective practices can be found across a range of New South Wales (NSW) government schools. It was framed by a review of the research literature on effective teaching and learning and leadership practices, including the NSW Department of Education's (NSW DoE) *What Works Best*. This research sought to build upon what is already known about effective practices to uncover what is distinctive about the ways in which they were implemented in Ambassador Schools to enhance their effectiveness.

Literature review

The literature review centred on pedagogical and leadership practices that lead to enhanced academic achievement and other positive student outcomes. Literature sources from Australia and internationally were included in the review if they met the following criteria:

1. Discussed and analysed pedagogical and/or leadership practices that directly or indirectly positively impacted student outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, improved wellbeing); and
2. Were conducted in Australia or other similar national and socioeconomic contexts (e.g., the US, Canada, the UK).

The literature review included peer-reviewed studies published within a broad timeframe (1965–2022) to incorporate a range of formative sources. It encompassed primary and secondary research, qualitative and quantitative data, and various sample sizes, with concerted effort made to include studies conducted in diverse contexts.

The literature review found strong evidence supporting the use of a number of practices,

including explicit teaching, effective school wide approaches to classroom management, catering for the diversity of student capacities and needs in curriculum delivery, teacher collaboration, the use of distributed and instructional leadership practices, engaging effectively with the school community, and supporting student wellbeing and belonging. There is strong alignment between these practices and those recommended in the NSW DoE *What Works Best: 2020 Update* report.

Although existing studies offer strong empirical evidence to support the use of these practices, the literature review highlighted a number of gaps in the research. Most significant and important to this research is the impact of context on student outcomes. Collectively, the gaps identified in the literature review establish the need for further research of effective practices that contribute causally to the success of high performing schools within their unique school contexts.

[▶ Read the literature review](#)



Methods

The research was aimed at addressing the research objectives of the Ambassador Schools Research Centre, namely to:



develop a body of rigorous, evidence-based research on effective practices that characterise Ambassador Schools and that contribute causally to their success; and



identify effective practices that can be tested and then applied in contextually similar schools where appropriate.

A rigorous mixed methods approach involving multiple participant groups (principals, teachers, students, parents) and multiple data collection techniques (interviews, focus groups, surveys, classroom observations, and shadowing) was used. The practices that were identified emerged from the synthesis and analysis of data across participant groups and data types. Multiple stakeholder perspectives allowed nuance and specificity on each practice.

The research participants represented 26 schools including the 10 Ambassador Schools (AS). The schools were broadly representative of NSW government schools in terms of the distribution of primary and secondary schools, and rural and metropolitan schools. A unique feature and strength of the research was its co-design, bringing together university-based research expertise (the Ambassador Schools Research Centre) and the systemic knowledge of the NSW DoE's Ambassador Schools.

The research employed a strengths-based approach, which focused on the strengths and positive potential of the students, educators, families, and other relevant groups as the primary focus of inquiry. This approach recognised that effective practices are evident across all NSW public schools.

Ambassador Schools Research Findings

The substantive findings from this research have been grouped into specific teaching and learning practices and enabling conditions. These elements are often difficult to separate, and all are bounded by their context. In addition, their effectiveness as well as their distinctiveness in Ambassador Schools is dependent on the way in which they are implemented, including their combination with other practices and conditions.

These specific learning and teaching practices emerged from synthesised findings from each of the various data collection methods employed in this research. These practices and enabling conditions have been identified through deep analysis of at least three of the data sets, including the voices of a range of research participants.

School Context

Context typically refers to the characteristics of the setting, and the circumstances, within which a practice is implemented. This may include location, resourcing, staff characteristics (such as skills and experience), and student factors such as socio-economic status, Indigeneity and gender. While context is often taken for granted, and not well articulated in research literature, it is nearly universally understood to exert a major influence on educational practices and achievement.

In this research a school's context was never seen as a limitation as to why something could not be enacted or achieved; instead, it was the basis of realistic assessment of the opportunities and limitations of the context that then enabled deliberate design to be undertaken. As such the way

each school went about their effective practices was distinct from one another.

Many of the practices identified are not new and many schools are likely to be already implementing such practices. However, it is instead the fidelity of their implementation and enactment in their context that is most significant in the Ambassador Schools. This goes to leadership and school culture, and the consistent and deliberate use of multiple forms of data to inform and monitor practices. Each school was characterised by a clear vision accompanied by a deliberate strategy based on cooperation, collaboration and the development of shared values. That staff felt engaged, empowered and involved, and students felt valued and cared for created the preconditions for the practices.

Key practices

 <p>Data-informed practice</p>	<p>Data-informed practices were embedded in the cultures of Ambassador Schools. Teachers used their knowledge of students' prior achievement and needs to provide appropriately challenging work. Strategic planning decisions at the school level were based on the analysis of data generated at system and school levels.</p>
 <p>Explicit teaching</p>	<p>Teachers ensured students were clear about what they were learning in each lesson and how they would know they had achieved that learning. Instruction was clear and engaging, lessons followed predictable patterns, and students received immediate feedback on their efforts.</p>
 <p>High expectations</p>	<p>The expectation that every student could and would achieve was conveyed through appropriately challenging work and systematic encouragement and support for students and their families.</p>
 <p>Instructional support and leadership</p>	<p>In concert with explicit teaching, differentiated instruction was used to ensure that all students were appropriately challenged and supported to learn. School leaders were focused on the school's core business – student learning – and ensured that the school's routines and structures were focused on supporting teaching and learning. Leaders had the necessary curriculum expertise to lead teaching and learning.</p>
 <p>Classroom management</p>	<p>The routines of explicit teaching contributed to orderly classroom environments. There was a relentless focus on maintaining the conditions in which learning could occur. This underpinned behaviour management which was proactive with teachers moving about the classroom providing guidance and encouragement.</p>
 <p>Whole school vision/approaches</p>	<p>Ambassador Schools leaders had a clear vision for their school based on shared values. Effective practices were instituted consistently and coherently across the school and were understood and supported by staff.</p>
 <p>Positive teacher/student relationships</p>	<p>Interactions between teachers and students, and between principals and students, were consistently positive. Students appeared to enjoy talking with their teachers, and principals orchestrated opportunities to interact with students throughout the day.</p>
 <p>Focus on student wellbeing</p>	<p>Ambassador Schools were proactive and systematic in providing support for students. The strategy and approaches adopted were based upon deep knowledge of students, their circumstances, and their needs.</p>
 <p>Teacher and student agency</p>	<p>Trust and respect underpinned collaborative relationships in Ambassador Schools. Teachers decided how whole school approaches could be applied in their classrooms and subject areas. In the context of explicit teaching, students had choices about the degree of challenge and the examples with which they engaged.</p>
 <p>Growth orientation</p>	<p>Classrooms were focused on learning rather than competition and performance. Teachers created and sustained environments in which students could challenge themselves and learn from failures as well as success.</p>

Enabling conditions allowed teachers and school leaders to implement the effective practices. While not practices as such, enabling conditions resulted from deliberate choices and actions on the part of school leaders and teachers. They supported the practices and were reinforced by those practices.

Enabling conditions	
 Collaborative practices	<p>Collaboration among staff was supported by organisational structures and underpinned by professional trust and respect. Collaboration was essential to the effective implementation of whole school approaches, and increased the likelihood that initiatives were understood and adopted with high fidelity across the school, thereby optimising impacts on student learning. Collaboration was a key means by which teachers learnt and developed their practice.</p>
 Wellbeing and emotional support	<p>Student supports were proactive and based on the deep knowledge of their students and their communities and were delivered in an ethos of kindness and care. School environments fostered a sense of belonging, mitigating circumstances that distract from learning.</p>
 Growth mindset	<p>Ambassador Schools were characterised by a belief that everyone – staff and students – can learn and get better at learning. A growth mindset underpinned every practice from high expectations and explicit teaching to the focus on wellbeing and emotional support.</p>
 Professional learning	<p>Ongoing professional learning was embedded in school cultures, and strategically directed towards areas of student learning need. The impacts of professional learning were monitored and evaluated, and practices recalibrated as a result. There was a shared understanding that teaching and learning could always be improved.</p>
 Proactive leadership	<p>School leaders in Ambassador Schools were visible and active in school activities on a daily basis. They were aware of events and positioned to respond proactively and deliberately to challenges. These school leaders did not wait for problems to happen before responding.</p>
 Routines	<p>Analogous to the routines associated with explicit teaching, routines characterised the organisation of Ambassador Schools. Routines supported consistency and efficient use of time in a calm, caring environment focused on learning.</p>

The research provides evidence of the crucial role that enabling conditions played in the effective implementation of the distinctive practices identified in Ambassador Schools, and how they uniquely interconnect in mutually reinforcing ways. Working together, practices and enabling conditions may optimise impact within a school's unique context, including low socio-economic variables to address a range of diverse needs.

In summary, the Ambassador Schools research identified and reinforced the effectiveness of a range of evidence-based practices across NSW public schools. It generated new knowledge for the system about the fundamental importance of enabling conditions and the ways they mutually reinforce and align with effective practices. The reinforcing interrelationship between leadership, enabling conditions and teaching and learning practices is an important nexus not deeply explored and examined in educational reform research. These findings contribute to further strengthening the implementation of effective practices aimed at improving student learning outcomes across our diverse school contexts. Research findings will be embedded into existing and future work to further support NSW public schools.



References

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2020). *What Works Best: 2020 Update*. Retrieved from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/research-reports/what-works-best-2020-update>