



**Establishing our  
Darkinjung Barker  
Reading Programmes**

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## About the Author

**Michele Studd** is currently Head of Learning Support. Prior to coming to Barker, she was Director of Middle Years at Northholm Grammar and she has held various Special Education teaching and consultancy roles. Michele's particular areas of interest include supporting all students to achieve their personal best and working collaboratively with classroom teachers to plan and establish inclusive and effective classroom learning environments.

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# Establishing our Darkinjung Barker Reading Programmes



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## Abstract

The opening of our Darkinjung Baker Campus was met with great excitement and anticipation. In the first few weeks of Term 1, students and staff were busily getting to know each other, daily routines were being established, learning approaches were being formalised and the process of assessing each of our students' reading strengths and areas of need had begun. The results of these assessments provided staff with a clear direction for the focus that our reading program needed to take. This information guided the design we adopted for both our class and homework reading programs. This paper provides an overview of the assessment tools used, the reading data highlighted by these assessments, along with the approach we adopted and types of activities we incorporated into our programs. Throughout this first year, our reading programs have continued to be fine-tuned as our students' reading needs have changed. The end-of-year testing results have highlighted that our students have made good progress with their reading skills. These positive results have been very encouraging, but each staff member recognises that it is vital that we continue to monitor our students' reading performance closely and make ongoing changes to our programs.

**Student:** *Hi, my name is Allan and I love to read.*

**Interviewer:** *What books do you like to read?*

**Student:** *"Sam" and "On the Mat" (proudly holding up the class readers).*

**Interviewer:** *What is your favourite book?*

**Student:** *"Pig the Elf" (a book from the Books in Home programme).*

**Interviewer:** *Why is it your favourite?*

**Student:** *Because it is so, so funny.*

This interview was recorded at the completion of the first year of operation of our Darkinjung Barker reading program. This student's pride in his developing reading skills along with his growing love of books is in total contrast to his attitude to reading at the beginning of the year. At the beginning of the year, he, like some of his other classmates, appeared to have little interest in books and reading.

The reading program we have developed and implemented is informed by ongoing teacher observations and assessment data. It aims to develop and strengthen each of our student's reading skills, to foster their love of books and reading and to develop their confidence, allowing them to see themselves as readers.

## Initial assessment – The Five Keys to Reading

While our initial reading skills assessments highlighted that some of our students had scored 'at' or 'above' grade level, what was of great concern were the significant reading skill gaps possessed by many of our students.

A range of curriculum-based measures and standardised tests was selected to assess the students' reading strengths and areas that required further development. The specific skill areas being assessed were focused around the essential components of a quality literacy program. These reading components include: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension. In addition, spelling assessments for the older students and Concepts of Print assessments for the younger students were completed.

Analysis of the assessment data provided us with a clear programming direction. In general terms, our students' perceptions of themselves as readers was poor: self-efficacy levels were low and a common response in attempting to read a 'difficult' word or being asked to answer, in some cases, even a literal level comprehension question was simply to say: "I don't know". This response was often instantaneous. It appeared that the students did not possess, nor could effectively access a bank of strategies either to decode a word or search a text to find the answer to a comprehension question. A number of the students also found it challenging to sustain their focus and to even attempt to read what they perceived as being too long. In one case, a student refused to attempt to read even one word from a short paragraph of writing given to him. The student's immediate response was "that's too much". Encouragement by the assessor for the student to "have a go" was met with a determined, "NO, I don't want to!"

Our programs needed to address a broad range of literacy skill areas as well as foster and increase each student's reading engagement and self-efficacy. In terms of our students' ability to decode words successfully, we needed to develop and strengthen their phonological awareness skills (ability to hear and manipulate sounds) in conjunction with their phonics knowledge. We needed to model and teach comprehension skills explicitly and to develop our students' vocabulary knowledge. We had to create opportunities for each of our students to engage in and practise their reading regularly.

## Fostering a love of reading

As the year began we realised that it was vital that our students were provided with daily opportunities to engage with reading. Generous donations ensured that we could surround the students with books. Daily book readings by the students' teachers as well as visitors provided our students with rich and enjoyable opportunities to engage with reading. It has been heartwarming to see the increasing levels of engagement and enjoyment in reading across all of our students.

Book reading sessions are now characterised by class choral responses to repeated rhyming lines within a story, students offering character/story predictions, asking questions and finding detail and, of course, lots of laughing and giggling!

## Our reading programmes

Our reading programmes have continued to develop throughout the year, designed to address our students' learning needs and to target their reading gaps. The programs have operated using either a whole-class or small-group approach. In addition, for some of the older students who have required targeted intensive support, individual programs have been implemented to supplement other elements of their reading programme.

Our daily reading group sessions are comprised of a range of activities. Systematic phonics instruction along with explicit phonemic awareness activities are key and distinct components of our reading program. The scope and sequence of the letter sound as well as phonological awareness skills' introduction has been determined by the Jolly Phonics Programme and the English K-10 Syllabus.

The younger students learn, identify and read/write letter sounds (and the Jolly Phonics' actions that match the sound) during each session. Students are engaged in a range of word blending and segmenting tasks. They particularly enjoy our 'Action Hero' activity where they have to blend/segment the sounds of secret words. Structured book reading sessions provide opportunities to build vocabulary and comprehension skills as well as to strengthen the students' phonological awareness skills. Students also have multiple opportunities to practise their reading using our phonic-based readers.

The older students complete their phonics and phonemic awareness activities in conjunction with their spelling activities. Differentiated and targeted weekly spelling lists/activities are used in small groups. The structured whole-class reading sessions provide the opportunity to reinforce and develop vocabulary as well as the students' comprehension skills. The students have been taught to use the 4H reading comprehension strategy to allow them to search for information actively. Students also practise their reading throughout the day in their reading groups as well as during peer and buddy reading times. A group of the older students also complete individual reading program lessons to supplement their class based programs.

## End-of-year testing

The end-of-year testing highlighted that our students have made good growth in all aspects (accuracy, fluency and comprehension) of their reading and in their spelling. They are now far more willing to 'have a go' and to engage with texts/words directly. The students were able to apply a range of active reading skills (including re-reading and think-and-search skills) to answer their comprehension questions. This was in stark contrast to the typical student response ('I don't know') at the beginning of the year. In the end-of-year spelling test, students were checking back over their words and sounding them out to make sure they were correct. One student, excitedly under their breath, commented: "I know this" when one of the spelling words was read out. Another student, who at the beginning of the year only attempted one of the test spelling words and then refused to go on, attempted over 50 words in the end-of-year test.

The confidence levels of each of our students has also risen significantly – they now see themselves as readers. Comments such as "I'm a good reader now", "Mr Shack, are we doing reading now? I love reading" and "Can I read to you now?" affirm and highlight the students' pride and growing confidence in their newly-acquired reading skills.

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