

Signature Practice 1 Narrative

Balanced Literacy

1. Rationale/Basis for the Practice

The Village Elementary School staff is committed to preparing our students to become successful learners in the 21st century. Since reading comprehension is the cornerstone of learning success for all students, we decided in 2004-05 to evaluate our students' performance in this area. After district staff examined CST test data, they established a reading comprehension committee. This committee reviewed data and determined that most students were making excellent progress in English-Language Arts *except* in the area of reading comprehension. Once the committee presented their findings and supporting data at a faculty meeting, the teachers agreed to embark upon a journey to improve reading comprehension for all students. This decision ultimately resulted in a five-year school-wide plan for systematic professional development, implementation of balanced literacy instruction, and an emphasis upon students' ability to use higher order thinking skills. Following a year-long study of data that included examination of the instructional practices at Village and extensive research into current "best practices", an inquiry question emerged: *What methods of instruction will improve our students' overall reading comprehension?* The committee then created a two-year professional development program for the entire K-5 staff called "The Bridge to Comprehension."

"The Bridge" identified four essential behaviors of effective readers, the ability to predict, question, clarify, and summarize. Eight strategies became the pillars that support "The Bridge": previewing/infering, making connections, self-questioning, visualizing, developing vocabulary, monitoring and clarifying, summarizing, and evaluating. Over the next two years, members of the reading comprehension committee researched, organized, and presented materials and lessons on these eight pillars. All staff members participated in this systematic professional development and began implementing the strategies with students in their classrooms.

Simultaneously, Village embarked on a process of school-wide planning to develop a site specific academic Strategic Plan based on data and needs of the students. The strategic planning committee comprising teacher representatives, parents, and administrators, considered input from all representative groups and prioritized identified needs. This process paralleled the work of the reading comprehension committee and validated its findings. The Strategic Plan established specific school-wide goals to improve reading comprehension based upon the state content standards. Since then, we have implemented the Strategic Plan, and its goals have been reevaluated and updated yearly.

After the first two years of implementing "The Bridge to Comprehension", CST and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)/Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) assessment data indicated some improvement in reading comprehension. However, the data also revealed the need for more growth. CST scores in reading comprehension provided an objective measure of our overall improvement in English Language Arts but also revealed only minimal improvement in reading comprehension. Working closely with students, teachers saw the need to build strong connections between "The Bridge" strategies in order for students to make meaning of text. With this more targeted focus, the reading comprehension committee

continued researching best practices found in *Reading for Life*, *On Solid Ground*, and Lucy Calkins' units of study.

Out of this study, our goal became clear. We wanted all students to demonstrate better reading comprehension, as evidenced by their ability to synthesize, evaluate, and critique both fiction and non-fiction text. We decided the next step was to use the balanced literacy approach for instruction of reading comprehension skills, emphasizing the importance of reading for meaning.

2. Description of the Practice

Continuing research determined that our instructional approaches needed to be realigned, systematic, and consistent across all grade levels. We hired a literacy consultant to assist in implementing balanced literacy instruction based upon the "gradual release of responsibility model" (Pearson and Gallagher, 1993) which includes reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading and independent reading and conferencing. The consultant provided professional development for the reading comprehension committee and assisted at newly implemented professional learning community (PLC) meetings. She worked with the entire faculty, differentiating content to meet the specific needs of upper elementary and primary grades. The Village lead teacher coordinated materials, information, monthly professional development meetings, as well as weekly PLCs for each grade level. Teachers and administrators also attended a variety of workshops devoted to literacy, and in particular, primary teachers attended a workshop conducted by literacy expert from Columbia University, Sharon Taberski.

As part of our ongoing professional development, in 2007-08, our entire staff visited a local school with both similar demographics and consistently improving reading comprehension test scores. Teachers participated in PLC discussions with that staff, observed classroom instruction, and analyzed student achievement. These observations and conversations enhanced our understanding of how to instruct higher-order thinking through a balanced literacy approach. During the visits, Village staff observed teachers instructing *Seminars in Critical Thinking*, a thinking/reading/writing curriculum which emphasizes the connection between higher-order thinking and writing via read-alouds and shared reading. All Village teachers implemented balanced literacy instruction, and our fourth grade teachers, along with several others, decided to pilot *Seminars in Critical Thinking*.

One hundred percent of Village students receive reading instruction through balanced literacy approaches. During read alouds, the teacher models reading strategies, especially higher level thinking. In shared reading, students engage in group problem solving and conversation about the meaning of the text. Throughout guided reading, students take on more responsibility for reading, with appropriate instructional support from the teacher. As independent readers, students read text for meaning. For example, in second grade, students compare and contrast to make meaning across texts. Fourth grade students write theme statements and cite evidence from text. By fifth grade, students evaluate and critique narrative and expository text. At each grade level, teachers assess the instructional needs of students through conferencing. The student-teacher interaction establishes mutual goals and provides opportunities for student-driven curriculum. The information garnered during conferences is the driving force in selecting future instructional strategies.

At Village, all teachers draw from a wide range of resources to implement balanced literacy instruction including the GATE specialist, librarian, and literacy support provider. To

supplement our state-adopted text, published by Houghton Mifflin, teachers at each grade level coordinate the use of resources including *Making Meaning*, *Reading for Meaning*, *On Solid Ground*, and *Seminars in Critical Thinking*. Village is a text-rich environment. Our students have access to an extensive school library as well as other fiction and non-fiction texts. In classrooms, students enjoy leveled libraries, genre collections, a variety of guided reading materials, and periodicals such as *Time for Kids* and *Weekly Reader*. These resources were provided by School Library Improvement Program funds, the Coronado Schools Foundation, Parents and Teachers Together (PATT), and federal Title II staff development funds.

Village provides ongoing communication, including extensive information about reading curriculum and instruction. Periodic strategic planning meetings, monthly Site Council and PATT meetings, and PATT and regular classroom newsletters are vehicles for communication. In addition, we offer school and individual classroom web pages, parent information nights (Back to School Night, Open House, literacy information nights), and our yearly *Everyone a Reader* training for parents and community members. As well as disseminating information, Village also hears the voice of the parents and community through these varied conduits of communication. This valuable exchange of information helps reinforce our successful practices and direct future goals.

The implementation and coordination of such a major curricular and instructional change has been a mammoth undertaking, especially considering the large student population and a campus spread over two sites. To facilitate consistent instruction and share materials, grade level teachers plan extensively during weekly professional learning community time. Regularly scheduled staff meetings and collaborations between grade levels facilitate coordinated reading instruction. The principal, lead teacher, and consultants support and organize this ongoing professional learning. One of the many professional development buy-back projects was the *CUSD Language Arts Handbook* and a supporting video. Created as a resource for all teachers, especially new teachers to our site, this handbook includes information about “The Bridge to Comprehension”, balanced literacy, assessment, and other literacy resources.

3. Results of the Practice

Village staff monitors the success of balanced literacy instruction formally through CST, DRA2, grade level benchmarks, and pre/post response to literature assessments (i.e., *Seminars in Critical Thinking*), and informally through staff observations and feedback. CST test data for 2004-2009 clearly shows on-going improved reading comprehension for all students. In grades 2-5, reading comprehension scores rose from 78% proficient or advanced in 2005 to 85% in 2009. Analysis of the CST clusters of reading comprehension shows an increasing number of advanced and proficient students, a decreasing number of basic and below-basic students, and no far-below basic students. In grade 2, comprehension scores jumped from 80% to 86%; in grade 3, 64% to 74%; in grade 4, 86% to 92%; in grade 5, 83% to 89%. From these data, we can conclude that balanced literacy instruction is helping our students become more competent readers.

CST Reading Comprehension Cluster Scores

Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced Grade	2004-2005	2008-2009
2	80	86
3	64	74
4	86	92

5

83

89