

CASE STUDY

Education Improvement Branch
Research Centre
Case study 3

School improvement is a continuous and highly contextualised process, with every Queensland state school at different stages of their improvement journey. The Education Improvement Branch produces case studies to showcase schools that are making significant gains in their journey, and identify factors that contributed to their success.



Making learning visible at Thargomindah

More than a thousand kilometres to the west of the state capital, in the small, rural and remote school of Thargomindah, a new approach to teaching gives children the ownership of learning. When learning is made visible, teachers become learners and students become their own teachers.

Background

Thargomindah State School is the only school in a rural town of about 250 residents in the outback Shire of Bulloo. A teaching principal, two teachers and three teacher aides look after 26 students from Kindy to Year 6.

As a small school in a remote location, Thargomindah has always been challenged with high staff turnover. With the usual length of stay for principals and teaching staff ranging between a year and a half and two years, it has been difficult to establish a strong, consistent teaching routine and sustain that routine over time.

In the last few years, Thargomindah has made significant progress by developing a whole-school curriculum plan and reading framework, aligned to the Australian Curriculum, and implementing new pedagogical approaches: Explicit Instruction, Age Appropriate Pedagogies and visible learning.

A quest for a sustainable teaching approach

With staff turnover, change was a constant, along with new ways of doing things in Thargomindah. When the current principal took over, she decided not to change anything for a while, but instead to reflect on existing practices in order to clarify the Thargomindah way of doing things. The focus was on open communication and collaboratively building a clear, shared understanding of school practices and future direction. The principal believed that this clarity would have an empowering effect on the school staff. With prior experience as a teacher in

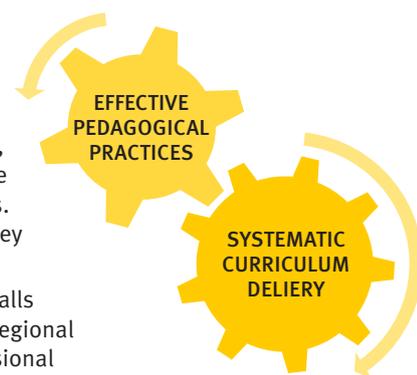
a multi-age classroom context, she was determined to find the best way to teach her students. This started the school's journey with visible learning.

In 2018, interest in Learning Walls was sparked by the assistant regional director, who provided professional development on this practice to a group of rural and remote school principals. Collaborative work, with the strong support of regional leadership, resulted in implementing a new approach to teaching based on the philosophy of visible learning (Hattie 2009).

According to Hattie (2009, p. 25), it is most important that 'teaching is visible to the student, and that the learning is visible to the teacher'. The new approach recognises the importance of assessment-driven instruction and student engagement with assessment as a critical step connecting teaching and learning.

“The more the student becomes the teacher and the more the teacher becomes the learner, then the more successful are the outcomes.”

(Hattie 2009, p. 25)



Curriculum and assessment

As a small school, Thargomindah operates multi-age classrooms, where vertical alignment of curriculum is critical. Over the last few years, the school has made big progress in this area. During curriculum planning, teachers make sure that all age groups are covered, and everyone is teaching the same content area consistently across years. Aligned with curriculum, there are also a range of age appropriate pedagogical approaches to address the needs of all students.

In Thargomindah, teaching starts with assessment. It is the assessment that drives instruction. The scope and sequence of curriculum are developed by backward mapping learning activities from the assessment tasks. The school places priority on developing assessment tasks that are locally relevant and responsive to local needs.

“ Planning with the end in mind and knowing where each learner is and how to move him or her way beyond is both an expectation and an outcome of quality teaching. ”

(Sharratt 2019, p. 147)

Assessment as learning

Before the assessment is conducted *for* students (formative) and to students (summative), it is done *with* students. Doing assessment with students means they learn to self-assess their work, monitor their own learning, and use assessment information for new learning. Student engagement with assessment is an important part of learning and the key assumption of the ‘assessment as learning’ approach (Dann 2014).

Assessment as learning is a process during which students engage with assessment to become aware of different aspects of their learning and identify learning gaps and goals. As a result, students, with the support of their teachers, take responsibility for achieving their learning goals.

Assessment as learning is ‘the complex interplay of assessment, teaching and learning which holds at its core the notion that pupils must understand their own learning progress and goals through a range of processes which are in themselves cognitive events’ (Dann 2014, p. 150-151).

In Thargomindah, the work starts with a teacher analysing the assessment piece and building a clear understanding of what students need to know in a specific learning area, and what is required for each level of achievement. This happens before teaching commences (usually in the first week of term) and is aimed at collaboratively establishing the learning intentions and success criteria. Students reflect on the assessment piece with the teacher, with those in higher year levels also discussing the guides to making judgements (GTMJ) after they have been translated by teachers into student-friendly language. Analysing

and reflecting upon the GTMJ helps to establish what students know and what they need to learn. The identified gaps in learning are used to ‘backward map’ the teaching sequence for a term. This, in turn, helps determine next steps and learning goals, which are established for each student. Overall, the discussion of assessment helps students understand their learning destination and clarifies how they can reach it.



“ Students and teachers are empowered when they know the learning destination with scaffolded signposts along the way. ”

(Sharratt 2019, p. 147)

This stage is also critical for the teacher to understand what students’ learning needs are, and to design learning tasks that are tailored to those needs. Both curriculum content and pedagogy become well-structured and tailored to student needs.

Pedagogy

Learning on the wall

Teachers in Thargomindah make sure no teaching occurs without learning. The key elements in daily teaching practice are Learning Walls – artefacts collaboratively designed to make learning visible for students. Learning Walls are created for each of the four subjects – mathematics, science, English, and HASS – and they change each term. Each classroom has a Learning Wall that is co-constructed with students and developed throughout the term, ensuring student engagement. As a visual presentation that is developed through an interactive approach, the wall appeals to many different learning styles.

The critical foundation of each Learning Wall is for the teacher to know their students and how they learn. Each wall starts with five questions:

- What am I learning?
- How am I doing?
- How do I know?
- How can I improve?
- Where do I go for help?

As teaching progresses, teachers and students systematically add other elements to the wall. Assessment tasks and marking guides are added to document the learning intentions and starting points for student learning. Success criteria with modelled responses (exemplars) are placed on the wall to clarify what success will look like when it is achieved. This helps students to set goals for achievement. These modelled responses are developed for each year level and link to different marking guides to reflect the multi-age context. Each Learning Wall also has anchor charts, which help to structure and scaffold the content to be learnt. Students add every concept they have learnt to the chart, so they can see their knowledge growing on the wall. Multiple layers can be added around those key elements of the wall (e.g. word walls) to reflect the specific subject content.

“ Learning Walls capture the ongoing assessment journey (...) [they] look at the big picture, macro level of the big ideas and concepts that are being taught in the classroom and reflect assessment for, as, and of learning. ”

(Sharratt 2019, p.144)

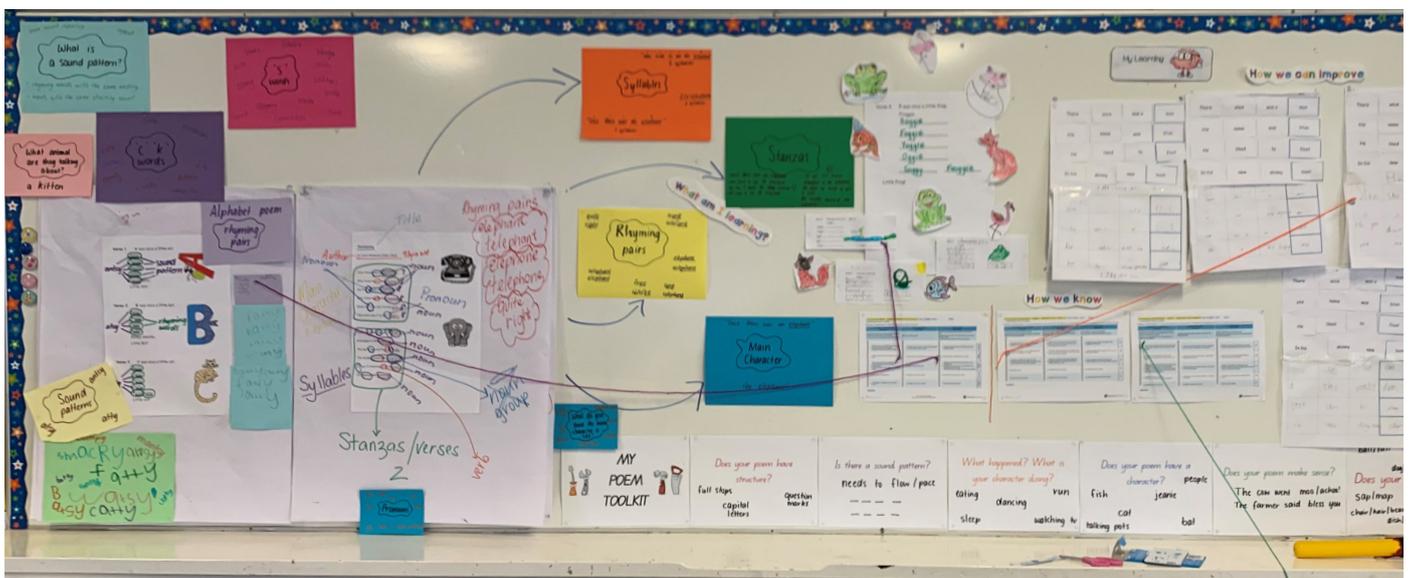
The wall makes visually clear, what students are working towards at the end of each term. Seeing their knowledge growing on the wall, and the learning gap decreasing, positively affects students’ motivation for learning and self-efficacy.

Students can refer to the Learning Wall any time to increase their understanding of what they are learning, why, and where they are at with their learning. The wall is also a point of reference for students when they work on their daily tasks. They verify and self-assess their own work tasks using the elements of the wall, such as the five questions, modelled responses or success criteria. In this way, the wall is helping students become independent learners.

Each classroom in Thargomindah has a Learning Wall. Although the principal modelled the practice for teachers, there is no one prescribed way of developing the walls. They are highly contextualised tools that cannot be simply copied and applied between classrooms. Every teacher adjusts them to the needs of their student cohort, their teaching style and the content to be taught.

“ When classroom Learning Walls move from teacher-made to student-owned walls, the learning is transformational. ”

(Sharratt 2019, p.146)



A variety of Learning Walls can be identified across the Darling Downs South West region, as they have been implemented in many schools. Within a small cluster of rural and remote schools, principals and teachers share their Learning Walls when they visit their schools. This particularly helps to engage new and beginner teachers.

“ Everyone does Learning Walls a little bit differently (...) it has got to be contextualised to the students you are teaching. ”

Principal



Teachers ask	Students ask
What are my students expected to know and be able to do? What can they already do?	What am I learning?
How will I know my students are learning?	Why am I learning it?
How will I help my students learn and respond if they are not learning?	How do I know how I am doing?
How will I determine the level of my students' learning and report on it?	How can I improve?
How does my evaluation inform my diagnostic next steps for every student?	What are my next steps?

(Sharratt 2019, p.122)

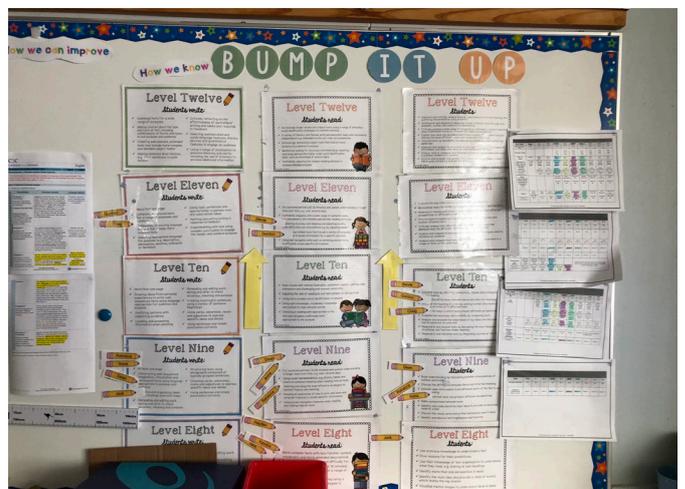
Bump-It-Up Walls

The visible learning journey does not end with the Learning Walls. Student learning gaps and next steps identified through interactive work inform another key classroom artefact – the Bump-It-Up Wall. This visual display provides a levelled benchmark for students and teachers to enable the tracking of learning.

While Learning Walls aim to identify what students know and do not know (diagnosis), a Bump-It-Up Wall is focused on showing the progress in student learning throughout the year. By using the Bump-It-Up Wall, students can determine their achievement level. Teachers help students by discussing their work and drawing comparisons between the student’s work and achievement standard. It is this feedback that helps students reflect on their learning and aspire to achieve improved outcomes.

For English, the Bump-It-Up Wall is based on the literacy continuum. It includes student short- and long-term goals and shows the progress students are making throughout the year. It demonstrates how different areas of English are interconnected in a way that the progress in one area (e.g. reading comprehension) benefits the achievement in other areas.

Bump-It-Up Wall processes also help teachers to differentiate teaching for a range of students.



“ The purpose of Bump-It-Up Walls is to show students that through self-assessment – Learning is iterative – it gets better with feedback and successive attempts, – Improvement is possible, – Work can always get better, – Students look for ways to improve and never settle for the first attempt. ”

(Sharratt 2019, p. 140)

Outcomes

Student-centred teaching

Visible learning practices implemented at Thargomindah State School have increased teachers' knowledge of students and how they learn. Co-constructing the Learning Walls at the beginning of the term has become a precious time where teachers learn about individual students and their knowledge, abilities, needs and motivations. This knowledge helps them to tailor the curriculum content and the way of teaching to individual needs and ensure all students are achieving in a multi-age classroom.

Clarity of curriculum expectations

Applying the foundations of the visible learning approach has resulted in clear and more consistent teaching at Thargomindah. Learning Walls support teachers in clearly articulating teaching expectations – why they do what they do and how things work in classrooms. They know what their students need and what the learning environment looks like when a differentiated approach is applied to instruct students in a whole group, in small groups, or individually, when needed.

Students' perceptions of the curriculum

Forefronting the assessment and Learning Walls has made curriculum more meaningful for students. There is now a purpose for all the learning, and clarity about what students need to work on to achieve their goals. Learning Walls have helped structure knowledge for students and consolidate what they have already learnt.

Empowered, assessment-literate learners

Assessment and visible learning practices have given Thargomindah students ownership of their own learning and contributed to building a culture of independent learning. Students have become more engaged and capable of assessing their own work, and they know how to improve. They are empowered to articulate what they are learning, how they are doing, how they know how they are doing, how they can improve, and where they can go for help. Using Bump-It-Up Walls has supported students to become more self-determined and self-directed in their learning. They have developed meta-cognitive skills and have become more self-regulated learners. The 'assessment as learning' approach has been building students' intellectual independence and critical thinking skills.

Student outcomes

As the visible learning practices have been gaining traction, Thargomindah has already started seeing their impact on student outcomes. Some improvements were noted in level of achievement data between Semester 1 and 2, 2019, and the number of students receiving B or higher has continued to grow throughout 2020.

“ Visible learning practices really helped me know the students and know how they learn. Having that additional time to get to know the students and their learning abilities, has allowed a more intensive time for learning. ”

Principal

What do users say?



“ The Learning Walls created in primary school assisted me in moving my grade from a B to an A. They helped me understand the difference between the two levels. ”

Former student

“ It helps me have a visual in the classroom and I use it when I am learning. ”

Year 3 student



Success factors

- Co-constructing the practice with students – ensures their engagement and ownership.
- Focus on understanding what students know and how they learn – guarantees students remain in the centre of curriculum planning and pedagogy.
- Culture open to innovation and risk-taking – supports teachers and helps them build confidence in the new approach to assessment-informed teaching.
- Professional collaboration and sharing within a cluster – enhance teacher confidence in using the new practice.

“When we listen for and really hear the voices of the students self-assessing their understanding in classrooms, we can celebrate success.”

(Sharratt 2019, p. 146-7)

Next steps

Visible learning practices have been well-embedded in teaching at Thargomindah. Thanks to the increased clarity of learning expectations and students' understanding of assessment, their learning outcomes are set to continue to improve.

Learning Walls at Thargomindah have gained popularity beyond the classrooms. The staff also developed one for the school administration. The wall is asking: 'Where are we?' as a school, 'What is our story?', 'Why are we here?' and 'Where are we going?'

With visible learning practices embedded in the teaching repertoire, Thargomindah staff are now getting ready to implement a positive teaching philosophy in the hope that enhancing the school's positive culture will help reduce teacher turnover and ensure the sustainability of embedded approaches.

References

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