

# Transcript Ross Fox's Keynote Address

## Part 4 – Reflections on the Science of Learning cont.



## Science of Learning Leadership Accelerator

19 May 2022

A joint venture between



**Crowthier Centre**  
AN ENGINE THAT POWERS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

**Primary  
focus**



## There is a science of learning (cont)



The most efficient way to teach knowledge is to **teach explicitly** (as opposed to discovery or inquiry learning).



High quality **whole class instruction** (Tier 1) is more efficient for students than differentiation or intervention as a first line of teaching.



**Reading** is an essential method humans use to acquire knowledge. Accelerating students moving from learning to read to reading to learn through teachers using the most effective methods of teaching reading is a peerless investment in educational improvement.



**Curriculum and lesson planning** should be **ambitious in knowledge coherent, sequential and cumulative**, created to the highest quality by the school or system to lower the variation.

Catalyst

We've been on a huge journey. A few years ago, we went with some colleagues to look at primary schools in Western Australia. Lorraine accompanied us, and gave a presentation. I remember really vividly, we went and saw a Brooke Wardana teaching. One of my colleagues sitting down that night over a drink said "I could never do that. It just wouldn't feel right".

This is about explicit teaching. Now, I won't use the term precisely, I'll use it as saying, "Our inclination is if a student needs to know something, we'll tell them first". I'll use that simple definition. One of the principals in our system did send me a video yesterday of Doug Fisher about explicit teaching, or he used direct instruction I think, it was the same concept, and it was as though he was describing something that you should use as a last resort when you're in classroom; teaching has failed, maybe you should consider direct instruction, but only if...

I just thought it was breathtaking because at the core of what I think we should be trying to do as educators is teach the most efficient way possible. Because every minute that the student hasn't learnt something, they have missed an opportunity to learn the next thing. It's our professional responsibility to teach as efficiently as possible. And I believe very strongly that means we've always got to ask what is the role of explicit teaching in this pedagogy or direct instruction, i.e. telling first.

There are a number of systems around Australia, mine included, who've had a substantial commitment to enquiry learning, the idea that you always start with a student directed question. If that's done in a precise way, I can acknowledge that it could be a high quality pedagogy. I'd say that often it is very, very problematic, and the idea that we expect students



to know what we haven't taught them is really, really problematic. I think we've got to have, as professionals, a very clear account of teaching explicitly. And that's very much a part of our approach to reflecting on pedagogy in Canberra Goulburn.

One of the things certainly is a commitment to whole class instruction. In some instances about five years ago in our system, and I assume this is similar around Australia, we had schools with 50% of students in reading intervention programs. There was this assumption, that it was okay because kids vary in their ability to read. I was quite influenced by some of the sources that Pam (Snow) cited; that our expectation is 95% of children learning to read through our in-class instruction. The simple maths is that's 19 out of 20 children in a kindergarten class. 19 out of 20 children. Then you've got to have very high quality focused interventions. I'd say we're spending a whole lot of time across Australia on interventions because we're not spending enough time on the high quality in-class instruction, so that's the commitment. We're going to spend time on that first.

We have set a bold goal for ourselves. We reflected on this a lot. What were our goals as a system going to be? The first one we said was Every child will be a competent reader. There's a couple of observations about that that competent people find problematic, it sounds standards based. We had to say something. We've said competent, but also then some people were inclined to say, oh, well, if we just have a phonics program added, we don't need to worry past grade two. Our commitment as Catholic educators is that we actually think Year 12 should be out to read Milton's "Paradise Lost" and know what it means, what it means for their lives, how their identity might change because of having read it. And what does that involve? Really high vocabulary knowledge, really sophisticated experiences of that language so that they can make meaning from such a text. I'm just using that as one example. They should be able to appreciate the world through very dense, densely populated with interesting concepts. Literature like Milton's "Paradise Lost", that is their aspiration that the competency at the moment where you might be thinking about standards-based might be too low for our aspiration in time and we know people like Harold Bloom talk about "reading to get to know yourself as a human". Now we might be at risk of losing that, if we've got so many children and people who just can't read. We think reading is such an essential element to humanity in our account of the purpose of education,

and then that that comment at the end - the curriculum and lesson planning, ambitious and we haven't cracked this yet, but our aspiration is to have really knowledge rich, high expectations. Personally, I was very, very affected by reading Natalie Wexler's "Knowledge Gap". I think it's Chapter 10 where she talks about the classroom, where they share the poem from the side of the Statue of Liberty and children who the teacher thought were totally disengaged begin to make sense of it. That whole schools change in their behaviour because the students in the playground are talking about what they've learnt in the classroom, not just happy being at school.



The expectations that we have too often are far too low and the potential of the students is not being realised.