

Why Comprehension Strategies Instruction (CSI) Pays Off

The remarkable gains in literacy achievement at Sir
Douglas Bader Intermediate

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'Don't listen to anyone who tells you that you can't do this or that. That's nonsense. Make up your mind you'll never use crutches or a stick, then have a go at everything... Never, never let them persuade you that things are too difficult or impossible'.

Sir Douglas Bader

These rousing words on the website of Sir Douglas Bader Intermediate (SDBI)¹ urge the school's Year 7 and 8 students to beat the odds, just like the heroic fighter pilot after whom the school is named. This call to prove naysayers wrong is especially fitting for the Mangere-based pupils whose predominantly low socio-economic status and 'minority' cultural backgrounds are commonly associated with lower than average literacy achievement. For Principal Peter Weir, raising achievement in literacy is a top priority for the decile one school, notwithstanding the challenges presented by the demographic of its roll – in recent years, up to 99% of students came from Māori, Pasifika, or other non-European ethnicities.²

The rationale for adopting CSI – SDBI's key areas of focus:

1. *Achievement in literacy*
2. *Quality of teaching and learning*
3. *Student engagement*
4. *Support to strengthen students' thinking strategies*

¹ <http://sirdouglasbader.ultranet.school.nz/WebSpace/19/>

² ERO, *Sir Douglas Bader Intermediate School Education Review 03/11/2008* (p.2); ERO, *Sir Douglas Bader Intermediate School Education Review 16/10/2005* (p.2)

Enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning is a key objective for SDBI. The most recent report from the Education Review Office (ERO) further identified student engagement as an area for improvement. As a result principal Peter Weir decided to implement the *CSI Literacy* approach across the school to 'strengthen teaching and learning approaches that promote students' thinking strategies'.³

Comprehension Strategies Instruction (CSI) is an evidence-based literacy resource with practical lesson plans, designed by Neale Pitches and his team at South Pacific Press to develop readers' critical thinking skills, vocabularies and fluency. *CSI* provides support for teachers as they deliberately teach, by modelling and interaction, comprehension strategies and vocabulary, using a digital interface for shared reading. Students then work cooperatively to apply their newly-acquired strategic knowledge using a new text and then write into a graphic organiser, to show what they can do. The *CSI* texts are chosen from across the subject areas of science, mathematics, social studies, non-fiction and fiction. While the resource is international, the issues raised in the texts are highly engaging for New Zealand students, whose crucial 'world knowledge' is enhanced by the many short texts they experience.

Following one day of intensive professional development with Neale at the start of 2011, teachers established baseline levels of literacy through pre-intervention testing using Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle)⁴, then adopted *CSI* right across the

³ <http://www.ero.govt.nz/Early-Childhood-School-Reports/School-Reports/Sir-Douglas-Bader-Intermediate-School-03-11-2008/Recommendations>

⁴ A resource developed by the University of Auckland which allows teachers to create and analyse tests for literacy. The resulting reports show what students know, what gaps they have in their learning, and what they need to learn next. For more details, see http://www.tki.org.nz/r/asttle/about_e.php

school in each of the composite Year 7 and 8 classes.

After 14 weeks of implementation, post-tests revealed some remarkable improvements in students' literacy proficiency. Overall, the pre- and post-CSI reading scores were highly encouraging, showing accelerated progress in reading functions and processes across both year groups. In fact, the adoption of the CSI intervention has positioned SDBI to more than exceed its own achievement expectations of improving in reading over the course of the year.

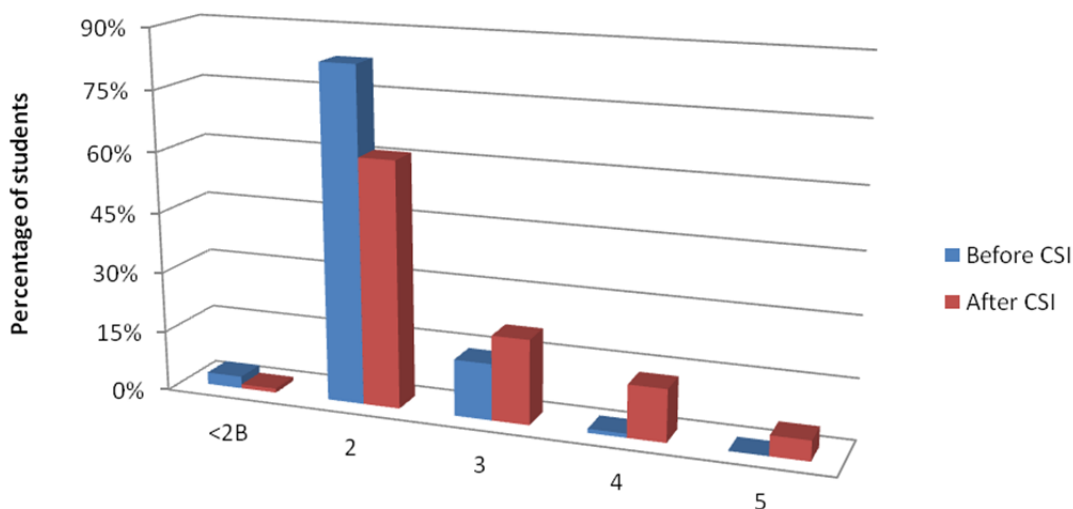
Perhaps most strikingly, 60% of the students gained one or more curriculum sub-levels between tests – this is an outstanding feat given that the average expected rate is one sub-level over one to two years.

Between tests, the distribution of students moved from a very high concentration at curriculum level two (83%, reduced to 61%) to greater representation at level three, level four and – for the first time – level five. These significant shifts in whole curriculum levels for reading are illustrated in Chart One (below).

Other noteworthy results reveal that:

- Year 8 students made particular improvements
- Māori students performed well, especially those in Year 8
- The school's greatest overall achievement was in 'thinking critically' – this was also one of the areas of accelerated learning for Māori.

Chart One: Aggregate view of the distribution of Sir Douglas Bader Intermediate pupils by curriculum level for reading, before and after the CSI intervention in 2011 (asTTle results)



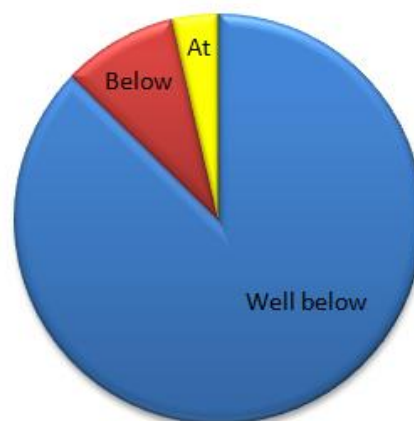
After designing and carrying out its asTTle assessments in reading, the school mapped students' performance in terms of National Standards. This exercise showed that the large proportion of SDBI students in the 'well below' and 'below' categories progressed to higher reporting bands following the CSI intervention.

This impressive rate of change over just one term bodes well for the school to meet its target to increase the number of students achieving 'at' or 'above' the National Standards at the end of the year.

Chart Two (right) shows that the proportion of the Year 7 cohort 'well below' expectations dropped dramatically following the CSI intervention, with a corresponding rise in the 'below' category. This positive movement was also reflected in unprecedented Year 7 representation in the 'above' categories.

Chart Two: Achievement of Year 7 Sir Douglas Bader intermediate students in National Standards for Reading, before and after the CSI intervention

Week 1



Week 14

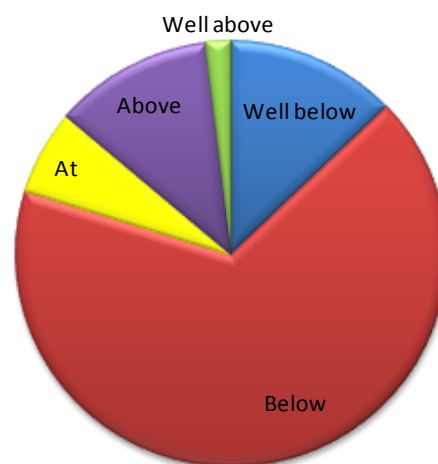
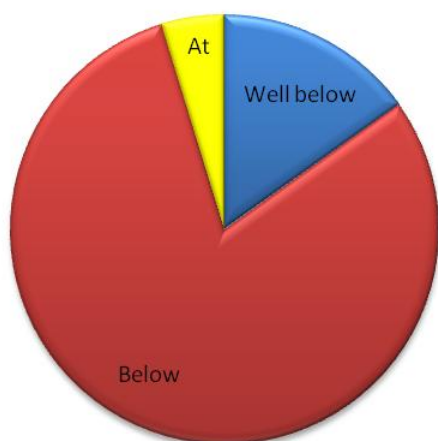


Chart Three: Achievement of Year 8 Sir Douglas Bader intermediate students in National Standards for Reading, before and after the CSI intervention

Week 1



Week 14

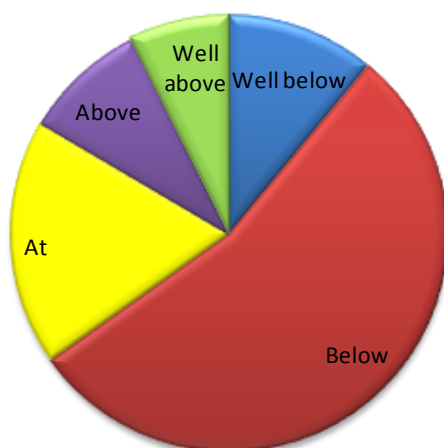


Chart Three (left) depicts changes for Year 8 students. Starting from a higher proportion 'below' expectations for reading, these students experienced a sizeable drop-off at this level, with higher proportions operating 'at' National Standards and – again for the first time – in the 'above' or even 'well above' categories after using CSI.⁵

This relatively clean and robust data from 'lived' classroom experiences presents compelling evidence that the CSI intervention had a positive effect on the literacy achievement of SDBI students – **what's more, students made this accelerated progress over the course of just 14 weeks.**

So what did the teachers think about the CSI package?

While the extent of implementation varied between them, those who most closely followed the metacognitive model and the oral/interactive components appear to have had better outcomes. One teacher in particular admitted to being reticent towards CSI at the beginning but soon grew to 'totally love it'.

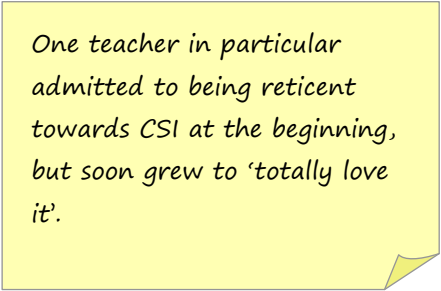
Those who most closely followed CSI's metacognitive model and the oral/interactive components appear to have had better outcomes.

⁵ While these proportions remain some way from the Ministry of Education's estimates that 60% of students are likely to be 'at' or 'above' the reading standard at Year 8 (*New Zealand Education Gazette* 3 May 2010), they represent real progress for SDBI whose students, on average, enter at Year 7 at least two years behind in reading.

Teacher feedback variously commended the 'easy to follow sequence of the lessons' and the 'ready-made resources', as well as the satisfaction of 'relating to things you already know', especially through the strategies of questioning and making text-to-text connections.

While many students – and some teachers – found the texts above-level or just plain 'hard', those with the 'have a go' attitude actually enjoyed the challenge, and were proud of learning to apply the strategies together.

With the composite nature of the classes increasing the range of literacy proficiency amongst the students, certain teachers felt that next time they would use a different level to better engage all their students in quality discussion and as independent readers.



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Teachers commonly reported good responses to the colourful texts and pictures which were also praised for presenting a variety of material in different formats. Although some teachers found the content to be 'foreign' ('American') in places, others applauded the scope of the kits which 'exposed students to wider concepts'. Positive feedback was also received on the digital aspect of the instruction.

With such encouraging results from SDBI's piloting of *CSI* and staff requests to 'use the resource throughout the year', the school's priority to raise literacy achievement is on track to beat the odds and then some, honouring those words of Sir Bader that things are not too difficult or impossible.