

# At the coalface with Mark McClements

**Simmons  
Pogorzelski**



Moving countries and changing careers is not uncommon in these times of global migration, but it is not without its challenges. A finalist in the 2016 WA Beginning Teacher of the Year awards, Mark McClements has successfully navigated a change from soccer coach to Year 1 classroom teacher, a move that has brought him both professional accolades and personal satisfaction. Having traded in his soccer boots for a career in teaching, he is kicking some early goals both in the classroom and at the whole school level.

It was with great excitement that I entered Mark McClements' Year 1 classroom. A former student of mine, I had asked Mark if I could come and observe his literacy block in action. I knew that he would do a good job. Mark had been an outstanding pre-service teacher and he was passionate about making a difference in the lives of children. For the next two hours, I observed as Mark presented a highly structured literacy session, showcasing both his and his students' talents. Using humour, warmth and intelligence, Mark challenged the children to be the best they could be. It wasn't hard to see why he was nominated for a beginning teacher of the year award. Not long after my visit, I sat down with him to find out more about what motivates him as a teacher.

## **What motivated you to change careers and move into teaching?**

I had experience and enjoyed working with children in my former role as a soccer coach. When I moved to Australia and my career in soccer coaching in WA didn't work out as I had planned, I looked around and wondered what else I might do. I felt I had some transferable skills having coached children in soccer and when I stumbled across the Graduate Diploma of Primary Teaching residency program at Edith Cowan University (ECU), I applied to do the course. I was accepted, and haven't looked back!

## **Do you feel your teaching course prepared you for the demands of teaching?**

Yes absolutely, I loved my course. The biggest drawback for me was that I spent time in the classroom right from the start of the year. I had two days in the classroom from week one of the program; from the outset I was experiencing classroom teaching, building relationships with students, and learning the logistics that are in place for the start of the year.

Being able to see and experience this gave me an insight and an advantage over other education students who didn't go into a school setting straight away. By the time I had arrived at my practicum I had been in a classroom for a whole year, and it really gave me an insight into the 'how' of teaching. Everything that I learned in the course could be applied straight away.



I liken it to the ‘Gradual Release of Responsibility Model’; I was doing little bits every week, little and often, and that allowed me to build up my repertoire of skills, so by the time I started my full-time practicum I had all these hours of experience built up that allowed me to tackle my practicum confidently.

I was fortunate that I was at a school that embraced the Graduate Diploma program and reinforced the content that I was taught at ECU. I had a mentor teacher that supported explicit instruction and the research on best practice in teaching children to read. I was learning about reading models that were based on evidence, and then I saw this in action in the classroom. It was very helpful in terms of my development as a teacher.

### How confident are you in teaching reading in Year 1?

I’m fairly confident because the teaching course I completed was fabulous for both the theory and practical elements of teaching reading. The course was focused on ensuring that as new teachers we had

knowledge about the sound system of language and, in particular, that we had been taught models of reading based on current research.

### What support did you have as a new teacher? Has support from the school continued?

When I first started at Challis Community Public School (CPS), the support from the school was outstanding and it continues to be so. At Challis CPS we have an extra hour of DOTT (Duties Other Than Teaching) provided each week. This allows for our team to get together to collaboratively plan or reflect on our practice and make sure we are consistent within our year group. This is crucial as we have six Year 1 classes!

Making sure we are implementing practice that is effective and based on research helps us to meet our school goals. At Challis CPS we have systems in place that support our development as teachers. Peer coaching and opportunities to observe our colleagues teach are helpful in terms of our knowledge and development. As a

team, we can observe each other’s warm ups and explicit instruction lessons, or the use of collaborative strategies in the classroom. I find the ongoing professional development in our school very helpful.

At a whole school level we’ve got a scope and sequence for all of our teaching, which is provided for us and is really useful. We have a curriculum leader who I have access to freely, so we can talk through any issues.

In addition to this, I’m lucky enough to be in contact with my lecturers from ECU, who always make themselves available to answer any queries, recommend someone or a particular piece of research to read, to help me along my way, which I appreciate.

### Do you manage to keep up to date with the literacy/reading research? How do you do this?

The hardest thing is time management. Obviously the job is full on and I’m a dad with two young children. Time constraints at home are taxing, but I do try and set time aside to do my own

professional reading. I'm an avid follower of Twitter (I follow a number of UK and Australian teachers and experts in the field) and my principal will pass things on for me to read. Reading what the experts recommend saves a lot of time; I know that it's going to be useful and helpful in a practical way in the classroom.

### **How easy do you find it to implement changes based on the research in your classroom?**

I'm quite flexible in the classroom, and if I see or hear evidence that something is better, I'm quite good at implementing it straight away. But if it is a major overhaul I might park the idea or change until the next term, and I'll reflect on it and think how best to do it.

### **One major overhaul in your classroom has been the introduction of streaming. How have you done this? How have parents responded, how successful is it, and how has the school managed the expectations around such a significant change?**

At Challis CPS we have a very strong parent community. We try and foster this relationship by keeping parents up to date and informed about everything we do in the classroom. I have a classroom Facebook page and a Twitter account, which helps to keep parents informed. We try and communicate that everything that we are doing is for the benefit of their children.

One big change to our Year 1 classroom this year has been the introduction of streaming during the literacy block. We have 22 children in each class and our data indicated that a particular group of children were not moving up levels in text reading. These children were making progress but not at the rate that we hoped for.

The solution was to take the lowest performing students from each of our six classes and provide instruction at their level with an experienced reading teacher. We are providing intensive instruction, tailored to the needs of the group.

The data is promising and the children appear enthusiastic and keen to learn. We have decided to continue until the end of the year and assess the data before making a determination

about whether or not to continue with streaming next year.

### **How do you teach literacy in Year 1?**

We have a two-hour literacy block that is non-negotiable. During this time we implement a 15-minute warm up session, where we review previously taught skills. We teach phonics using a synthetic approach. We teach new phonic skills explicitly, at the sentence and the text level, and we ensure that the children get lots of reading practice, using decodable texts initially before moving them on to levelled readers. As the children read more complex text we can focus on comprehension and fluency in our guided reading groups.

### **How do you meet all the objectives of ACARA in a Year 1 classroom? How do you fit everything in?**

While ACARA is very demanding, we do find creative and flexible ways of ensuring we teach all the content. We might for example introduce a non-fiction text during our guided reading. If we have to cover procedures as part of writing, we can cover this in reading also. We draw on and make use of our specialist teachers. We can, for example, cover the text type of 'procedures' in reading and writing, which will be helpful for science. In maths we have been learning about cylinders, this is tied in with an art unit that was being implemented by our artist in residence.

Whole school planning documents and a scope and sequence ensure that we cover everything from ACARA that we need to. We prioritise literacy, seeing it as a foundation for everything else. With regard to the literacy strand, we teach beyond what ACARA prescribes for sound and letter knowledge at a Year 1 level.

### **Historically the school has focused on lower performing students, but what about the children who are performing at the higher levels. How do you accommodate their needs?**

The teaching practices employed at Challis CPS have allowed us to narrow the gap between our striving ahead and catch-up

groups. This means we can spend more time on developing problem solving skills and other areas of the curriculum for all our students. But we also recognise that we need to accommodate the learning needs of students who are performing at a higher level.

When I first arrived at the school, I found that a lot of the resources in terms of time and programs were earmarked for the catch-up group, and I did wonder about the kids who were performing at a higher level. I made it a personal goal to provide the more able students with more of a challenge. We've started an enrichment program called 'Awesome Authors' for our Year 2 students, and I think our parent community are really pleased that we can offer something for lower primary students outside of reading. Reading is very important at our school, and it underpins everything we do, but my personal enthusiasm for teaching writing has kick-started some new programs and we are now hoping to extend the program to other year groups and bring more teachers on board.

### **This is great for a community that has always had as its main focus intervention and catch-up.**

Yes, the school has a strong history of community service and of raising literacy levels, but now after years of success and a number of programs in place we are at the point where we actually need to accommodate the group that are striving ahead. This is a great position to be in.

### **What's next for you in teaching?**

This year, in addition to my role as a classroom teacher, I've been responsible for implementing a whole school writing program. We now have in place a whole school plan for teaching writing across the school years. It's early days but we've seen some great improvement already in our NAPLAN data; writing has been identified as a key factor in the improvements we've had. We've also seen some great improvements in our Year 1 cohort, especially in boys and our EAL students.

I'm going to continue with this role and also move to an upper primary class to model and showcase the teaching of writing. This is a new era for Challis CPS and for me. We have had a huge focus



on reading and are starting to establish a good rich history in maths also. Writing has been identified as the next area of growth to focus on. We have a plan and we have had some early successes. Our Year 1 students won a national writing competition at the beginning of the year. We've had some nice early wins and we have structures in place to support our teachers on this new journey.

**What are the most challenging aspects of your job in the classroom?**

Some days, children come to class affected by a lot of external factors that impact on our school day and the ability of the student to learn. That's the biggest challenge I face as a classroom teacher.

**What do you most enjoy about teaching?**

The best part of the day is the laughs that we have in class: whether it's enjoying something I've taught and I can see a child using it, or whether it's the enjoyment of when the children love coming to school. I think that's the biggest one. If they love coming to school, if they've got an enjoyment for learning, and learning because they like learning, not because they are going to move up on a list, but because they have an intrinsic motivation to want to learn, that's my job.

**If you had a magic wand and could change anything in the education system, what would you wish for? What would make the biggest difference to the lives of your Year 1 children?**

*Making sure we are implementing practice that is effective and based on research helps us to meet our school goals.*

Hopefully I am making a difference. The data is important and the programs we are using are making a difference to children's lives in terms of what they are learning. But we also need to ensure that the health and wellbeing of our children is our main priority. If during my literacy block I have a child that comes to school unfed or exhausted from lack of sleep, I'll sort that out first. If I need to put them to bed, or put them in the reading corner, so that they can have a sleep, then I'll do that. If they need to be fed, I'll send them to the breakfast club or I'll get some lunch for them. As much as we want to progress our children in their learning, their health and wellbeing comes first.

If I could have every child come to class well-fed and well rested, it would make my literacy block much more efficient. We are doing what we can, we are working with our community to make sure that they are doing everything they can do to make sure every child is in the right place, at the right time, ready to learn. I want the children to want to learn, to know that school is the best place for them to be, and given time, given the best practice that is in place, the cumulative learning over their primary years, will put them in good stead to have 'better than postcode' results.

That's the magic wand!

**STOP PRESS**

Since this interview was conducted, it has been announced that Mark McClements is the WINNER of the WA Beginning Teacher of the Year Award for 2016. Congratulations Mark!

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