



Elizabeth Williams, relieving K-6 English Advisor, promotes the importance of teacher understanding and collaboration to select and use quality literature and concept based programming to challenge students.

Demystifying the big ideas of English

One of the joys of the [NSW English K-10 syllabus](#) is the emphasis on quality literature and its key role in teaching the big ideas of the subject English. It provides teachers with greater opportunities to immerse their students in books. It also stresses the need for teachers to enhance their understanding of the subject's core intentions. The skill of finding the English in the text is challenging in the primary context, especially when these big ideas are blurred and left to personal interpretation.

Consider the power of literature in the classroom. We can appreciate it for its ability to:

- teach valuable life lessons
- transport our students to other worlds
- exemplify the art of the English language.

This aesthetic appreciation for literature is valuable, yet we also need our students to develop an intellectual appreciation for literature where students view texts with a critical eye. In order to do this, we need to understand the metalanguage of the subject, the literary terms and the technicalities of the construction of texts. The *English Textual Concepts* resource provides teachers with a key into the syllabus and demystifies the subject's big ideas, thus defining the heart of the subject.

Rethinking the purpose of the text at Casula Public School

Over the past two years, teachers at Casula Public School delved into the conceptual approach to teaching English and explored the vital role of quality literature in developing deep knowledge of the subject. This journey resulted in a shift in focus on how to use texts in the classroom. Prior to this, teachers selected texts based on a theme or topic related to other key learning area (KLA) content. This integrated approach allows students to make connections across KLAs and provides teachers with a solution to an overcrowded curriculum. However, subject English often becomes overshadowed by literacy and the full depth and breadth of the subject is lost. Learning sequences that focus on developing and applying comprehension strategies to unpack meaning in texts do not necessarily maximise the

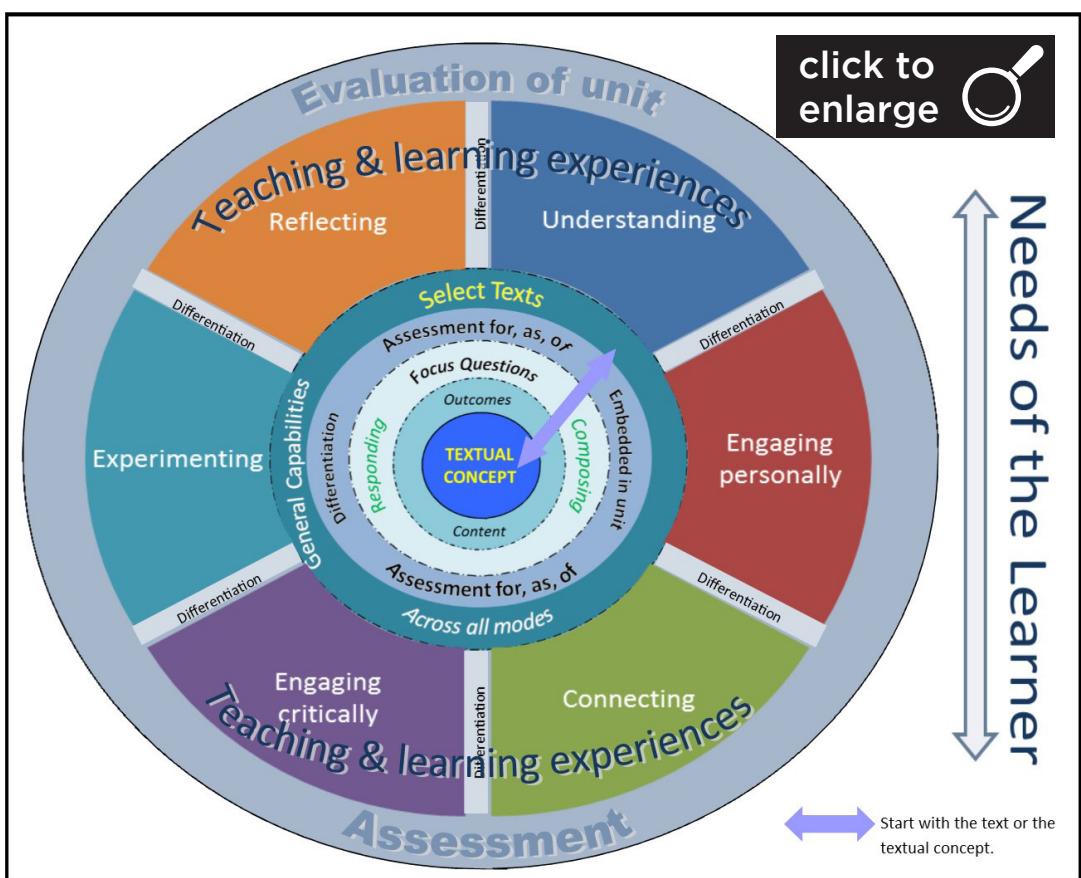
text's full potential to develop deep knowledge of the subject English. Consider the purpose of using texts. Shifting the focus to a conceptual lens influences the text selections in a unit of learning.

The role of collaborative planning days

Collaborative planning days play a key role in creating a supportive pathway on this learning journey. Teachers at Casula Public School participated in collaborative planning days to develop concept based units of learning. At this stage, the concepts were not clearly defined, which posed a challenge requiring teachers to study the content and find the threads that revealed the big ideas.

Planning wheel

Developing a planning wheel to scaffold the process of programming supports teachers. One of the key



steps in this process is the selection of texts. With conceptual focus, teachers have a clear purpose for selecting texts, which requires them to expand their knowledge of quality literature. Each term, teams evaluate their units of learning with a specific focus on the appropriateness of the texts. Their repertoire of quality literature expands and created text sets further support concept based programming. The English planning wheel is adapted and revised as the staff's knowledge and understanding of the subject develops.

Quality literature inspires students to write

Exposing students to quality texts with rich language promotes rich discussions, develops their capacity to think imaginatively and creatively, and creates a springboard for composing their own texts. During this learning journey with conceptual programming at Casula Public School, Early Stage 1 and Stage 1 teachers implemented the L3 program. They found that this program created a strong foundation for rich conversations about texts and that when introducing a conceptual focus students were more capable to respond to texts that required deep thinking. They explored and experimented with the variety of language techniques that they encountered.

When exploring how texts are constructed and how they are an expression of someone's ideas, values or opinions, students develop the tools to express themselves. Students understand how language is shaped and manipulated to influence or challenge someone else's ideas. This prepares students to think more critically about what they read or view and empowers them to question these representations. Quality literature enables teachers to facilitate this

critical thinking and provides students with inspiration to develop their own voice.

Stepping out of the text and working with teachers

In my role as the relieving K-6 English Advisor, I worked with a group of primary teachers across the Sydney region on a project based on quality literature in the primary classroom. One of the aims of this project was to explore how quality literature could be used as a springboard into creative and critical thinking. By using the learning processes outlined in the *English Textual Concepts* resource, teachers realised that students need to interact with texts in different ways to engage in imaginative and critical thinking, and develop deep knowledge.

The analysis of texts, and what is involved in this process, is the skill that unlocks the *stepping out of the text*. Moving beyond the story and venturing further out of the text encourages students to see it as a construction that promotes critical engagement. Asking how and why questions in relation to the construction of the text shifts the analysis to the deliberate and sometimes subtle choices made by the composer. When framing the questions around concepts, the responses require students to move beyond the literal and inferred meanings and to consider how the composer positions them to respond to the ideas represented in the text.

By immersing students in quality literature, they develop an appreciation for the power of language. They are empowered with tools to express themselves and they have the capacity to question the ideas presented to them.

The journey evolves at Lavington East PS

The release of the *English Textual Concepts* resource provides teachers with the missing link and defines the study of literature. The metalanguage of the subject is foregrounded, providing the pathway to students developing an aesthetic and intellectual appreciation for literature. A consistent understanding of the subject's core ideas supports the intellectual transition between stages of learning. The way in which literature is studied in primary classrooms prepares students for the demands of high school content.

At Lavington East PS, teams collaboratively plan concept based units of learning using the *English Textual Concepts* resource. Teachers feel much more supported with the clear definitions of the concepts and the related syllabus content to make the links. Each stage has planned units of learning for the concept of character, enabling teachers to see the progression of the concept across the stages of learning. The concept drives the selection of texts, promoting rich discussions about quality literature. The learning processes challenge teachers to rethink or reflect on how literature is studied in the classroom, particularly about the learning opportunities to promote critical engagement with texts.

On a final note

Neil Gaiman beautifully articulates the power of literature: *You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You're being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you're going to be slightly changed.*

Gaiman, 2013

We need to immerse our students in literature to develop empathy and, just as importantly, we need to ensure our students understand how and why these worlds are created. By knowing and understanding this, our students are able to question these worlds and the ideas presented to them.



References and further reading

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