Change management: The science of reading

**Stephanie
Le Lievre**

"I want to align my practice to the Science of Reading, but I don't have support from my administration team or colleagues … what do I do?"

"I am a school leader and would like to start the process of aligning our practices to the Science of Reading, but I just don't know where to start, HELP!"

These sentiments are echoed by administrators and teachers alike. The Science of Reading (SoR) refers to the vast body of research conducted in laboratories and classroom settings which (should) inform educators, clinicians, university lecturers and so on, about reading development and effective literacy instruction. The SoR has gained a lot of traction in recent years, but with this movement also comes a lot of opposition. You are probably familiar with the 'Reading Wars', but if it's your first time hearing this, read Alison Clarke's take on it *here*. Emina McLean has a nuanced take on the Reading Wars, which you can read in this edition of *Nomanis* (pp. 22).

As a teacher, curriculum leader and school consultant, I have had my fair share of change management projects in the school setting, particularly those pertaining to evidence-based literacy practices. I've had many failures and successes, so I would like to share with you some things I have learnt along the way.

I will structure the rest of this article with a focus on two different perspectives: that of the **classroom teacher** who wants to make the change 'from the bottom up', and that of an **administrator/school leader** who needs to get staff onboard. Both approaches would be rather different, so it's important I address the different experiences. When instigating change within a school, I believe it's important to follow a change management model. I am choosing to use Dr John Kotter's *Eight Step Change Model* for the purpose of this article.

Classroom teacher perspective	Administrator perspective
STEP ONE: Create urgency. Get staff to see the need for change.	
• Gather your information. Get upskilled in the SoR. It's important you can have robust discussions about what cognitive psychology and reading science tells us about effective literacy instruction. I have provided a list of recommended reading material to start you on this journey (see the end of the article). Learning the SoR is never-ending. I have been reading about this topic for years and I still learn something new most days. Be kind to yourself, and start with my recommended reads first, so you don't feel like 'Alice down the Rabbit Hole'. • Keep sharing your knowledge with staff members. You are planting the seed by regularly bringing up the SoR when appropriate to do so (maybe not at staff drinks, you might get left on your own). • Talk about your learnings and ideas with a positive/forward thinking mindset. Don't get bogged down in how terrible certain programs/approaches are. Instead focus on what you CAN do to make a difference to student outcomes.	• This is the same advice regardless of your role in the school. Get upskilled with the fundamentals of the SoR. See my recommended reads at the end of this article.
STEP TWO: Form a powerful coalition. The coalition can help you to spread messages and ensure there is support for the change school-wide.	

• Arrange a formal meeting with the administration team. Be transparent about your intentions, with a focus of whole-school improvement. If they are open to furthering their knowledge, provide them with some readings and podcasts (see below) to get them started on their SoR journey.
 	
   o If you are given the green light, you can continue down this change management path.
 	
   o If you are given a red light, you will need to continue 'planting the seeds' until your administration team are on board.
 	
• Do you have an English or curriculum-focused Professional Learning Community? Is it effective? Do they meet regularly? What a perfect opportunity to start sharing what you have learnt about evidence-based literacy instruction. Reflect on the things your school is already doing that reflect the SoR. Maybe some teachers are using decodable texts for early readers? Maybe others are incorporating phonemic awareness into their phonics instruction?
 	
• If you don't have Professional Learning Communities or project groups at your school, approach your administration team. You may even want to volunteer to lead it!
	• Arrange a formal meeting with the administration team. Be transparent about your intentions, with a focus of whole-school improvement.
	
	• Do you have Professional Learning Communities? Are they effective? Do they meet regularly? Most administrators are aware of the importance of shared responsibility and distributed leadership model.
	
	• If there isn't a current leader of the English Professional Learning Community, appoint a staff member/s who demonstrates reflective practice and shows interest in the SoR.

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STEP THREE: Create a vision for change.	
• Don't do it alone! Within your coalition/Professional Learning Community, develop a vision. Where do you want to see the school in five years? Two years? One year? Make short-term and long-term goals which reflect the SoR. I have included some example goals in *a longer version of this article*. • Reflect on the current assessment schedule. The right data can be a huge driver of change, so the school's assessment procedures need to reflect the SoR. Please see the *Reading Science in School Assessment scope and sequence*, containing (mostly free) assessments for reading, spelling and oral language.	• Don't do it alone! You may be the leader of the change, but you need to have a shared responsibility amongst your coalition (and eventually the whole staff). • Within your coalition/Professional Learning Community, develop a vision. Where do you want to see the school in five years? Two years? One year? Make short-term and long-term goals which reflect the SoR.
STEP FOUR: Communicate the vision and build the knowledge of the staff around the SoR.	
• You need to communicate the vision to the whole school staff, with assistance from your leadership team and Professional Learning Communities. • Share specific articles, blogs and podcasts you found to be most powerful (see end of article for suggestions). • Handle people's concerns with sensitivity and understanding. • Seek feedback, feedback, feedback. Listen to staff and implement feedback when devising the implementation plan. • Discuss with your administration team how you can build the knowledge of the staff.	• Devise a plan to build the knowledge of your staff. The success of any program within the school will ultimately depend on the staff buy-in. They need to be provided with the knowledge and have opportunities to directly (and immediately) apply this knowledge. I highly recommend seeking external professional learning, or appointing a leader in the school who has an in-depth knowledge about the SoR to lead this process. If your budget is tight, there are a range of courses and presentations available online to get your started. • Seek feedback, feedback, feedback. Listen to staff and implement feedback when devising the implementation plan. • Remember too much information at once will result in cognitive overload. Effective professional learning must have a direct classroom application which is followed up with mentoring, coaching and support. • Structure your staff professional learning gradually, focusing on one area at a time. • Communicate the vision to parents and the wider school community – parent information night, P&C, School Board meetings etc.
STEP FIVE: Address obstacles.	
• If you are faced with negativity and/or resistance by fellow staff members, always remember to 'keep your cool' and try to approach the conversation from a place of understanding. • **Seek feedback**	• Work with your staff members who are resistant to the change. Suggest that they observe others, or potentially even lead a particular aspect of the change (for example, using decodable readers to develop decoding fluency). • **Seek feedback**

Classroom teacher perspective	Administrator perspective
STEP SIX: Generate and celebrate short-term wins.	
• Discuss the successes you are having in your own classroom. Use data to assist. When you hear of other teachers experiencing success, celebrate this as a team. • Discuss and celebrate the short-term wins within the Professional Learning Communities. Make sure the administration team know about it! • Share your wins with the parents. Continue explain the WHAT and the WHY to parents, when describing the change. • **Seek feedback**	• The school implementation plan needs to contain short-, medium- and long-term goals. Celebrate individual successes amongst staff as well as whole school progress along the way. Remember – progress, not perfection!! • Share the school wins with the parents and wider school community. Continue to explain the WHAT and the WHY to parents, when describing the change. • **Seek feedback**
STEP SEVEN: Build on change.	
• Continue supporting staff in the process. Within the Professional Learning Committees, refine the short-, medium- and long-term goals in the implementation plan once you achieve others. • **Seek feedback**	• Staff need continual coaching, mentoring and support for the changes to be sustained. • Always discuss and reflect on the progress of the SoR staff meetings. • **Seek feedback**
STEP EIGHT: Anchor the SoR into the school culture.	
• Once the school is fully underway and is implementing programs and pedagogies which align to the SoR, you need to work with your colleagues to embed it firmly into the school culture. • Every staff member should be able to explain what the SoR looks like in the school. • The assessment schedule, operational plans and school targets should all demonstrate that the school follows the SoR. • Think about a display for the staff room. A SoR display may include Scarborough's Reading Rope, the Simple View of Reading, as well as the school practices which align to the SoR.	• The SoR should become part of the school culture, communicated to the larger school community and be reflected by all programs and pedagogies in the school. • Succession planning is imperative to ensure the sustainability of the changes – continually identify and support future leaders in the school to ensure the sustainability of the programs and pedagogies. • The school business plan, assessment schedule, operational plans and school targets should all demonstrate that the school follows the SoR. • Ensure your school website contains information on the research aligned programs and practices within the school. • Continue to share the progress with the parents and wider school community.

To conclude …

As clichéd as it may sound, remember it's about the *journey*, not the destination. Effective and sustainable change takes time and involves a shared responsibility among staff. Below I have included some readings (and viewings and listenings) I recommend to start your journey in the SoR. In the *longer version of this article*, I have also included some EXAMPLES of short-, medium-, and long-term goals. Every school's journey will be different, and will all be starting at different points, so it's imperative you create your own implementation plan with your staff based on your context.

Free resources I recommend to share with your administration team and colleagues when initially introducing the SoR:

• *Video presentation*: PaTTAN Literacy Symposium 2020, by Emily Hanford

• *Podcast episode*: 'At a Loss for Words', by Emily Hanford

• *Article*: 'Why Jaydon Can't Read', by Jennifer Buckingham (*Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin*)

• *Article*: 'Reading IS Rocket Science', by Louisa Moats.

This is an edited version of a blog post that originally appeared on The Speechie Teach (June 17, 2020).

Stephanie Le Lievre is a Level 3 Classroom Teacher and Certified Practising Speech Pathologist. She spent five years in the Kimberley region as the Literacy Coordinator of a large district school. Stephanie now does consultative work for schools in Perth, providing professional learning on best practice literacy instruction. She also co-facilitates the Facebook community 'Reading Science in Schools' with Natalie Campbell and Jasmyn Hall.