

Q NARRATIVE

NOVEMBER 2020

MICHAEL'S STORY: FINDING AND USING RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE



Michael Coenen is a specialist teacher for students with disabilities at Macleay Island State school, a small regional primary school on Macleay Island, located in Moreton Bay off the coast of Brisbane, Queensland. The school is situated in a diverse community of approximately 3000 people that spans wealthy older people and retirees, an artist commune, and young struggling families. The school's population of 140 students is classified as disadvantaged with high rates of student disability (approximately 25%) and students from an indigenous background (15%).

This is Michael's story **about finding and using research and evidence** to improve teaching practice for his unique student cohort.

“WE ARE CURIOUS, ADVENTUROUS AND PROACTIVE”

In 2019, Michael and his school principal, Glenda Seawright, initiated an in-depth analysis of the disadvantage experienced by their students. This was done so as to access external support resources more effectively and to tailor teaching practices more proactively. By reading professional publications, they subsequently located and used [the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study \(ACE\)](#) of childhood abuse and neglect, household challenges, and later-life health and well-being to assess the impacts of local issues such as poverty, parental unemployment, domestic violence, and family substance abuse on students' learning abilities and behaviours.

“After looking at the ACE Study, we knew we had a particular student cohort that needed specialised support”. This fueled Michael and his principal to identify Eric Jensen's [‘Teaching with Poverty in Mind’](#) work as best suited for their needs. When asked how they located this, Michael made several comments. First, research and evidence suggestions from colleagues and other schools were not sought because “there was no one in our school network that we identified as addressing the problem as much as we wanted to”. He explained that it can be challenging to rely on others as sources of research and knowledge because their advice is only as good as their own use. Second, despite presenting some of their early work to the state's Department of Education, Michael and Glenda were not directed to similar state or national case studies of poverty-related educational impacts. This may have been due to an unknown or limited Australian evidence base: “even when we started looking at the ACE Study, there were very few Australian studies; we had to predominantly look at American studies”.



“If we don't find out what type of learners we are dealing with and change our teaching to the way that these students need to be taught, we will not get the outcomes we want.”




“You need to read professional literature and look at teaching magazines. If something is of interest – ask ‘Which studies have they used?’ Look at guidelines and frameworks from regional office. Ask ‘Where is the evidence coming from?’ Dig deeper...”

Jensen's work was located through the [American Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#), a source that both Michael and Glenda regularly access to keep abreast of new knowledge. He describes both himself and Glenda as “self-starters” and “curious”; considering and following up research, authored works and ideas that they read about in different publications and from different sources. This “drive” is essential he believes, because despite excellent resources from the Department of Education, locating the most appropriate research and evidence for contextual needs is not necessarily an easy task. He believes “teachers need more support in knowing where to go”.

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“WE KNEW THE EVIDENCE WOULD FIT OUR PURPOSE”

Having completed the ACE-based student analysis, the previous trauma-based research used to inform teaching at the school was considered insufficient, with the “poverty-related aspects” of this research “not as strong as others” and therefore, not addressing the specific needs of the Macleay Island student cohort. When reviewing Jensen’s approach for relevancy, the state Department’s [Standards of Evidence](#) were used to assess its design, impact, scalability and investment requirements for fit. The work proved relevant, requiring little adaptation or investment:

“Jensen gives a toolkit for primary settings and for secondary settings – so the differentiation was already done. So, it was only then for us to do the last five or ten per cent to really contextualise the content.” There was a clear need to focus on some very specific issues within the community: “the impacts of these are quite prevalent here on the island”.

Contextual relevancy is one of Michael’s key considerations when using research and evidence, as is “sustainability”. He reflected that research or evidence is only fit for purpose if colleagues and staff are prepared to work with it and implement it well over time. Part of using Jensen’s work at the school would involve challenging staff members’ beliefs around the origins, implications and ways of dealing with poverty. Michael commented that amongst the teaching cohort at the time, there was a “deficit approach to students’ behaviour - teachers looked at ‘what was happening’, rather than ‘why’ students were behaving in particular ways”. He needed to know whether teachers were prepared to “change their mindsets” before using the selected approach. After surveying the teachers, 90 per cent agreed to be “open to work on their perceptions; have a good look at them and challenge them”. This gave Michael the “starting point” for the implementation of Jensen’s ideas.

“You need to ask: ‘Am I getting an outcome?’ ‘How well does it fit in my context?’ and ‘How likely is it that my colleagues and I will be able to implement the research or evidence properly?’”

The current focus of Michael’s use of Jensen’s approach is “working on relationships between teachers and students - we think this is just the groundwork, like if we don’t get this one right, we will not gain as much traction as we want”. Using evidence-informed tools, the teachers have been supported to experiment with different practices and mindsets in the classroom. “Inquiry cycles” have underpinned monthly progress, evaluation and reflection discussions. Both Glenda and Michael are looking forward to next steps involving building the cognitive capacities of the students.

“Our outcomes are currently focused on teachers’ behaviours. Our data clearly shows that we have a massive increase in positive interactions between teachers and students.”



THOUGHTFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH AND IMPLEMENTATION OF APPROPRIATE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The Monash Q Project is interested in understanding ‘how research can be used *well* in education’, and sees teachers’ and school leaders’ [thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence](#) as core to this undertaking.

Michael’s story demonstrates the importance of key behaviours: identifying and sourcing appropriate research and evidence, assessing it for credibility and relevancy, and then ensuring it is adapted and implemented to suit the specific context.

Empathy with students’ needs and considerations of sustainable improvement are key to such thoughtful engagement and implementation.