

Q NARRATIVE

APRIL 2021

PENNY & JULIE'S STORY: A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST AND RESPECT



Julie Allen and Penny DeWaele

Penny DeWaele (Head of Curriculum) and **Julie Allen** (Teacher & P-3 Phase Coordinator) are both long-term practitioners at Dalby State School. The primary school is one of the oldest public schools in Queensland. Established in 1861, Dalby State is located in the Darling Downs region, approximately 200km northwest of Brisbane. The school's population of 597 is classified as disadvantaged with high rates of students from Indigenous backgrounds (21%).

This is Penny and Julie's story about their own **collaboration** and how **honesty** and **trust** between them helped the successful implementation of a research-based intervention.

"IT'S ABOUT TRUST AND HONESTY"

Penny DeWaele and Julie Allen have worked together for over a decade. Penny has had various leadership roles, whilst Julie has been "on the ground" as a classroom teacher, coach, and phase co-ordinator for the Prep to Year 3 cohorts. At the beginning of 2016, Penny, as Master Teacher at the time, facilitated the introduction of a university-led phonics project into the early years' curriculum. All Prep teachers were required to participate in the project during the first year.

Julie, drawing on a strong background in various phonics approaches, initially felt that the project was "a little bit different" and admitted that it "didn't sit well" with her. So, she started questioning it. *"If there's something that comes up and I'm not 100% sure, or I'm not comfortable with something, or my belief might be slightly different because of my early years background, I will question the validity or reliability of the data and the research being used. And I just question. 'Why this one? Why this approach?'"*



"Penny listened, she understood . . . I've got that trust with her and I feel that I can sit down and talk with her".

Julie emphasised that having a good knowledge of the research base behind any change, along with supporting data, gave her the confidence to take her concerns and questions about the project to Penny. *"We had conversations, there was that honesty there. I didn't feel any pressure or anything. Penny was very supportive in what I was saying. I get very emotional, as Penny knows, when I really believe in something strongly. But I do feel supported, and I didn't have a problem going to Penny to talk about my concerns".* It was this deep level of trust in her relationship with Penny that also enabled Julie to speak up. *"I*

have respect for Penny. I've got that trust with her and I feel that I can sit down and talk with her. I can take the evidence and data back to Penny and have those discussions and say, 'Can we do this? Or what are your thoughts here?'" Penny agrees that trust is critical to enable the challenging conversations that her and Julie have engaged in over time. However, this level of trust takes effort and time to build. *"If you don't listen, then the project's going to fall in a heap. You have to be adaptable and changing all the time."*

Without "any warning", the phonics project was introduced in the first days of a new school year. Julie explains: *"We were supposed to be teaching next week and we had this whole new approach being just lumped on us with nothing beforehand. So that just built up that feeling of being anxious at the start as well 'How am I going to do this? I haven't had time to think about it. I don't know anything else about it'".* Both Penny and Julie believed that collaborative consultation with teachers before implementation would have helped staff to engage better with the project in its initial stages.



"You need to be that open person they can talk to; you have to have the ability to gauge where people are sitting [and] to listen because the teachers are the ones on the ground teaching".

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“A CONSULTATIVE, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH - IT'S A MUCH EASIER SELL”

However, Penny's role was to coach the staff to implement the program as delivered. When her staff raised their concerns, Penny became concerned. *“The new phonics program wasn't set up for success at the beginning and there was no consultation. I think we're a staff who like consultation. So there needs to be that discussion at the start, this is what we're going to do.... I had a role to do, but I could see that Julie and another teacher were really struggling, [and] they had really valid points and really valid information. So, I had to listen to that and take it on board.”*



Penny drew on the strength of her relationship with Julie and another staff member. *“We had lots of meetings, we talked about a plan of attack and what would work. It was [then about] going to Mona [the Principal] with our own evidence and saying, ‘Look, if we just did this, it would be more successful’. We didn't want to throw it out. We just wanted to slow things down a bit and make it a bit more accessible for the students. So, once we came in from that angle, it was much more accepted.”*

Julie admits that it would have been easy to *“lock myself away in my classroom, do what I was told, and just let it go”*. However, her passion for her work, and her confidence in her relationship with Penny, drove her to seek out support. *“I didn't take it lightly. I stewed on it for a while. Then I thought, ‘No, I've got to go and talk to someone.”* It was important to Julie that the project continued, but equally important

that she had input into its delivery. As Penny and Julie continued to collaborate, Penny observed that, over time, other staff also started asking questions. Penny saw this as an indication of positive staff engagement – the more questions staff asked about the project, the more she felt that staff were motivated and confident to invest in the project's success: *“That's grown as we've grown the project across the school”*.

Penny believes that the success of the project's turn-around came from long term relationships with staff, like Julie, that she had developed. She is a firm believer that trusting relationships come from listening and being respectful, as well as working together. Collaborations like Penny and Julie's have had a long-lasting impact on the staff at Dalby State School. *“People feel confident that if there is something that they know can be changed, it's not going to be set in concrete. If someone does have a concern...at least they know now that you can discuss it [and it] will be listened to. We can look at it and make any necessary adjustments that will fit in with how they want to teach that program.*

Knowing that there's people there that will listen, respond, take your ideas on board. I think that's been a flow on [from] the relationships that we've built, and we model to other people.”

Penny and Julie continue to work closely together and are currently focused on implementing the project across the Year 2 cohort. The benefits of their contextualised program have seen improvement in the children's reading, as well as in their spelling and their confidence as writers.

 **“The more you can show that you're doing that consultative collaboration with people, the more convincing it is than if you're just going off on your own”.**



RELATIONSHIPS ARE A KEY ENABLING COMPONENT OF QUALITY RESEARCH USE

The Monash Q Project is interested in understanding how research can be used well in education, and sees teachers' and school leaders' *trusting relationships* as core to this undertaking.

Penny and Julie's story is about strong relational skills built on respect and trust: a compassionate leader who actively listened, valued expert professional knowledge, and empowered her staff to make changes. It is also about an inquiring teacher whose value for research and deep knowledge about her students motivated her to challenge the contextual relevance of the research being used.

Collaborative and trusting relationships based in a mutual passion for driving improvement through the use of quality research are key to thoughtful engagement and implementation.