

Explicit teaching drives student motivation, engagement and achievement in NSW public schools

A What Works Best research update

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



About this resource

This resource presents research evidence from NSW public high schools using Tell Them From Me (TTFM) survey data.¹ It explains how explicit teaching practices, including feedback, as identified in the [What Works Best: 2020 update](#), can support students' academic self-concept and study behaviour.

This resource was originally published in 2024. It should be considered alongside the more recent [What Works Best 2025](#) for the most current guidance.

In 2025, TTFM was replaced by the NSW Public School Survey suite (NPSS). For more information on NPSS, visit the [NSW Public School Surveys](#) webpage. School leaders can assess their students' motivation, engagement and experience of teaching practices by viewing their school's [survey results \(staff only\)](#).

Key findings

- Explicit teaching and feedback are 2 of the 8 quality teaching practices identified in What Works Best
- Explicit teaching improves learning outcomes in the short and long term
- Explicit teaching improves learning by fostering student motivation and engagement
- Explicit teaching's effect on motivation and engagement is particularly strong among students with lower prior achievement
- Explicit teaching fosters student motivation and engagement by supporting student academic self-concept and perseverance

¹ Tell Them From Me was provided by, and is the intellectual property of, The Learning Bar.

Explicit teaching and feedback are 2 of the 8 quality teaching practices identified in What Works Best

As outlined in What Works Best, the evidence strongly supports teachers' use of explicit teaching practices, including:

- telling students what they will be learning, and being clear about the purpose of tasks
- demonstrating or explaining new ideas, and checking that students understand
- giving time for asking and answering questions
- giving specific feedback based on success criteria
- systematically delivering skills, concepts and content knowledge in the right sequence to provide the building blocks towards mastery
- asking students challenging questions, such as 'why, why-not, how, what-if, how does X compare to Y, and what is the evidence for X?'
- assessing and confirming whether students understand what they are learning before progressing
- reviewing learning and explaining how it contributes to related and more complex skills
- providing opportunities for guided, and then independent, practice as students gain proficiency and understanding of concepts and skills.

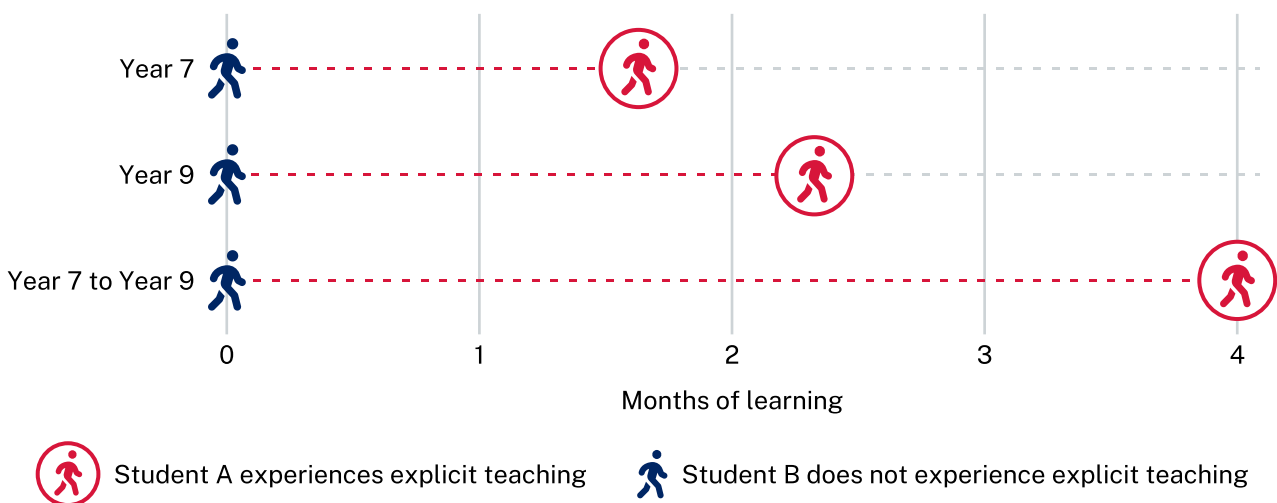
Consistent use of explicit teaching practices across the whole school supports teachers' use of effective practices. A whole-school approach creates a common language around practice which in turn supports teacher collaboration and strengthens classroom observation practice.

Explicit teaching improves learning outcomes in the short and long term

The positive relationship between explicit teaching and student outcomes is found in NSW Government schools. Research by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) and the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) examined the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) responses and NAPLAN results of 16,000 secondary students. The research identified whether – and how – explicit teaching practices affect achievement, above and beyond student characteristics like prior achievement and socioeconomic status, and regardless of other What Works Best practices teachers may implement at the same time.

Figure 1

Explicit teaching practices in Year 7 and 9 and their effect on student learning



Students who experience explicit teaching make greater learning gains than students who do not experience these practices.

In the short term, explicit teaching has a positive effect on NAPLAN results:

- In Year 7, students who experience explicit teaching practices are on average 1.8 months ahead in learning (Figure 1, top row).
- In Year 9, this increases to 2.4 months of learning (Figure 1, middle row).

The effect of explicit teaching is long-lasting: when a student experiences explicit teaching practices in Year 7 they are on average 4 months ahead in learning by Year 9 – regardless of whether they continue to experience explicit teaching after Year 7 (Figure 1, bottom row).

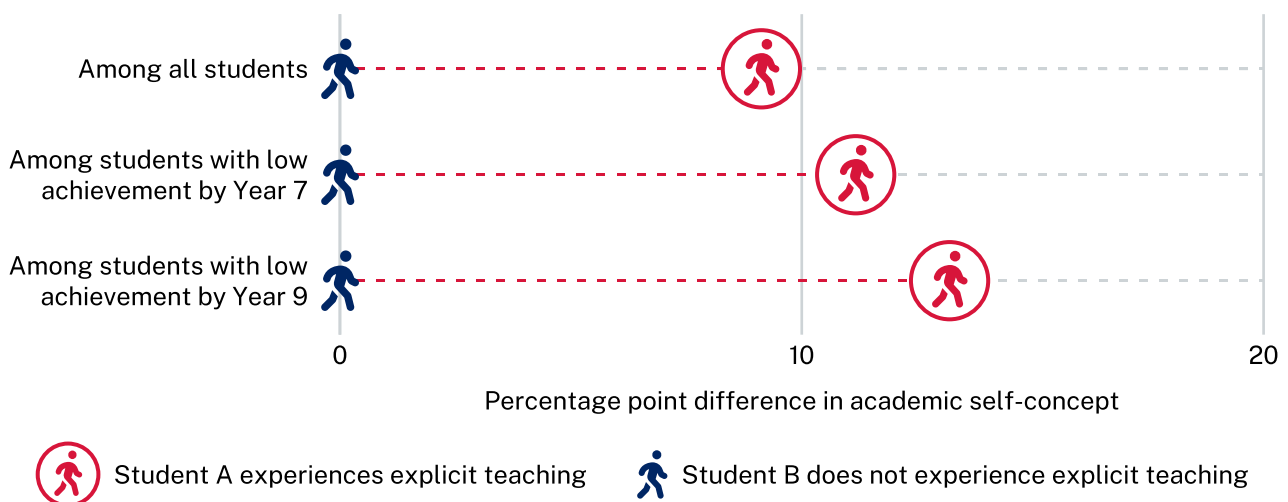
Explicit teaching improves learning by fostering student motivation and engagement

The CESE/UQ study found that explicit teaching affects learning outcomes by improving students' motivation and engagement, in particular academic self-concept:

- Around 35% of explicit teaching's effect on NAPLAN Reading results is due to its positive influence on students' academic self-concept, that is, their belief in their ability to succeed in a specific academic task or domain.
- On average, a student who reports receiving explicit teaching has 9 percentage points higher levels of academic self-concept than one who does not (Figure 2, top row).
- Explicit teaching also supports students' perseverance in pursuing goals even in the face of obstacles: on average, a Year 7 student who reports receiving explicit teaching has 11 percentage points higher levels of perseverance than one who does not. In Year 9, the difference is 8 percentage points.

Figure 2

Explicit teaching practices and their relative effect on academic self-concept



Explicit teaching's effect on motivation and engagement is particularly strong among students with lower prior achievement

The effect of explicit teaching on academic self-concept and perseverance is stronger among students with lower prior achievement.

- When a low performing student in Year 5 (bottom 2 NAPLAN bands) reports receiving explicit teaching in Year 7, their academic self-concept is 11 percentage points higher than a student who does not experience explicit teaching. This effect increases to 13 percentage points in Year 9 (Figure 2, middle and bottom row).
- For perseverance, this effect is consistently at around 10 percentage points.

Explicit teaching fosters student motivation and engagement by supporting academic self-concept and perseverance

When implemented effectively, explicit teaching is not the same as lecturing or rote learning. To follow the evidence-based principles of explicit teaching, teachers need to have dynamic and responsive interactions with students. Lecturing or rote learning alone do not cover the adaptive guidance or feedback teachers provide, nor students' active engagement when teachers check for their understanding, and during practice. When implemented well it is a highly interactive, engaging teaching practice (as demonstrated in CESE's [2022] [Balgowlah Boys case study](#)).

A growing body of empirical research shows that explicit teaching practices not only maintain but increase student motivation and engagement. Among Australian students, explicit teaching practices are associated with increased academic self-concept, everyday resilience, growth goal setting and persistence as well as with reduced anxiety and disengagement (Likourezos and Kalyuga 2017; Martin and Evans 2018; Martin et al. 2022).

Explicit teaching practices likely affect student motivation and engagement through 2 key mechanisms. First, they can positively impact motivation and engagement by reducing extraneous cognitive load, that is, the mental effort expended on non-essential elements that do not contribute to learning (Martin 2016). Studies show that when students experience extraneous cognitive load during a task, their academic self-concept decreases: they are less likely to believe that they can successfully perform such tasks, accomplish goals and overcome challenges – independent of their actual performance in the task (Feldon et al. 2018; Likourezos and Kalyuga 2017).

Second, explicit teaching practices provide students with structure which supports their academic agency, that is, their ability to be active and self-directed learners who take initiative in their own learning and educational experiences. Explicit teaching allows students to feel a sense of competence, to recognise their growing competence and to get support when they are yet to achieve competence. It does so by relating new content and difficulty to students' prior knowledge and skills, acknowledging difficulty by scaffolding learning, and providing opportunities for questions, guided practice and feedback. When students understand what is expected of them in both content and the classroom environment, they are less likely to switch off, showing higher levels of attention, effort and persistence and lower levels of misbehaviour (Evans and Martin 2023; Jang et al. 2010; Vansteenkiste et al. 2012).

Measuring explicit teaching and student motivation and engagement in NSW public schools

From 2015 to 2024, students reported on various elements of their school experience in the Tell Them From Me student survey. This resource presents findings from TTFM data on the link between explicit teaching and student motivation and engagement.

Explicit teaching practices

In TTFM, students responded to questions about their experience with explicit teaching in both the primary and secondary TTFM questionnaires. Most items measured how often students recall teachers using specific strategies in the classroom. In the secondary survey students were asked to respond in relation to their English, Maths or Science classes (with the aim of getting students to focus on specific lessons):

- ‘The teacher sets clear goals for our learning.’
- ‘The teacher tells us what is expected of us when we get a test, quiz or assignment.’
- ‘The teacher asks questions to check whether we have understood what has been taught.’
- ‘The teacher asks me or my classmates to explain our thinking and reasoning.’
- ‘The feedback from assessments and quizzes helps me learn.’
- ‘The teacher gives students the changes to ask questions about assignments.’

Academic self-concept

Academic self-concept relates to how well a student thinks they can learn and succeed at academic tasks. The TTFM survey asked secondary students to what extent they agree or disagree with several sentences, drawn from research by Roesler, Midgley and Urdan (1996):

- ‘I am certain I can learn the skills taught in school this year.’
- ‘If I have enough time, I can do a good job on all my school work.’
- ‘Even if the work in school is hard, I can learn it.’

Perseverance

Perseverance refers to the ability to pursue one’s goals to completion, even in the face of obstacles. The TTFM survey asked all students to what extent they agree or disagree with several sentences, taken from work by Kern and colleagues (2016):

- ‘I finish whatever I begin.’
- ‘I keep at my school work until I’m done with it.’
- ‘Once I make a plan to get something done, I stick to it.’
- ‘I am a hard worker.’

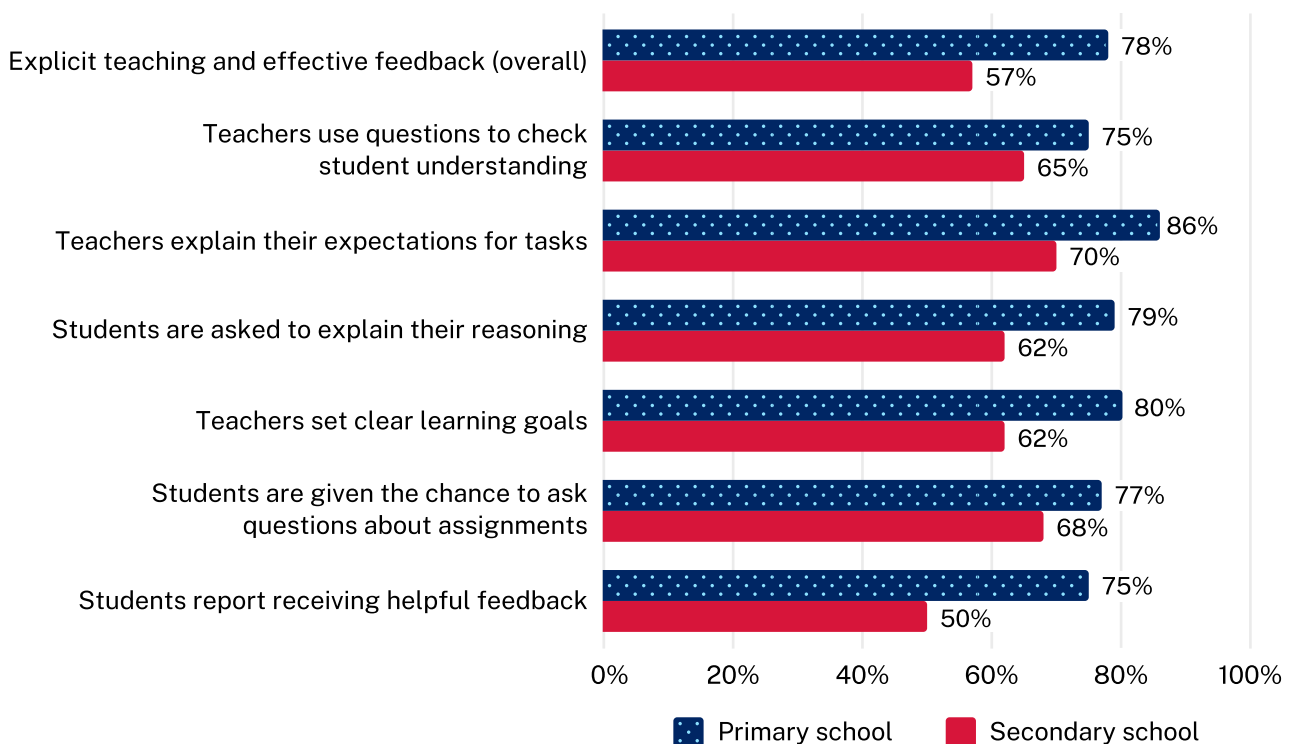
The responses to the individual sentences are combined to a measure scaled from 0 to 10 and the results are reported as the average score for the respective measure. Scores of 6 and above are referred to as ‘positive values’ of explicit teaching practices, academic self-concept or perseverance.

Explicit teaching in NSW public schools

TTFM data in NSW public schools shows that most students – 78% in primary school and 57% in secondary school – report receiving explicit teaching and feedback regularly (Figure 3). Across individual aspects of explicit teaching and feedback, primary school students report particularly high levels of teachers explaining their expectations for tasks, with relatively fewer students reporting checks for understanding and effective feedback. Trends are similar for secondary school students, with particularly fewer students reporting receiving effective feedback.

Figure 3

Percentage of students who report explicit teaching and feedback, TTFM 2023



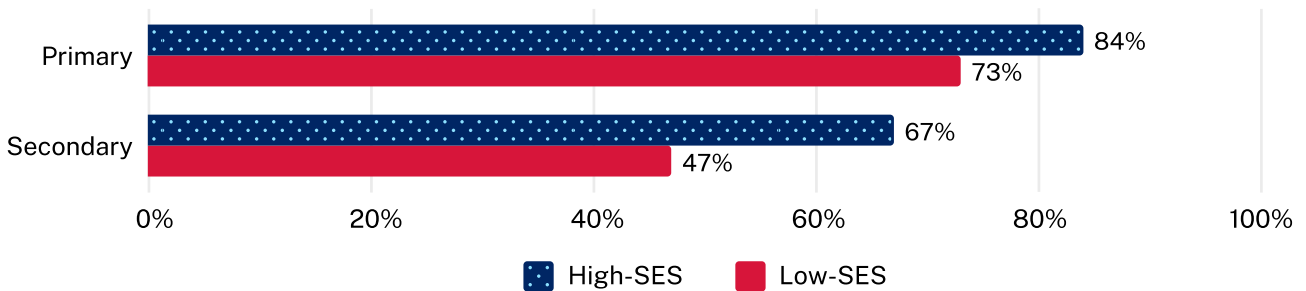
There is a clear equity gap as to which students experience explicit teaching, especially in secondary school (Figure 4). The greatest gap is between students from high and low SES backgrounds – with 11 percentage points more high-SES than low-SES students reporting receiving explicit teaching in primary school. In secondary school, this gap grows to 20 percentage points.

In primary school, Aboriginal and rural students report similar levels of explicit teaching to non-Aboriginal and metropolitan students, respectively. In secondary school, Aboriginal students report lower exposure to explicit teaching than non-Aboriginal students (12-point gap). Regional students report lower exposure to explicit teaching than metropolitan students (7-point gap).

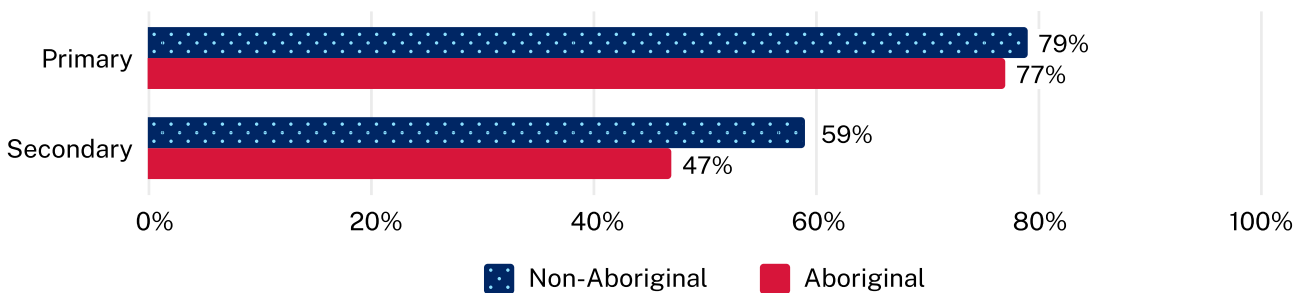
Figure 4

Percentage of students who report explicit teaching and feedback by socioeconomic status background, Aboriginal background and geographical location, TTFM 2023

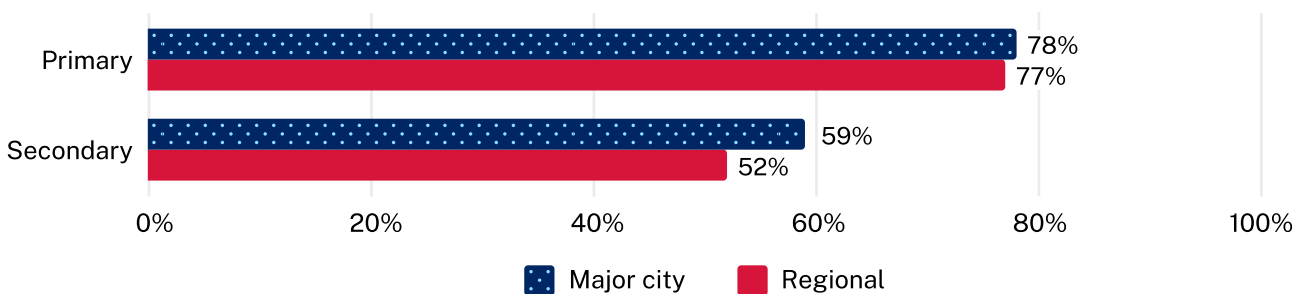
By socioeconomic status background



By Aboriginal background



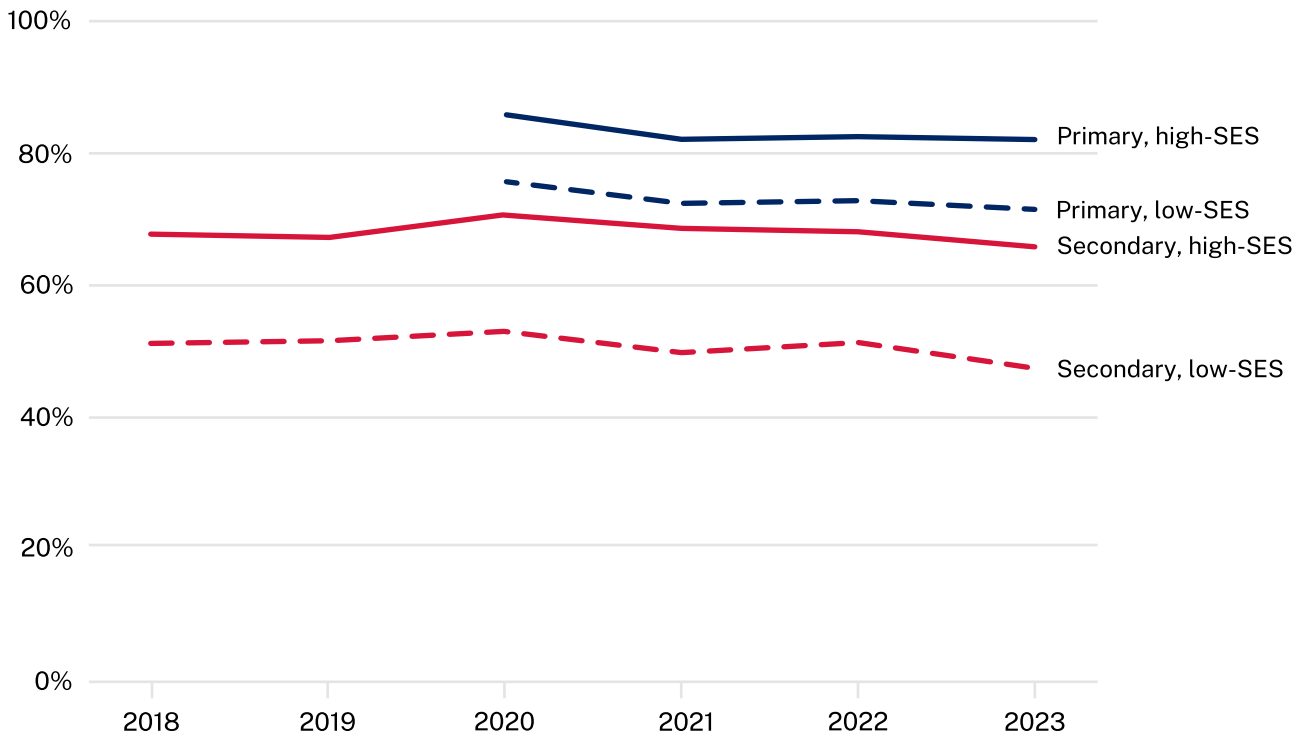
By geographical location



In 2020, more students in all primary and secondary cohorts reported explicit teaching, potentially due to learning from home. Among secondary low-SES students, the bump is less pronounced and was followed by a sharper decline in 2021 than among high-SES students (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Percentage of students who report explicit teaching and feedback by socioeconomic status (SES) background, TTFM 2018-2023



Further resources on the evidence base behind how explicit teaching practices support learning processes

- [Cognitive load theory](#) (CESE 2017)
- [What Works Best](#) (CESE 2020)
- [Balgowlah Boys Campus case study](#) (CESE 2022)
- [How students learn best](#) (AERO 2023)
- [Explicit instruction optimises learning](#) (AERO 2023)
- [Knowledge is central to learning](#) (AERO 2023)
- [Strong beginnings](#) (Teacher Education Expert Panel 2023)

References

- Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) (2022) *Effective teaching practices at Balgowlah Boys Campus – a What Works Best case study and practical guide*, NSW Department of Education, accessed 1 February 2024.
- Evans P and Martin A (2023) 'Explicit instruction', in O'Donnell A, Barnes NC and Reeve J (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Educational Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199841332.013.53.
- Feldon D, Franco J, Chao J, Peugh J and Maahs-Fladung C (2018) 'Self-efficacy change associated with a cognitive load-based intervention in an undergraduate biology course', *Learning and Instruction*, 56:64–72, doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2018.04.007.
- Jang H, Reeve J and Deci E (2010) 'Engaging students in learning activities: It is not autonomy support or structure but autonomy support and structure', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(3):588–600, doi:10.1037/a0019682.
- Kern M, Benson L, Steinberg E and Steinberg L (2016) 'The EPOCH measure of adolescent well-being', *Psychological Assessment*, 28(5):586–597, doi:10.1037/pas0000201.
- Likourezos V and Kalyuga S (2017) 'Instruction-first and problem-solving-first approaches: alternative pathways to learning complex tasks', *Instructional Science*, 45(2):195–219, doi:10.1007/s11251-016-9399-4.
- Martin A (2016) *Using load reduction instruction (LRI) to boost motivation and engagement*, British Psychological Society, Leicester, UK.
- Martin A and Evans P (2018) 'Load reduction instruction: exploring a framework that assesses explicit instruction through to independent learning', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 73:203–214, doi:10.1016/j.tate.2018.03.018.
- Martin A, Burns E, Collie R, Bostwick K, Flesken A and McCarthy I (2022) 'Growth goal setting in high school: a large-scale study of perceived instructional support, personal background attributes, and engagement outcomes', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 114(4):752–771, doi:10.1037/edu0000682.
- Roeser W, Midgley C and Urdan T (1996) 'Perceptions of the school psychological environment and early adolescents' psychological and behavioral functioning in school: the mediating role of goals and belonging', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(3):408–422.
- Vansteenkiste M, Sierens E, Goossens L, Soenens B, Dochy F, Mouratidis A, Aelterman N, Haerens L and Beyers W (2012) 'Identifying configurations of perceived teacher autonomy support and structure: associations with self-regulated learning, motivation and problem behaviour', *Learning and Instruction*, 22(6):431–439, doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2012.04.002.

Author: Anaïd Flesken

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

✉ info.cese@det.nsw.edu.au

🌐 education.nsw.gov.au/cese

📱 yammer.com/det.nsw.edu.au

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Please cite this publication as:

CESE (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) (2026) *Explicit teaching drives student motivation, engagement and achievement in NSW public schools – a What Works Best research update*, NSW Department of Education.

