

Final Report for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat:

Niagara Catholic District School Board's Cross Panel Literacy Collaborative Inquiry Project (2013)



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Brock University Faculty of Education Researchers:

Tiffany Gallagher, Ph. D.

Katia Ciampa, Ph.D.(c)

Niagara Catholic District School Board Team:

John Crocco, Director of Education

Mark Lefebvre, Superintendent of Education

Anthony Corapi, Research, Assessment and Evaluation Consultant

Jennifer DeCoff, Intermediate Consultant

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Over the past few years, teachers at NCDSB have participated in various professional learning sessions that have literacy embedded strategies. It has become evident that although teachers understand the importance of embedding literacy through-out all subject areas, questions are consistently raised about: (1) the consistency of classroom literacy instruction across the intermediate grades, and (2) the use of learning goals and success criteria when assessing and evaluating students, and (3) the use of 'literacy units' within the intermediate grades. Further, a comprehensive approach to language and literacy instruction should include questioning, metacognitive strategies, critical literacy skills and opportunities for students to form their identity. These considerations and components were integral to the instruction that was facilitated as part of this project.

To positively impact the literacy learning of adolescent students, programs of professional learning should be collaborative, job-embedded and inquiry-based. It is important for teachers to be a part of the learning process, where educators can seek answers to questions they have rather than being told what they need to do. An effective method to undergird growth in educators is the formation of collaborative inquiry teams that engage in cycle of professional learning (Coburn & Stein, 2010). This cycle begins with planning: identifying a literacy need, selecting a learning focus, and determining professional learning to address students' literacy need. The second stage is acting: implementing evidence-based strategies and evaluating the outcomes. Then collaborators observe, building their experiential knowledge to re-apply it. Finally, there is reflecting: examining, analyzing and evaluating the results of the learning.

A complementary blend of professional learning approaches might be found in collaborative inquiry and co-teaching. Co-teaching that involves middle and high school teachers is termed, vertical team teaching (Cunningham, & Gresso, 1993; Texas Leadership Center, 1998). This is especially poignant for a successful transition from middle to high school given the typical differences in the curriculum and skills (Bertrand, Roberts, & Buchanan, 2006).

Research Design and Methodology

This case study research reports on a program of professional learning that eighth and ninth grade teachers engaged in establishing their own inquiry and collaborating to plan and teach together. Debriefing about this collaborative inquiry process was encouraged post-lesson and in teacher and student open forums. Data was collected over a 3-month period (March-June) in 3 elementary and 2 secondary schools with teachers (n=11), students, literacy coaches/facilitators, administrators and parents. Multiple forms of data were collected: fieldnotes (during meetings, lessons), surveys (teachers, parents), interviews (teachers, administrators, coaches/facilitators), artefacts (work samples, forum summaries, reflections), report card grades. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted on these data.

Findings

As a function of participating in this project, teachers developed, shared, and added to their repertoire of instructional strategies, ideas, and resources that support adolescent literacy development. Many of the teachers described the critical role of co-planning to ensure a common understanding and common language of instruction across both panels. During co-planning the teachers prepared attainable learning goals for the lesson that were shared with the students to make them aware of expectations. As a part of this co-planning process, the teachers also discussed how to make the lesson and resources personally relevant to their adolescent learners. The co-taught lessons were enhanced with technology to make learning relevant to and match the preferred learning styles of the 21st century learners.

The grade 9 teachers appreciated the ability to observe the grade 8 classrooms, which allowed them to see the gaps between elementary and secondary literacy instruction. Grade 9 teachers commended the grade 8 teachers for their innate ability to embed literacy into the various subject areas. Based on these observations, the secondary teachers are now incorporating familiar components of scaffolded, skill-focused literacy instruction in their classrooms. The elementary teacher participants appreciated the ability to observe and co-teach in an applied, academic, or locally developed classroom, and they now more fully understand the dynamics of streaming/ability grouping in secondary school.

Teachers acknowledge that their adolescent students' transition to secondary school involves changes in social interactions, academic expectations and school environments which inevitably impact literacy outcomes for their students. The grade 8 students benefitted from the co-teaching by garnering an understanding of the culture and academics of secondary school. Additionally, the parents of the students involved in this project were quite positive about the preparedness of their children for secondary-level English. The practice of being actively engaged during a collaborative inquiry lesson was valued by the student participants who remarked about this during the student forum. Students were also able to apply the strategies learned during the co-taught lesson to their own summative assessment task of writing an essay. Final language arts report card grades for grade 8 students and English for grade 9 students were analyzed for gender comparisons for strand grades.

Responses for the teachers' beliefs about traditional vs. social constructivist practices were compared; interestingly, the former beliefs still dominate the latter beliefs. Participating in this cross-panel project enabled teachers to confront and challenge some of the misconceptions they held about their co-teaching partners' teaching practices in elementary or secondary school. Teachers reported a sense of validation of their current literacy instructional practices as a function of participating in this cross-panel literacy collaborative inquiry project. Participating teachers also reported that they now sought alignment and consistency in assessment and instruction across the grade levels. Based on their students' positive reactions to the co-taught lessons, several teacher participants will continue to use their co-teaching partner's instructional strategies in their future practice.

Lessons Learned

Bringing together these traditionally opposing but complementary levels of education was a catalyst for professional growth. Funding, resources, and periodic release time for observing, co-planning, and co-teaching should be continuously provided in order to build continuity and consistency across all grade levels. This type of parallel learning builds collegial professional practice among teachers and focuses on student learning. An opportunity exists for a sustained investigation into the program of literacy professional learning that has been presented herein.

Authors' Note:

Dr. Tiffany L. Gallagher and Katia Ciampa, Ph.D. (c) are both educational researchers and instructors in the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University. Tiffany's research expertise is in mixed methods research designs that investigate assessment and teaching strategies and students with exceptional learning needs. Katia also engages in mixed methods research designs specializing in the use of technology in literacy education to motivate students. A request was made by NCDSB's Research Officer for researchers to investigate the *Cross-Panel Collaborative Inquiry Project* and Tiffany and Katia elected to assume this role. Throughout the second term of the 2013 school year, both Tiffany and Katia were at arms-length to the design and facilitation of this project. The research of this project was vetted through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University and NCDSB. All data were independently and confidentially collected and analyzed and subsequently presented in this report. Neither Tiffany or Katia have been employed by Niagara Catholic District School Board and were not remunerated for the research or writing of this report; consequently they have remained an objective evaluators throughout this process.