

Final Report for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat:

Niagara Catholic District School Board's Cross Panel Literacy Collaborative Inquiry Project
(2013-2014)



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Recently, NCDSB identified three areas of need with respect to teacher professional learning: (1) building an understanding of literacy needs and types of assessment; (2) strategic direction for student achievement (NCDSB - BIPSA 2013-2014); (3) strengthening the impact of professional development. To build an understanding of literacy needs and types of assessment, NCDSB decided to focus on components of the *Adolescent Literacy Guide* during the design of a unit of study. Following the backward-design model, there was a focus on assessment for/as/of learning. The strategic direction within NCDSB is to advance student achievement and close the achievement gap for all students. To accomplish this, teachers have been provided with classroom-embedded learning opportunities to increase their understanding and application of assessment strategies. As well, NCDSB sought to support teachers as they engage in collaborative inquiry to examine their practice and facilitate student-led inquiry. Related to these areas of need, NCDSB acknowledges that they desire to strengthen the impact of professional development.

Adolescent learning evolves during the transition from elementary to secondary school and teachers must be responsive to these multifaceted changes. A comprehensive approach to language and literacy instruction should include questioning, metacognitive strategies, critical literacy skills and opportunities for adolescent students to voice their ideas. Since literacy learning is a shared learning responsibility, teachers should collectively engage in research, collaboration and professional learning. Such embedded professional learning is especially productive when it fosters peer interactions that center on a common professional resource or an instructional method (Hadar & Brody, 2010).

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).

A complementary blend of professional learning approaches might be found in collaborative inquiry, co-planning and teacher moderation. Co-planning involves a small group of teachers who work collaboratively to plan lessons and provide students with an enhanced learning environment. Teacher moderation of student work can contribute to consistent and reliable assessment and aligned instructional design (Literacy & Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). These theoretical and practical considerations were integrated into the integral to the *Cross Panel Literacy Collaborative Inquiry Project* that has been evaluated herein.

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 a language unit. Debriefing about this collaborative inquiry process was encouraged post-unit delivery and in teacher and student open forums. Data were collected over an 8-month period (October-May) in 4 elementary and 2 secondary schools with teachers (n=10), department heads, students, and literacy coaches/facilitators. Multiple forms of data were collected: fieldnotes (during meetings, lessons), surveys (teachers), interviews (teachers, students, coaches/facilitators), artefacts (work samples, forum summaries, reflections). Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted.

Findings

The *Adolescent Literacy Guide* (MOE, 2012) was the primary professional resource that was highlighted in this project, and the teachers declared that it is an effective and valuable reference. At the end of the project, teachers collectively evaluated the efficacy of the *Guide* and stated that it reaffirmed and consolidated their existing best practices in adolescent literacy instruction. Many teachers reported that they

will continue to embed the *Guide* in their future practice and they are eager to promote the value of this resource among their colleagues.

The participating teachers sought to supplement their literacy instruction with technology to create relevant learning experiences that mirrored students' daily lives. They taught students the skills and habits required to be critical media consumers and users of information. Teachers also used the Learning Management System (LMS) as an instructional support tool for their students. In the coming year, a few of the teachers intend to integrate blogging into the classroom to enhance and support already-established classroom practices, such as literature response.

Enhancements to teachers' assessment practices were evident in their adoption of the backwards design model, use of success criteria and greater emphasis on diagnostic and formative assessment. This was apparent as teachers shifted away from the product of learning (i.e., grading) towards the process of learning. These teachers became confident in their understanding of students' literacy skills, their abilities to adapt and differentiate literacy instruction and use appropriate assessment methods. The concrete experiences that teachers engaged in during the professional learning maximized their immediate transfer from the in-service training to their respective classrooms.

The participating teachers acknowledge the benefits of reflection on their practice as they began to question long-standing beliefs and consider implications for their professional practices. Within their collaborative inquiry groups, the teachers were willing to take risks to explore different pedagogies and use new resources as they planned instructional units. It became apparent that the hard work, time, and effort the teachers invested in their unit plans were well worth the intrinsic satisfaction they subsequently felt. When there were dynamic relationships between collaborating teachers there was a reported increase in teacher self-efficacy. Moreover, based on their successful and positive co-planning experiences, several of the teachers intend to continue to engage in this activity and maintain their collaborative relationships.

Participating in this project enabled teachers to confront and challenge some of the misconceptions they held about their cross panel colleagues' teaching practices. As a result, teachers noticed an increase in continuity and progression of learning from elementary to secondary school in terms of the instructional strategies, supports, and assessments used across both panels. The returning Grade 9 teacher participants (from Year 1) reportedly sustained changes to their instructional practices as a function of participating in this project in Year 2. Changes adopted include a shift from a passive, top-down experience to an active, bottom-up experience which maximized student engagement and supported students' success.

The voice of the adolescent learner was prominent in the findings of this project. Why? Student voice was given the opportunity to be heard and it was valued. Grade 8, 9 and 10 students stated that they are engaged in literacy learning when the teacher makes connections to their prior knowledge, actively involves them in discussion and peer collaboration, and provides clear explanations and instructions. In particular, they value success criteria, sample exemplars and explicit details about expectations. The benefits and challenges of peer collaboration were articulated such as encouraging all to participate, and respectfully letting all voices be heard. The students spoke to their appreciation of teachers who get to know and understand them and make connections to them, their peers and their reality. Making learning relevant and opening up options to their interests provides these adolescent learners with opportunities for choice and ultimately self-determination. Choosing resources, texts and topics that are relevant to their contemporary lives is essential. They enjoy the exercise to critically analyze current news events and this increased their interest in literacy learning. Finally, it is reasonable to conjecture that a student outcome of this project is student confidence. Students expressed that their literacy strengths relate to reading engagement and comprehension as well as writing with coherent expression. Discussion is viewed instrumentally as contributing to fruitful and diverse communication.

Lessons Learned

Teachers in both panels have begun to establish a bridge by co-planning and using common strategies in their literacy unit planning, instruction, and assessment. The consequence: their students experienced consistency in literacy pedagogy with clear assessment checking for their understanding. Teacher release time to engage in collaborative inquiry and co-plan with teaching partners was integral to the facilitation of this program. Future iterations of this project (or a hybrid version of this project) should harness the experience of the exemplary veteran teacher participants. As well, facilitators might re-evaluate the inclusion of co-teaching in subsequent cross panel project designs.

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* in the Winter of 2013 (Year 1) and Tiffany and Katia elected to assume this role. Tiffany and Katia continued their research study throughout the 2013-2014 school year, remaining 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.