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*Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.*

Collaborative Inquiry in Literacy: Primary Grades Crystal Côté-Poulin

This story describes a French language school district's inquiry into how to improve student achievement in reading in the primary grades. The story illustrates how a principal enacted the leadership practices and drew on the personal leadership resources (PLRs) of the [Ontario Leadership Framework](#) (OLF) to foster staff collaboration, persistence, and laser-like focus on a shared goal. What resulted was improvement in Mathematics and a significant increase in the collective efficacy of staff.

In June 2013, pedagogical team of the Conseil scolaire catholique Franco-Nord decided to focus its collaborative inquiry process on reading at the primary level as an outcome of their analysis of school and EQAO data for June 2013. As a staff we have been monitoring reading results for several years since we noted that our results in this subject were not stable. We noticed that most of our students are achieving at level 2, and we wanted to find out why.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

4.2 Providing instructional support

We are constantly questioning ourselves in this regard. What is happening? What are we doing that isn't working? What's different? Have there been any changes in our schools over the last few years? If yes, what are they?

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school

These questions have raised pedagogical discussions and compelled us to think about reading and our practices in that respect. We have come up with many hypotheses and confirmed the importance of investing in this subject which has become a priority for us. Furthermore, as number of students covered by the [Actualisation](#)

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

linguistique en français (ALF) curriculum is ever increasing in our schools, we knew full well that these students would benefit from the strategies targeted by this collaborative inquiry. Therefore, we decided to move forward with a collaborative inquiry focused on reading with all ten grade 2 teachers of our school district. Special education teachers and principals were also invited to join the team.

Inquiry Question or Hypothesis

Our inquiry question was, “What impact will explicit teaching integrated comprehension strategies for the reading process have on students’ reading performance?”

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement

This inquiry question was based on academic research and pedagogical resources to ensure a direct link between theory and practice. It was also directly aligned with the board’s improvement plan for student achievement.

Implementation of the Collaborative Inquiry Model

The inquiry process regarding 2nd grade students began in October of the school year and continued to the end of February. It was implemented as a learning pathway in which teachers administered a diagnostic assessment, a formative assessment and a summative assessment in reading within a period of about 16 weeks. Additionally, since we had targeted reading comprehension, each assessment was given orally. We met with teachers on three occasions, two days at a time, for a total of six days.

The study began with an initial meeting when we examined the results of diagnostic assessments previously administered. From the pointed questions, we analyzed student results and made some assumptions and observations. Following this analysis which provided base-line data, the literacy consultant worked with teachers in areas related to the students’ difficulties.

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

3.3 Building productive relationship with families and the community

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing

We also held Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings and had co-teaching sessions with the individuals involved. The goal was to learn from classroom observations and analyze some of the students’ work.

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

During some PLC meetings, teachers were able to meet with staff from the primary grades in other schools to share, analyze and discuss their students' learning. These conversations allowed teachers to reflect on students' learning while consulting on their work.

4.2 Providing instructional support

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

For each collaborative inquiry process, teachers video-recorded their interviews with students. During these interviews, students recalled a text they had read and then verbally answered one explicit and one implicit question. Teachers then noted students' results on an observation scale. During subsequent meetings, we analyzed the results to identify evidence of learning.

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement

It should be noted that our collaborative inquiry process included elements of [Growing Success](#). Students were able to identify the learning goals, co-construct success criteria, accept and offer descriptive feedback, and self-evaluate.

Initiatives Linked to the Leading Student Achievement (LSA) Project

The collaborative inquiry process took into account the Four Paths linked to the LSA project, specifically the Rational Path, the Emotional Path, the Organizational Path and even the Family Path¹. Following this analysis, we targeted promising practices in-line with students' needs, which guaranteed a focused teaching.

4.2 Providing instructional support

Throughout the duration of the inquiry, we questioned ourselves about student learning and our teaching strategies. What were the behaviors of the students who participated in the readings? What reading strategies were observed? What does the data tell us about the problem? What assumptions do we make about students and their learning? What are the strengths and weaknesses that emerge from the data? What can we do to fix the problem?

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement

5.1 Building staff members' sense of internal accountability

¹ Leithwood, K., Patten, S., Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how leadership influences student learning, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 5, 671-706

We used triangulation of information sources (conversations, observations, products) to track the students' steps to analyze and reflect on our observations. We have had to engage in courageous conversations at times as we were required to pull back and reflect on our own practices.

This questioning allowed teachers to become more efficient when targeting and implementing new and promising practices. The opportunity for classroom observation that the inquiry provided was very beneficial for teachers. They welcomed us in their classrooms to observe them co-teach a lesson in front of their colleagues. This cooperation allowed teachers to work collaboratively, to trust in their partners and take risks. It allowed them to gain confidence in their instructional practices.

Social Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity, resilience

The participation of principals was valued and enriching for all as their comments and questions elicited lively dialogue and discussion.

They were able to improve their understanding of the targeted teaching strategies in reading which were designed to support classroom monitoring of student achievement. Principals also had the opportunity to contribute to exchanges during the PLCs. Principals also participated in principals' PLC sessions that focused on building their capacity to support monitoring, implement tools and resources and engage in courageous conversations.

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

The literacy consultant was invited to participate in some of the school PLC sessions to contribute their expertise to the discussions. During each collaborative inquiry meeting, the literacy consultant presented pedagogical information on reading and strategies for meeting student learning needs in reading. Given that we were working with a backward design model, teachers had the time to implement the selected strategies prior to implementing the formative and summative assessments.

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

Finally, since we wanted to involve the parents in their children's learning, the 10 teachers sent them resource materials that outlined promising strategies

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and community

they could use at home to support reading with their children. Parents expressed their appreciation for these materials.

Successes and Challenges: Testimonials

One principal had this to say:

Successes

“The grade 2 literacy collaborative inquiry process enabled students to visualize during reading preparation and throughout their reading. Therefore, based on previously acquired knowledge, on the context, on their senses, etc. students realized that reading is much more than simply decoding or connecting syllables.

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement

What I appreciated about this study and the LSA project was the opportunity to make connections between the two and allow monitoring, all the while considering the selected strategies throughout the collaborative inquiry process. Furthermore, even if the process comes to an end, teachers will be able to continue using the strategy that best meets the needs of their students. Finally, the next phase will be to integrate these strategies in reciprocal reading thereby increasing student progression. Teachers have been able to give meaning to reading for their students!”

Challenges

“From the principal’s point of view, monitoring such a project becomes very important. However, even if certain specific students are targeted for monitoring, we would like to be able to chart the progress of a larger sample group ... Ultimately, what we’re lacking once again is time ... Certain criteria would have needed to be looked at more in depth after observations, but unfortunately, time is limited. Nonetheless we carry on with the certainty that students are the winners.”

5.2 Meeting the demands for external accountability

Another principal had this to say:

Successes

“Within the LSA Project, school principals and teachers who participated in the grade 2 collaborative inquiry on reading at the board level have developed a theory of action and set a common objective with a view to improving performance. This objective is also aligned with the school’s improvement plan. Furthermore, setting a goal within a common project has facilitated the process for all involved. We have been able to target and implement strategies aimed at acquisition of reading skills by targeted students.

What has made things easy is the fact that the pedagogical team drafted the monitoring tool using clear, precise and realistic criteria. My presence at meetings of the literacy inquiry team and at PLC meetings allowed me to collaborate with the teachers and monitor them with confidence. During this monitoring, I was able to observe students and examine their work to ascertain their comprehension. Following the monitoring, I shared my observations with the teachers. This has in no way overburdened team members.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

During our primary level PLC meeting we shared best practices. The grade 3 and 4 teachers are also going through an inquiry process in literacy, so planning is done with the same objective in mind.”

4.2 Providing instructional support

Challenges

“It’s not always easy to schedule monitoring sessions and do follow-up afterwards. Also, given the number of school activities, it’s difficult at times to adhere to the deadlines set within a given process.

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement

As it happens, we have not been able to follow up and confirm our theory of action. Has performance improved? An analysis of report cards will have to be done and we will need to target other strategies following that analysis.

And finally, I’ve noticed that the needs of team members are not identical. How are we then to meet their needs as well as the needs of students?”

One teacher had this to say:

“I just wanted to say that since our meeting in October, I’ve organized several pre-reading activities that were presented during pedagogical activities with my students, and I can already see progress! They are much more curious about reading and seem to better understand what they are reading. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the ideas and strategies that are shared. I will certainly be using this approach for all reading activities from now on.”

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff