

March 23, 2007

I hope your spring break was both restful and exciting. I know the province's students will be happy to get back to school with their friends and teachers, although they will do the ceremonial groaning. It is a particularly exciting time for our almost 60,000 grade 12 students. This is when they really begin thinking about the end of their secondary schooling and is a very busy, and sometimes emotional time. Plans are made for what is next. Preparations get underway for graduation activities. Most importantly, students prepare themselves for the final school demonstrations of their learning. Teachers, of course, also focus on this last term and provide for every student's successful transition to the next endeavour.

Next week is Education Week – a good time to reflect on the learning opportunities and outcomes for all our students and particularly our Grade 12 students. As I promised last week, I have more stories of excellence to share with you. These stories are about great teachers, great leaders and great students. The stories show how our education system is improving the life chances of our students.

British Columbia is a great place to live and has many, many resources. Among these, our children are our most important resource. We know the number of school age children to be falling. We know we have a healthy and growing economy that relies on a highly skilled and engaged citizenry. For this reason, it is important that we continue to ensure that every student has the best life chances possible and is prepared to participate fully in the British Columbia economy.

Susan Close, Assistant Superintendent, School District No. 40 (New Westminster), provided this story about teacher leadership – making a difference for students.

The Power of a Professional Learning Round

Making a Difference for 400 Readers ... in just one morning

Carrie Ng, a member of the SD40 district research team and a grade four teacher at Lord Kelvin Elementary School, has systematically and explicitly taught her students a range of comprehension strategies. Through the gradual release of responsibility she invites them to

independently and thoughtfully practice each strategy in just-right texts of choice – using the same nine-step process they use as a whole class. Like many members of the research team, Carrie regularly welcomes visitors to learn with and from her students, through professional learning rounds. Just before Spring Break, Carrie and her class of diverse learners demonstrated their independent reading process in a morning learning round for eighteen teachers and student teachers.

Like any good lesson, a learning round is set up in three parts: before, during and after the learning experience. To begin the professional conversation before going to the classroom, Carrie explained her goals for the hour with the students. By this time of the year, the students are comfortably applying a range of strategies that include: imagery, IQ: image and question, questioning into summary, fact/inference, what's important into summary. For this learning round, she wanted the students to set personal goals in relation to the strategy they were independently choosing to use. She invited the participants to describe their personal goals for the classroom observation. Based on the experience of the teacher, the goals varied:

- see the process in action
- know how to get the independent process started
- learn more about how to structure the partner-talk
- press 'refresh' and renew what I am doing.

Carrie then invited the participants to anticipate what they were going to see and hear in the classroom, and she invited them to collaboratively generate their hardest questions. She planned to use their goals and questions to guide her teaching, stopping to emphasize or reinforce different aspects of the learning during the teaching time.

During the observation, the students became teachers showing the guests important aspects of their reading as they moved through the nine steps. They knew the visitors were listening to hear their thinking, and that the visitors would be telling them what they noticed about their learning, as a 'ticket-out-the-door'.

After leaving the classroom, the participants discussed their new ideas and connections, and then explored

questions – tapping into everyone’s understanding and experience. Each person set a goal for their work back in their own environments, and reflected on the effects of the morning’s work.

As you can see from the reflections on the learning round experience, the learning demonstrated by one teacher and twenty-four students - in one morning – made a difference to eighteen teachers, who will in turn make a difference with over 400 young readers! Now, that is the social power of a professional learning group.

Reflections from the guests:

- Learning rounds have had an extremely powerful effect on me as a professional. The opportunity for conversation and questioning allows for new ideas to be created and connections to be made. Having hands-on experiences in classrooms, hearing other educators’ language, and seeing how they work with the students allows a teacher to go back and immediately apply the new learning. This is how growth occurs.
- By having to reflect on practices and explain with justification the purpose of what I am doing, I believe I become a more powerful teacher. I deepen my own understanding as a learner of best practice. Through the learning rounds we get to celebrate all of the hard work, and the intense learning of the students!
- Observation in a real classroom is fabulous. To have the opportunity to see theory into practice engages all of us. We take what we already know, and then see where we can go.
- This was a real classroom with a wide variety of learners. That made it seem possible and manageable. What excellent professional learning. I can hardly wait to try the things that I saw.
- I could not have learned so much in isolation. It is through the shared conversations, and the observation that I develop new plans of action.
- When you pair dialogue with colleagues with in-class demonstrations and/or co-teaching, the learning multiplies.
- As a professional, having the opportunity to observe another teacher through a learning round is both empowering and inspirational – everyone benefits.
- As a new teacher, watching another teacher and discussing what works is vital. I feel that this collaboration is the best way for me to progress professionally. I feel that the partner-talk that takes place is absolutely inspiring!

What is the theme you notice running through the comments of the “guests” in this classroom? It strikes me that these teachers express the value of collaboration, learning together and conversations. How do we provide more opportunities for this to occur in our schools?

Chantrell Creek Elementary’s Developing Readers Story

Mike McKay, Superintendent, School District No. 36 (Surrey), provided this article about a school success story in one of that district’s elementary schools. We hear often in the research about the value of Professional Learning Communities. Here is one in action.

Context

Chantrell Creek is a K to 7 elementary school of 340 students and is located in the southern part of Surrey, B.C., between the communities of White Rock and Crescent Beach. The staff includes a Principal, 14 enrolling teachers, 2 learning assistance teachers and itinerant teachers for music, band, library, counselling, etc.

History

Chantrell Creek has had a school goal in writing for several years, with a focus on assessment for learning, school-wide writes, and the use of Writing Performance Standards. When we identified reading comprehension as an area requiring attention, our staff was interested in continuing our pursuit of assessment for learning in reading. Since the district had developed an assessment for learning tool in the area of reading (RAD) and its instructional component (Developing Readers), many teachers were interested. School teams were invited to participate in a series of workshops followed by school-based sessions, where teacher-principal teams were encouraged to make links between RAD and specific cognitive processes used by proficient readers.

We are now in our second year of the Developing Readers Project. In year one, the entire school team attended a series of district workshops designed and presented by a team of Literacy Helping Teachers. The school team brought strategies back to the school, began using them in classrooms and sharing them with colleagues. In year two, a small lead team of school facilitators attended district sessions and then hosted school-based planning sessions, working with the entire school team.

A very positive learning cycle has developed with all teachers agreeing to administer RAD, examine results, plan instruction based on results, and monitor effectiveness in an ongoing fashion.

Reasons for Success

- Support from the district with release time for teachers (TOC costs), providing resources and in-service.
- Dedicated attention from one of the Developing Readers Literacy Helping Teachers to our school, helping us when necessary, cheerleading and providing resources.
- Teacher leaders maintain momentum, working cooperatively with the principal, setting direction, facilitating, and encouraging collegial participation.
- Teachers were able to relate to their successes in writing, seeing the benefits to students when all staff members are on board, building common language and understanding.

Challenges

- TOC shortages in year one prevented us from following through on release time for teachers.
- As the materials are new to us, we are still exploring and learning together using RAD and the Developing Readers' strategies.
- We need to continue to explore student needs - their interests and hobbies are not what they were when we were students or when we started teaching. We need to know who they are so that we might engage them in meaningful learning.

Benefits

- Professional Learning Community – as a staff we engage in rich professional conversations about what works and what doesn't.
- Common language is used by students and teachers to describe reading processes and strategies for improvement.
- Raised awareness – the meta-cognitive piece – students and teachers are thinking about reading and understanding what they read in clearly articulated language related to strategies for improvement.

Two things stood out for me in the reasons for success in this school – teacher leaders working collaboratively with the principal and release time permitting teachers to work together.

Two Surrey secondary teachers submitted this article about secondary success.

The Literacy Initiative at L.A. Matheson Secondary School

Stacey Joyce
Kim Sadhra

L.A. Matheson is a designated inner city school with a diverse student population in the Surrey School District. A high proportion of our students are “not yet within expectations” or “minimally meeting expectations” in reading; our grade seven results, the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), and the Reading Assessment District 36 (RAD36) all support this. By initiating data informed decision making, a need for a school wide literacy program was recognized. In response to this data, we applied for and received an Action Research Grant from the Surrey School District to create opportunities for teachers to work towards improving literacy.

Our school's literacy initiative began in September 2005, with the advent of the Surrey school district Developing Reader's program. Initially, we had four facilitators representing the Social Studies, Science, Humanities and English departments. These facilitators attended the district in-service workshops and then returned with their new found knowledge and shared it among our school wide literacy team of eight members. In turn, these teachers integrated literacy strategies into their lesson plans and shared their knowledge with their entire departments. With this model, we were able to reach the majority of the staff. Math teachers started using “Placemats” so that students could make meaning of word problems and solve them, French teachers made use of “Shower of Stars” to make sense of difficult passages, Humanities teachers started “Sticky Lighting” to synthesize information about World Religions, and Science teachers set up SMART labs.

This year we have decided to take our literacy initiative to the next level by focusing on specific content material with each department. In order to maintain the literacy momentum we felt it was important to develop content driven lesson plans with each department to ensure their continued implementation. We work alongside members of each department to create a unit plan with specific literacy strategies, aligning these with Diane Heacox's Integration Matrix, to meet all multiple intelligences in our classroom. The

feedback from these departments has been extremely positive; one of our student teachers attended our in-service on Wednesday and was then integrating literacy strategies on the Friday.

The longevity of our initiative has been secured with the establishment of our Professional Learning Community (PLC). Through PLC, incorporating literacy has left the realm of the “literacy committee” and has become its own entity involving members across all curriculum areas; the original facilitators have empowered the entire staff in an example of true distributed leadership, and their leaving will have no effect on the sustainability of the literacy initiative.

Education Week across British Columbia begins Monday. I know some school districts celebrate their own Education Week at other times because of local calendar considerations, but March 26 to 30 is officially proclaimed Education Week. Watch for my Education Report each day next week. Feel free to share it with teachers and parents as we celebrate education in British Columbia and look forward to future success.



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