

• Cecil Swanson School • Bassano School • St Michael's School • Horace Allen School •

# TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN ASSESSMENT

*Case Studies in K-3 Literacy*

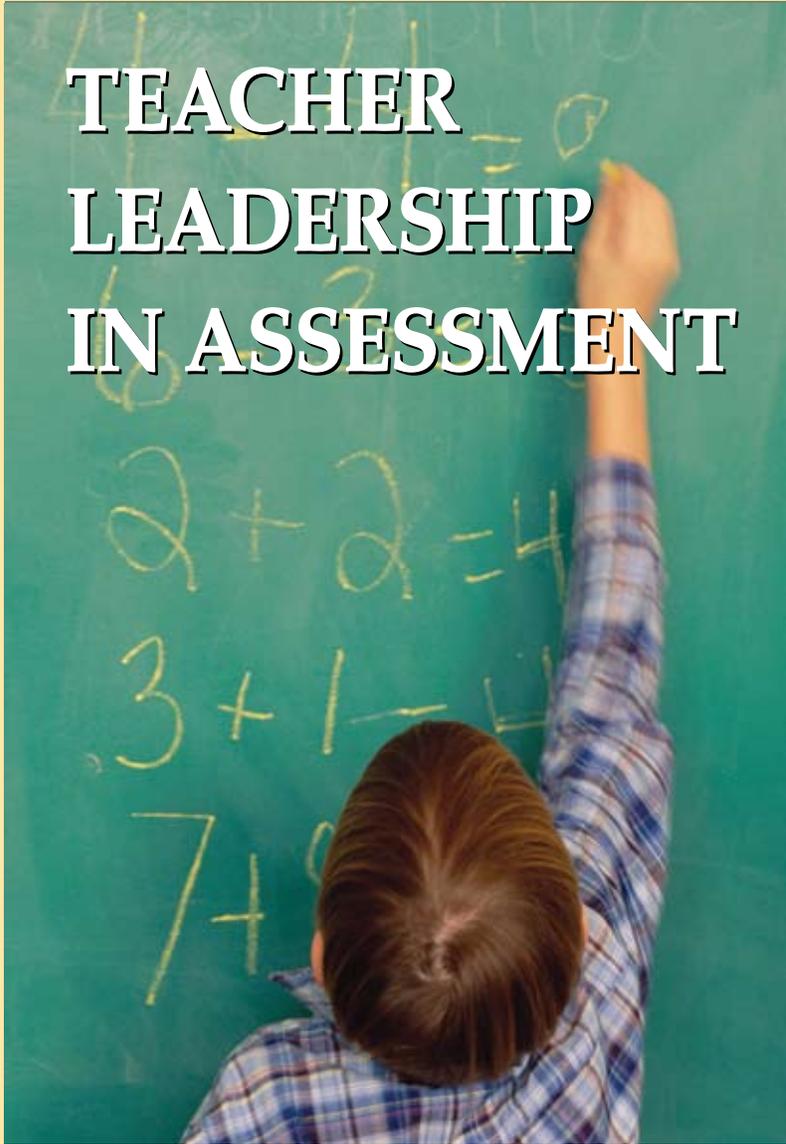
AAC

ALBERTA ASSESSMENT CONSORTIUM



The Alberta  
Teachers' Association





## *Case Studies in K-3 Literacy*

A joint project of the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta Assessment Consortium and the following four Alberta elementary schools: Cecil Swanson, Calgary Board of Education; Bassano, Grasslands School Division; St Michael's, Medicine Hat Catholic School Division; and Horace Allen, Livingstone Range School Division.

# Teacher Leadership in Assessment

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## Acknowledgements

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## Leadership in Assessment Project (LAP) Advisory Committee

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## Why a Project on Literacy Assessment?

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC), with facilitation support from Alberta Education, worked with staff from four schools to undertake a collaborative pilot study (Leadership in Assessment Project [LAP]) to develop a comprehensive, sustainable and scalable program to improve teacher-managed assessment and evaluation. The focus was on building the leadership capacity of teachers in their role as reflective practitioners who are focused on improving assessment practices that reflect the diversity and complexity of classrooms. Underlying this project is a commitment to improving student learning.

But why focus on literacy? In March 2006, Alberta Education drafted the *K–3 Numeracy/Literacy Report*. This report resulted from an Alberta Education provincewide consultation on literacy and numeracy in the early grades. A stakeholder advisory committee was convened to provide input and advice on the background documents and consultation process. Representatives from the ATA; the Alberta School Boards Association; the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association; the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta; the College of Alberta School Superintendents; the Alberta Children and Youth Initiative; a school principal; and Alberta Education staff from various branches participated on the advisory committee.

Consultations were conducted with key stakeholder groups, and information was posted on Alberta Education's website for individual or group response. Eight special forums were





## Leadership in Assessment

*“Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.”*  
(UNESCO 2003)

conducted with parents across the province, including one for Aboriginal parents, and as a result of the consultations, eight recommendations were developed in collaboration with the advisory committee for consideration by the department.

One of those recommendations was that Alberta Education, with education stakeholders, research, develop and communicate working definitions of numeracy and literacy related to Alberta Education’s program of studies. In response to this recommendation, the Curriculum Branch, along with the French Language Services Branch, proposed to develop a framework to enhance student achievement in literacy through the K–12 programs of study. The framework will include a contemporary definition of literacy in the Alberta context. In 2004, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) agreed to adopt a literacy action plan to increase literacy levels of all Canadians and to help Canadians acquire the highest level of literacy skills in the world. In November 2006, CMEC drafted a literacy work plan, which included policy work, sharing of promising practices, effective use of data and research, and development of a pan-Canadian communication and public-awareness strategy.

### *What Is Literacy?*

As is discussed in the Statistics Canada report *Measuring Adult Literacy and Life Skills: New Frameworks for Assessment* (Murray, Clermont and Binkley 2005, 93), the definition of literacy has changed along with changes in our society, economy and culture. The increasing importance of lifelong learning has brought about expanded views of literacy, as well as increased demands of literacy.

The literacy skills needed for participation in society, individual advancement and daily life in the 19th century were different from those needed in the 20th century, and those required for the future will be different still. Technology drives much of our economy in the 21st century, and our citizens are expected to know how to communicate in increasingly complex ways.

Resnick and Resnick (1977) point out that literacy in its earliest form consisted of the ability to sign one’s name. The definition of literacy has grown over the years to include the ability to read to acquire information. In fact, “The most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills—particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing—that are



*Our research team—Leaders in Assessment*



independent of the context in which they are acquired and the background of the person who acquires them" (UNESCO 2005, 149).

Definitions and understandings of literacy have broadened and changed over the last 50 years. In 1949 "the United Nations General Assembly envisioned the minimum requirements for fundamental education as including domestic skills, knowledge of other cultures and an opportunity to develop personal attributes such as initiative and freedom" (UNESCO 2005, 159). As definitions of literacy have shifted from a discrete set of skills to human resource skills for economic growth to capabilities for sociocultural change, articulating the deeper conceptual aspects of literacy has become more difficult. A proposed operational definition was formulated during a UNESCO international expert meeting in June 2003. It states: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society." This proposed definition encompasses several different dimensions of literacy. An attendant challenge has to do with accurately monitoring and assessing the multiple forms of literacy (UNESCO 2004). "To me, being literate encompasses self-discipline, control of language, facilitation of personal expression, creation of compassion and an understanding of life options and decisions. It's a collective sense of being part of a more scholarly life, a more passionate life, and that is my goal as a teacher. To reach every kid, *every kid*, we must constantly search for the means to bring that kid into the literacy fold by engaging them in passionate learning and discourse" (Morgan 2006, 388).



Fullan (2006, 1) notes that public education has a new mission and that is "to get all students to meet high standards of education and to provide them with a lifelong education that does not have the built-in obsolescence of so much old-style curriculum but that equips them to be lifelong learners." In order to meet this new mission it is essential that all the elements required for systemic success are creatively assembled in the service of reform that touches every classroom.

As a variety of complex texts become an integral part of basic social, political and economic institutions, people's ability to partake in the free exchange of information is becoming the new definition of a literate society. As educators we have a responsibility to ensure that our classrooms are preparing learners for the new literacy requirements. "The classroom must be a place where literacy becomes inescapable because it is not only the passport to connecting and making sense of the world, it is ultimately key to making the world a better place" (Hill et al 2006, 392).



### *Teacher Leadership in Literacy Development A Case Study Approach*

A key thread running through the K–3 Numeracy/Literacy Report was the importance at building teacher assessment capacity. As well documented in the research literature (Leithwood et al 2004b; Herr and Anderson 2005), support for professional inquiry embedded in the daily work of teachers is a proven approach to school improvement. Four schools representing some of the diversity and complexity of Alberta classrooms were selected for participation in this project. Each school report included in this publication underscores the need to recognize that literacy and numeracy development in the early years of learning is not a linear process that can be readily described in simplistic terms. It was in light of this recognition that this pilot project was developed and initiated in the 2006–07 school year. Three key goals were established for the project in collaboration with the four school site teams:

This collaborative pilot study is intended to

- form the basis for a multijurisdictional provincial research project to deepen and extend the development of multiliteracies in emerging priority areas, such as the implementation of the new social studies program;
- inform student assessment practices and policy development through the active engagement of participating jurisdictions and schools in support of a broader view of student learning beyond a focus or dependency on large-scale external assessments; and
- influence classroom assessment practice and assessment policy development in other provinces and territories in Canada.

### *Four Texts of Action Research— A Model for Professional Inquiry*

A four-cornered template provided a scaffold for sharing and linking during the course of the Leadership in Assessment Project (LAP). The template incorporated

- a) individual reflections,
- b) school-site reports and
- c) a final summary report.

A model for structuring teachers' reflections on their collaboration inquiry related to their practices was developed for this project based on the action research work of Luce-Kapler (1997). This four-corner writing space offers a powerful analytical framework for bringing together the multiple ways that teaching practice is inferred by school and community characteristics as well as the individual and collective histories of those involved in professional inquiry.

While site-based writing addressed all four corners during the project, site reporting has been appropriately constructed and edited for the intended audiences.



## Pretext

- What conditions existed in the school that contributed to the selection of the particular students and the learning targets?
- How did your personal assumptions and expectations about the project and the students affect the initial selection and targets you set?

*Professional reflection about biographies, histories, memories*

## Context

- What common interests in improving student learning brought you together as a group of teachers?
- What were the initial goals for the targeted students (ie, the targets and measures)?
- How were the students selected?

*Professional reflection about expectations, targets, what-ifs*

## Subtext

- What did you *not* know about the students and project goals?
- As the project unfolded, what did you avoid *saying? thinking?*
- What did you avoid asking
  - about each other?
  - about the targeted students?
  - about the staff at large?

*Professional reflection about echoes, exclusions, murmurs, voices not heard, words not spoken*

## Retext

- How did the project contribute to student learning (in terms of the initial goals and targets)?
- What were the key moments of challenge and progress
  - for you?
  - for the team?
  - for the students?
  - for the staff?

*Professional reflection about surprises, hindsight, measures, targets*

These four texts of action research remind us that authentic leadership in assessment is about helping teachers cross the boundary between self and other, me and not me, known and unknown in order to improve their instructional practice.



The background of the page is a photograph of a painting in progress. A brush with a yellow handle and blue bristles is visible in the foreground, resting on a palette. The palette has various colors of paint, including blue, red, and white. The background of the painting is a light blue sky with a white paper airplane flying across it.

# Cecil Swanson School

*Cecil Swanson School*

# Swanson School

**Calgary Board  
of Education**



# Who Are We?

We are not homogenized, like milk.  
We are variety, difference, us.  
We have spirit, determination, dedication.  
We love.

a place of safety, of nurturing  
a place to call our own.  
a school  
where all are accepted,  
diversity celebrated,  
change ever-present  
met with joyful perseverance  
all who live here welcome,  
support, model, accept.

We are from celebrated learning,  
small achievements acknowledged  
co-workers with listening ears  
always willing to lend a hand.

A place where a smile,  
a pat on the back,  
a granola bar,  
a consequence given  
are so important  
to those who walk  
through the door each day.

Students bring their whole selves  
stories not left behind  
embroidered silk, *salwaar kameez*,  
sandals, a pair of shorts  
two moms, no dad, one mom, one dad,  
brothers, sisters, aunties, uncles.

Children deemed delayed,  
deficient, different,  
talented, gifted, ordinary  
full members of our communities

Cecil Swanson, equity, not equality for all!

*Composed during the June 2007 writing retreat in Waterton*



# PRETEXT



## Our School

Cecil Swanson Elementary School has about 350 students. It is located in the culturally and economically diverse community of Rundle, in northeast Calgary.

Approximately seven years ago, Cecil Swanson experienced a sudden shift in the school population. Up until that time, only about 6 per cent of our students were ESL. Over two years, the ESL population quadrupled and has continued to climb steadily, such that at the moment (June 2007) 60 per cent of our students are ESL. Largely because of the sharp increase in housing costs in Calgary, the school is also experiencing more student transience. The 2006/07 school year saw as many students arrive and leave in the first three months as in the entire 2005/06 school year.

## Our Students

Cecil Swanson School strives to maintain a consistently positive atmosphere, and parents frequently comment on the strong sense of community, the shared commitment to the work, and the engagement of staff and students in the learning process. School staff also speak of a sense of community, and of their appreciation for and enjoyment of diversity. Our school welcomes all who come here and seeks to make use of their strengths to enrich our community. Our students have a strong understanding of equity and fairness, and approach others with a helpful attitude.

Standardized tests and other large-group assessments are based on an assumption of underlying uniformity and are a unidimensional way of measuring student achievement. They act as sorting mechanisms. At Cecil Swanson, the norm is diversity rather than uniformity. Our students have the usual physical and emotional attributes of children anywhere, but their background knowledge and experience vary widely. For example, although Calgary is less than an hour's drive from the Rocky Mountains, we have many children who have never seen them. At the same time, we have students who are intimately familiar with the Himalayas.

We also have students who come from difficult circumstances. For example, last year we welcomed a young boy who had attended five schools by Grade 2, and who was accustomed to eating crumbs off carpets. We also see children who exceed our expectations and constantly surprise us. For example, this year a five-year-old kindergarten student whose passion is trains gave a presentation to his classmates in language far beyond his years.

Cecil Swanson has a large and varied immigrant population from approximately 25 cultural groups, many from south and southeast Asia. Within this group there is a great variety of background and experience. We have literate and nonliterate refugees. We have recent immigrant parents who are well educated and trained in a variety of professions, including engineering and veterinary medicine. We have families who have been in Canada for 20 years and who maintain strong ties to their original culture. We have students who have never attended

*Standardized tests and other large-group assessments are based on an assumption of underlying uniformity and are a unidimensional way of measuring student achievement.*



school, those who have attended many schools in a few years, those who have attended private and public schools abroad and those who have attended only Cecil Swanson. We also have two classes of students with moderate to severe cognitive challenges.

### *Our Staff*

Cecil Swanson staff value and appreciate diversity and equity, and work to maximize the learning of all students. We recognize that full access to mainstream culture requires a strong education based on the Alberta program of studies. Assessment of learning and assessment for learning together provide essential information that allows us to design learning to best meet the needs of our diverse learning community. Unfortunately, normed assessments are designed to capture the sameness of students and not their special abilities. Furthermore, normed assessments often don't tell us what we really need to know to meet our students' needs and to capture the richness and variety of their varied backgrounds.

The Leadership in Assessment Project was a great opportunity for us to better understand the diverse learners at our school and to intensely examine how we gather information about young learners in the areas of reading, writing and mathematical literacy.

Although we were initially unsure of what this project would entail, as principal, I was nevertheless intrigued when asked to meet with colleagues to discuss diversity in our student population. I have always felt strongly that a major goal of public education in Canada is to teach children to value and welcome diversity and difference, and to honour the principles of democracy.

We help our students succeed by helping them make the best use of their strengths, talents, skills and knowledge. We also value the opportunity to share our thinking and our questions with others. The following teachers formed the research team for this Leadership in Assessment Project:

- Joan King (Grade 1/2)
- Keele Kozak (kindergarten)
- Janis Kristjansson (principal)
- Tancy Lazar (Grade 1/2)
- Neelam Mal (Grade 3/4)



*The Cecil Swanson School research team (left to right): Keele Kozak, Janis Kristjansson, Joan King, Tancy Lazar and Neelam Mal*



# CONTEXT



## Our Research Question

As we gathered around the table to discuss our ideas for this project, we began to talk about the difficulties faced by our students due to their “ESLness,” by which we meant issues related to differences not only in language but also in culture, experience and knowledge. Our students are often seen as lacking so many things: English proficiency, background experience and cultural understanding. Most testing, whether it is Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) reporting, provincial achievement tests (PAT) or diagnostic assessments, measures these students’ so-called deficiencies; that is, what they cannot do. We need to find ways of teaching and assessing that honour and respect students’ unique experiences and ways of knowing; in other words, what they can do. As a starting point, then, we asked ourselves the following question: *Amidst the complexity and diversity of our students, what does it mean to diagnose and respond in ways that honour and enhance the knowledge of both teachers and students?*

As a team, we decided that each teacher would choose a student from her class to focus on, and we would test our data by having more than one teacher observe and work with each child.

## The Targeted Students

The four students were selected for their individuality; together they represented many of the significant issues we work with.

### Joan King, Grade 1/2 (Asha)

I chose an ESL student from India, who came to Canada 18 months ago. Asha is in Grade 2 and is a strong student—eager to learn, always sits at the front, comes dressed for an important day (this is how she sees school), does her work neatly. Asha is the type of student any teacher would identify as a capable learner.

As an ESL teacher in a school with 192 ESL students, I have the unique opportunity to observe and work with these students as they progress through the grades. Asha is very similar to the ESL students I see in the higher grades, who tend not to want to draw attention to themselves. She does not demand attention and appears to be academically engaged, but she struggles with concepts. By the time her struggle becomes apparent, valuable time has been lost and learning gaps have appeared that could have been dealt with if I had known about the problems from the beginning. This experience tells me that we must be able to see beyond the surface, beyond what these students appear to be learning and understanding. We need to figure out how to close these gaps before they become chasms.

### Keele Kozak, Kindergarten (Abram)

Abram is fluent in Russian. His parents describe him as very shy; however, he is involved in almost every aspect of classroom life. Abram eagerly works with a variety of students and adults, and he is very productive during centre time, building amazing and complicated



structures, alone and with peers. He has strong fine-motor skills and is a creative artist, both with a variety of art materials and on the computer. Abram smiles and laughs and has a sparkle in his eyes. He knows all the actions to many songs and always does what is expected of him. He is able to communicate with adults and his peers to meet his own needs, even though he did not speak a single word in the first three months of school.

### Tancy Lazar, Grade 1/2 (Sam)

*Sam can be completely focused and coherent at one point in the day, yet hours later be incoherent and unable to focus on even the most basic task.*

Sam is a happy boy who appears to enjoy coming to school. He misses school for cultural holidays and spent two months of his Grade 1 year in India to celebrate a holiday with his extended family. Sam is somewhat oblivious to what is going on around him, both on the playground and in the classroom.

English is Sam's second language. Sam is experiencing challenges in a variety of subjects, but it is difficult to determine which problems are caused by language limitations and which are caused by other factors. Sam is currently waiting to see a pediatrician for assessment. Pending the results, the school psychologist will likely assess him.

Sam is in Grade 2 but is functioning below Grade 1 level. In November he could not read a level 3 on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) for early kindergarten. He had very limited sight vocabulary and had regressed considerably in his letter/sound recognition from the end of Grade 1. He struggled to skip count and could not make it to 100 counting by ones, twos, fives or tens. He could not do basic addition or subtraction. This being said, what makes Sam so puzzling is his inconsistency; he can complete a task and explain his thinking one day but not the next. One day he demonstrates a basic understanding of addition and does several questions, including adding two numbers together, yet the next day he cannot add  $2 + 4$ . Sam can be completely focused and coherent at one point in the day, yet hours later be incoherent and unable to focus on even the most basic task.

### Neelam Mal, Grade 3/4 (George)

George is, without doubt, the most complex child I have ever met. Choosing him for this study seemed very appropriate. He has witnessed terrible violence at home and has only recently begun to feel a sense of safety and security. He often worries about food, and not having a recess snack one day was a traumatic event for him. His schooling has been significantly interrupted; when he arrived here in Grade 2, Cecil Swanson was his sixth school. Though English is his only language, his language and communication skills are minimal, and he struggles with speaking, reading, writing and math. Due in part to his continual transience and his persistent state of anxiety, George has been struggling to commit to his learning and his school placement.

When he was in Grade 2, George used to cry hysterically and inconsolably every day. He would hide under tables and in corners where he thought no one would find him. Over the course of the past year, though, George has started to develop a sense of security and belonging. He is still anxious at times and tends to panic, particularly at times of change, such as the beginning of long weekends or breaks in the school year.

By all conventional standards, George doesn't measure up, but anyone who meets him can see that there is more to this complex child, whose learning and knowledge are based on his strong desire to be safe and who essentially needs two things: food and love. George is developing and growing every day, and this progress should be noted and celebrated.



**How do teachers work through the issues of student transiency and absenteeism? What role does school and jurisdiction support play in this process?**

Student scores on reading comprehension assessments can vary by two grade levels, depending on the student's background knowledge. Two parallel passages can yield one score at frustration level and one at independent level. A person's ability to understand depends largely on the number of connections his or her brain makes to things it already knows. In the absence of those connections, learning is slow and difficult. When there is no shared background or cultural knowledge between students and test designers, or between students and teachers, it is extremely difficult to predict and understand student responses to tasks.

Teacher-designed assessment encounters this same problem. Recently, during a math class, one team member watched as many strong math students were stalled on what seemed to be a simple problem. Fortunately these students had been taught to analyze and question confusing words (which is not as easy as it sounds; to wit, how do we know what we don't know or learn to understand what we don't understand?). One of the students finally asked, "Is a pair of shorts one short or two?" Clarification of this apparently simple point resulted in instant success for the students.

## *The Value of Observation, Discussion and Questioning in Professional Inquiry*

Observation and discussion give our students a chance to show us what they know, and a chance to feel heard and appreciated for the work they are doing. Observation and discussion honour students and give teachers a chance to enhance student knowledge by helping students see their misconceptions. By really listening when we ask questions during observation, we learn more about students and their learning needs than we do by simply asking them to complete a pencil-and-paper test. One test alone does not tell a story.

Using observation and questioning for diagnostic assessment is not simply a matter of deciding whether you feel students know or do not know what they should. Diagnostic assessment has to be based on the curriculum, which is also what forms the basis of one's teaching. If assessment doesn't match instruction based on the program of studies, accurate diagnosis of students' learning needs is impossible.

All the teacher participants in this study struggled with difficult questions and issues out of fear that any criticism of standardized testing would reflect badly on students and would suggest that we don't want to test them because they are somehow inadequate. This is not what we believe at all. All our students are the future of Alberta and Canada; if we dismiss them, we lose a great resource. The potential of our community and country lies in our ability to use assessment wisely and to identify our children's special knowledge and uniqueness. To appreciate the value of diversity, we must be able to see things from different perspectives. Tancy Lazar expressed the following about her work with Sam:

Some of the questions I had during this project were: How can I effectively diagnose a student's learning needs when they change so rapidly? How do I meet the needs of a student whose needs are changing hourly? Are observation and listening to and questioning a student's response enough to diagnose that student's learning needs?



*By really listening when we ask questions during observation, we learn more about students and their learning needs than we do by simply asking them to complete a pencil-and-paper test. One test alone does not tell a story.*



My first instinct was to rush out and learn about some sort of standardized test. After careful consideration, I realized I didn't need to do that. I had the tools I needed right at my fingertips. I needed to sit and watch Sam in the classroom, and ask him questions about what he was doing and why and really listen to him.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that standardized tests are inadequate to assess the learning needs of my students. First of all, two-thirds of my students have English as their second language, and the tests are not written with that in mind. The tests do not take into account the varied experiences of my students and they lack the background knowledge required to analyze and answer the questions.

Second, in Sam's case a standardized test would give a brief look at what he could do at that particular moment. It would not show what he can do on a good day or where the difficulties stem from on a bad day. Observing a student working on a set task gives a lot more information, especially if you ask him questions about what he is doing or why he took a particular step. Observing, questioning and really listening to students provide so much more information about their thinking and open up the assessment to allow the teacher to really help that student, to provide a better understanding of where the student went wrong and to show how the teacher can help students understand their errors.

Neelam Mal commented on her work with George as follows:

In spending my time watching George so carefully, I worry about his future. I feel as though it is only a matter of time before he is off again to another school to start all over from scratch. He needs so much consistency in his daily life. He is beginning to trust, to take risks and connect with other people and has already made so many gains. I wonder what will happen to him if it is all pulled out from underneath him.

I watch his interactions with other students, on the playground and in class, and I see that developmentally this boy is functioning at a kindergarten level. This raises questions about his academic learning. He is in Grade 3 and only just beginning to read. His communication skills are so low. How will he catch up? Will he catch up? I believe that not all people progress the same way, at the same rate. Some days I think that he will be just fine. Another more realistic and pessimistic part of me realizes that basic skills are requirements for plain old living. What will he do? What will happen to him? I worry about his not having his academic needs met. How do I attend to his emotional state and still make sure he gets it all in?

Another vital aspect to assessing students and enhancing their learning is the understanding that multiple viewpoints and multiple sources of information are crucial.

Neelam Mal summed it up this way:

At a Buddhist celebration I attended a few weeks ago, there was a lot of discussion about trying to see and experience things from outside of our own personal world view. In trying to apply this philosophy to George, I am more aware that often when we try to pinpoint exactly what a child knows or at what level he is functioning, this knowledge becomes difficult to share with others. I have learned so much about George from reading, writing or doing math with him; through time spent together, during which I coach and we both celebrate, I have come to understand him. His struggles with academic and social learning are deeply embedded in his history. I struggle with how to separate his school learning from his life learning, though, quite honestly, I don't want to, because to do so would fail to honour his experiences.



**How is students' literacy development linked to teachers' understanding of interculturalism?**

**How do teachers work with parents to enhance their intercultural understanding?**

# SUBTEXT



All teachers on the team used observation, questioning and pedagogical conversations as the primary means of assessment. Each teacher also had another member of the team observe and work with her student to validate her findings. Tancy Lazar summed up the thinking of the whole team in making this choice:

We need to have confidence in our knowledge of the curricular outcomes. We need to have an understanding of where our students need to be, but we don't all need to use the same test. We need to use more authentic assessments; standardized tests don't allow us to do that. Observation and discussion open up our diagnostic assessment to help us see where the student's trouble is occurring and to give us a better understanding of what to work on next.



**As you read the teachers' reflections, ask yourself what factors they considered in identifying students' literacy needs.**

## Joan King, Grade 1/2 (Asha)

When I began looking at Asha more closely, I began to pose more pointed questions, to look more closely at her writing and to accept less at face value. I decided to focus first on the area of writing (specifically journal writing) in which I could more accurately determine what Asha was learning and how she was using her knowledge, rather than following patterned or guided material. I have always found this form of writing to be the most accurate form of assessment because it gives me a truer idea of how a student is thinking and putting ideas together. In September, watching her write, I felt pretty confident that this was a solid student, well on her way to becoming a very strong student. No worries here—or so I thought. Nagging questions had been growing in my mind about some of my teaching practices. My inner voice questioned why some of the ESL students I saw in Grades 1 and 2 who seemed very strong—and possibly not in as much need of ESL support as other students—seemed to become weaker and to even begin to struggle by Grade 4. Other teachers told me that they had observed the same phenomenon.



From an assessment point of view, Asha's writing is simple, concrete and literal. In one exercise, students had to create words for a wordless picture book. In her work, Asha referred to the characters in her book as simply "the girl" or "the other girl," or "the boy" or "the other boy." Because she merely reported on the pictures, she was unable to create a story. I asked her why she didn't name the characters, but this notion appeared to be beyond her ability. This raised a lot of questions. How could I get her to see the characters? Why did it make more sense for her to use a generic term such as "the girl" instead of a real name? Was this a cultural thing? I spoke with her parents to discover if Asha has a sense of play at home. What does she do? I discovered that every day, when she gets home, she plays school, with herself as the teacher and her dolls as the students, and, no, she never names her dolls.

### Keele Kozak, Kindergarten (Abram)

How can I know anything about Abram if we've never had a conversation? Are my observations enough? Are they valid? How could I know Abram in a different way? Do I need different supports? And what would these supports look like? Do they even exist?

The first question I delved deep into was, How can I know more about Abram? The first step in the answer was to develop a quick and effective way to communicate with Abram's family on a daily basis, or as much as possible. Fortunately, Abram's mother and older sister speak and write very good English and were willing to write back and forth as often as possible. This is often not the situation for many of my ESL students. The first two weeks of communication were wonderful. I finally had the opportunity to learn what Abram says about his day at school.

At first I read to myself the notes from Abram's mother, then I began to invite Abram to sit with me and other students as I read aloud. Abram often smiled while I was reading. I hoped that sharing this with the other students would help them know him better and help him realize that his contributions were very important to the class.

I also began sending home the work that Abram did in class and asking his mother to record Abram's description and information about his drawings and work. This became a biweekly routine.

As I continued to observe and work with Abram in the classroom, I constantly asked myself three questions: What did he know? What was the proof? Had I done enough to acquire this information?

One literacy goal for kindergarten students is for them to be able to name each letter and produce the letter sound by the end of the kindergarten year.

Several times a year, I do a quick letter- and sound-recognition test with all my students. This helps me target the letters that students do not know and identify students who need extra support. In September, whenever I pointed to a letter, Abram just smiled at me and said nothing.

In December, after going through most of the letters, I asked Abram to point to the letters he knew. He began to point to all the letters in his first name. I named the letters as he did this. Next I began to go through the names of his classmates. "Can you point to the letter that Hannah's name starts with?" I asked him. And he pointed to H. Abram was able to point to seven beginning letters as I named his classmates.

Abram's understanding and knowledge of letter and sound recognition became more clear as I continued to find ways for him to communicate in the classroom. In May I gave him a paper with the alphabet out of order. As I called out letters, also out of order, Abram pointed to each letter I named. He was able to identify 24 upper-case and 21 lower-case letters.

After this initial test in December, I began to look very closely at Abram's interactions with print in the classroom. Abram spends time every day working with puzzles in the classroom. One day, as he put together a complicated alphabet puzzle with pictures of an animal on each



letter, I sat with him, watched and named letters. He was able to sequence letters from A to M with few mistakes. And when he got stuck, I would say the name of the animal associated with the letter. After hearing the animal name, his eyes would race quickly over the puzzle pieces and he would then quickly pluck out the correct piece. It was apparent by the end of the puzzle that he knew and recognized more than a dozen animals by their English names and many letters.

During the formative testing in May I felt confident that the information I acquired through this assessment was valid and authentic. I now wonder what Abram's responses would have been at the beginning of the year if I had tested this way.

### Tancy Lazar—Another Point of View on Abram

After spending 30 minutes observing Abram, I could already recognize the difficulties Keele faces when it comes to assessment. In the short time I was there, I could see that while he does not speak a word of English to anyone in school, he definitely understands it when it is spoken to him.

I joined the classroom during independent choice time. Abram was in the block area, and he carried a red block around with him for a while and played on his own. However, when it was time to clean up, he helped to put things away. At one point, I asked him to help another student put the puzzle away, and he immediately knelt down to help. He obviously understood what was asked of him. I followed the class to PE, where I watched him move from one side of the circle to the other, according to the teacher's instructions. When it came time for him to decide what equipment he wanted to play with, he headed straight for the scooters. When he discovered that other students were there first, he went to the basket of beanbags and pile of hoops on the other side of the room. He wasn't sure what to do with the beanbags, so I joined him and started to play catch with him. When he tried to throw the beanbags into the hoop, I said, "Why don't you stand in the hoop and throw the beanbags back into the basket." I was amazed when he did so without any further prompting. Again, he clearly understood exactly what I was asking for.

I think Keele has made some great decisions regarding assessment. In Abram's case, observation is key. It is wonderful that she has developed a way to communicate through Abram's family about what he is learning and thinking about school.

Formal assessment just doesn't work with students like Abram, but what Keele is doing is authentic, and it meets Abram's needs in the classroom in a way that honours him as a person. The questions she is asking are important, and the answers she is receiving will benefit her teaching practice and the many other students she will encounter.

### Tancy Lazar, Grade 1/2 (Sam)

At first I struggled to determine how to best meet Sam's ever-changing needs. How could I diagnose his learning needs when the results might not be an accurate portrayal of his abilities in a few days? If I used only one diagnostic method or did only one assessment each term, and then decided how to address his needs, I might find that I had overestimated his ability, and he would struggle with the task at hand, causing both of us frustration. On the other hand, I might find that I had underestimated his ability and chosen an inappropriate response to the assessment, in which case the work would be too easy for him.

Knowing that Sam's comprehension can be unpredictable, I thought that perhaps if I spent some time each day asking him questions and talking with him before sending him off to work, I could assess him quickly and determine his abilities that particular day.

By asking Sam basic questions before he sets off to work, I can determine what level of the activity would be most beneficial for him to be working on that day. If it is a day when he is



struggling, we can focus on basic facts or sight words and reading strategies. If it is a day when he needs minimal supports, we can go further and stretch his abilities. Some days he is able to work independently on an adaptation of the lesson; other days he is partnered with a peer who is at his level (a Grade 1 or 2 student, depending on the day) and who can remind him of the directions of the task. Some days simply understanding a question is challenge enough for him.

By asking Sam questions while he is working I get a better sense of what his misconceptions are or what vital piece of information is lacking. Using this information, I can then develop new lessons. Also, if I question him while he is working I can see if the task set before him is too challenging and change it accordingly, so that he does not get frustrated. When students become frustrated with a task, they don't learn, so why continue to push them?



**How do team teaching and coaching enhance our ability to diagnose and assess student learning?**

### Keele Kozak — Another Point of View on Sam

During my brief visit in Tancy's class, I had the opportunity to observe and talk with Sam during math. The class was working at similar tasks, aimed at their specific grade and ability level. Sam's job was to roll two dice: one was the ones; the other with a small dice inside, which was the ones and tens spot. Then he would print the numbers in the perspective columns and add the two digits.

Sam completed seven questions during my observation. I initially thought that he understood the idea. However, I had to ask him five questions before he could answer one independently and correctly. For the first four questions, he needed prompts and, for each answer, he hid his hands under the table as he counted on his fingers.

During my observation I saw Sam's needs change. I plan to observe him a few more times to see his complexities. Additional observation will allow me to see Sam understand a concept completely one day and not the next.

### Neelam Mal, Grade 3/4 (George)

With George there were few work samples and on-topic conversations early in the year. George spent a good deal of time avoiding work, choosing to draw in his journal instead. When it came time for assessment, I had to draw from our few on-topic conversations, a lot of stream-of-consciousness conversations and observation of his behaviour.

After thinking carefully and watching George, I found it difficult to determine whether he wasn't working because he couldn't or because he didn't want to. One day I asked him why he hadn't done any writing in the journalling time we had just finished. He looked at me squarely and stated, "Oh, I don't know how to read or write. I never learned how to do that stuff." There was no shyness or uncertainty in his voice, just a calm matter-of-factness. So I asked him to read through a few lists of basic sight words. He made it through about half of the words, relying heavily on sounding out words letter by letter. I then pulled out a simple word from a Grade 6 list. He looked at it carefully and read aloud "trucker." When I showed him that the word was at a Grade 6 level, he was astounded. The idea that he, a Grade 3/4 student, had just read a Grade 6 word astounded him! Suddenly the excuse that he couldn't do it simply was

*"Oh, I don't know how to read or write. I never learned how to do that stuff." There was no shyness or uncertainty in his voice, just a calm matter-of-factness.*



not true. We talked at length about how hard this business of learning is, how one must work all the time doing one's very best. I told him that if he would start trying, I would be there to help him; it would be very difficult, but if we worked together it would happen. We promised each other that with hard work from both of us, he would be able to read all of the Grade 1 words by the end of the year.

### Linda Belan — Another Point of View on George

Through the past year I have had the pleasure of watching George develop as a member of our school community. His outbursts have all but stopped, surfacing only when some uncertainty enters his life, such as a long break from school or a pending move. He no longer worries about food, and he even told me once that he did not like a certain snack. He has developed a relationship with his peers. Where once he hung out with the adults on supervision, he now enters into play with classmates and joins the soccer games.

I have watched George enjoy success in learning. He has become a reader. Once he would say, "I can't read or write." Now he has the confidence to write independently, using his best-guess spelling and the sounds and strategies that he knows. He is also willing to share his reading ability with others.

I feel that school is a safe place for George; it is a place where he feels accepted by both the adults and his classmates. He has shown us this by disclosing some of the traumatic events in his life.

George is a reminder that all our students' lives are intricate and complex, and that they are affected by experiences outside of school that neither students nor we can control. Teachers can only listen to students, accept them and, hopefully, give them the tools to become better learners.

I believe that it was in that brief moment of shared success that George saw for himself the possibility of being a learner. After this discussion, George started trying harder. He would still get frustrated and periodically cry or avoid his work—there was certainly no overnight change. But suddenly there were words on his page! He was writing! He wanted to sit with teachers and education assistants to read together. It struck me that the key to this change was the idea of relationship. For him, the knowledge that someone was investing time, energy and love in him was what he needed. When he sat independently, little work happened, but if someone was there to encourage and push—wow!

## Interventions

The intense observations of and conversations with students and colleagues allowed teachers to perform interventions that were responsive to students' individual needs and helped students significantly improve their learning to achieve the prescribed outcomes from the program of studies.

### Joan King, Grade 1/2 (Asha)

I make it a point to include the names and descriptions of characters when reading aloud or in guided reading. Asha could not tell me why she preferred nameless characters, just that not naming them made more sense to her.

I took this question of names to a small group of Grade 5/6 ESL students, because I was curious about Asha's attitude. I was surprised to discover that they could completely identify with her reluctance to name characters. Further discussion (and learning on my part) revealed that to these students names in stories were unimportant because they were unfamiliar. Furthermore, pronouns such as his and her and so on do not help because these students did



not associate gender with names. Apparently, naming, which seems natural to most of us, is a strategy that needs to be taught.

I was surprised to learn that teachers often mispronounce students' names and, even though all students are encouraged to correct teachers' pronunciation, they seldom do. They told me they feel the name the teacher uses is "just [their] school name." In some cultures students change their name and often go so far as to adopt a Canadian name because it is "easier for people to say and better to get a job when older." Thus, I had a Chinese student named Ling, who became Matthew, and another student named Pang, who became Thomas. Sometimes teachers in the same school pronounce students' names differently. As a result, the students told me, they often don't pay attention to names in a story. If the names were not important enough for the teachers to pronounce correctly, how could they be important to the children? This was definitely a revelation to me, and a somewhat sad one at that, especially since I discovered the same attitudes among Grades 3 and 4 students.

In the classroom, I put Asha between a strong student and a student with very limited English. Asha has been able to draw from the stronger student and is quick to help the newer ESL student, because she seems to need to explain and "teach." I have heard her explain to the weaker student that characters have names. This is rather interesting, because Asha continues to insist that saying "the girl" is easier for her in her writing.

### Keele Kozak, Kindergarten (Abram)

As the year progressed my focus shifted from hoping and assuming that Abram would begin to speak to giving him every chance to communicate in his own way. Speaking in the school environment is simply not for Abram at the moment. And as the students and I gave him more opportunities to communicate, he wanted to do so more often, but his communication was not verbal. For example, on a field trip in May the class learned signs for different types of nests found at the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary. During our many nature hikes and outdoor observations Abram would point to a tree and make the sign for the type of nest he saw (cup, roof, ground and so on). He was able to communicate this information not only to me but also to the volunteer naturalists and his classmates.

### Neelam Mal, Grade 3/4 (George)

The biggest roadblock to George's academic success has been his feelings of insecurity. His belief that he will be moved to another school in another neighbourhood has made it difficult for him to invest in any one place. Cecil Swanson is the first school where George has spent one full year. Having the time to let his guard down and connect to this space has changed his life. He has been able to build friendships, see himself as a valued member of a community, and feel love from the children and adults at Cecil Swanson.

George's enhanced feeling of being safe has helped him develop a sense of control in his life, and a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem; he is now able to view himself as a capable learner. He has taken huge risks by letting himself connect with people at this school. Taking that risk has allowed him to take other risks, both emotional and academic. Before he was even able to think about his learning, he required consideration of his basic social needs. It became my job as his teacher to attend to those basic needs, to give him the compassion and love he so desperately needed before he could begin to

think—or care—about reading and writing and math. Once George realized that he was cared for, I was able to push him further in his learning. He has come to know that the love he gets is unconditional, and though the expectations are high, they are achievable.





**While student emotional engagement is one of the strongest predictors of long-term success in learning, how effective are schools in assessing and focusing on enhancing student affect?**

# RETEXT



## *Outcomes and What We Have Learned*

This project has resulted in positive learning outcomes for both the teachers and students involved.

### **Joan King, Grade 1/2 (Asha)**

At the beginning of February, Asha began to write classmates' names in her journal. Instead of consistently writing, for example, "I saw my friends ride their bikes on the road," she would write, "I saw Sardar and Tim on bikes." By March, Asha was well able to use character names when retelling stories in written format. She continues, however, to prefer "the girl" when writing her own stories, but does acknowledge that these girls could have names. When she does use names, she is beginning to apply the appropriate pronouns. She is starting to extend her writing, and it will be interesting to see if, as her writing becomes more complex, it will become less generic.

Although this is an example of a very small part of Asha's learning and my own assessment, it has given me a window into one of the gaps in learning with our ESL students. I have also discovered there are similar gaps for non-ESL students. I will be paying more attention to this area.

I had the chance to observe Asha during a math class (I share this class with a math teacher). The students were doing 3-D shapes; first, they constructed shapes with toothpicks and marshmallows, and then they sketched and labelled them in math sketchbooks. Asha patiently talked to me about the faces: "Not like my face that can smile. It's another kind of face." She earnestly drew the cube she had made, but her drawing was always short two marshmallows. I listened to her working through the problem, drawing and redrawing. Together we went up to the board to look at how Miss Scobie had drawn her cube. Asha studied it, erased, redrew and said, "Now I know what to do," but she was still two marshmallows short in her drawing. Finally she shook her head, looked at the drawing and asserted that she was confident that her drawing was right and she would just leave it like that. I laughed and agreed with her when she observed that "this is just like when my stories have to have names, Mrs King."



### Keele Kozak, Kindergarten (Abram)

Finding new ways to communicate has had a positive impact on Abram's learning, my own learning and the learning of students in our class. He has changed from an involved student to a truly engaged one. The class has shifted from simply hoping that Abram would begin to speak to giving him venues to communicate. Abram's classmates unconsciously help him communicate on a daily basis, and I have acquired many more strategies to meaningfully assess the learning of English language learners in kindergarten.

### Tancy Lazar, Grade 1/2 (Sam)

Sam has made progress this year. In February he was able to read a level 8 on the DRA on good days. On an unfocused, more difficult day, he was able to read a level 6, which he had never been able to do previously. When we first began the program, he was reading below level 3. He is demonstrating an ability to skip count to 100 by fives and tens, regardless of the kind of day he is having. He is demonstrating a more reliable understanding of basic addition and can answer questions to 18 with a reasonable amount of accuracy. Sam made enough progress in second term to place him in the low-average Grade 1 expectations for the term.

By continuing to assess his needs each day so that I can appropriately challenge him, I hope that Sam will continue to develop his understanding without becoming anxious and frustrated, and that diagnosing his needs on a continuous basis will continue the progress he is making in reading, writing and math.

This project has allowed me to focus on one student and improve my assessment practices. It has helped me realize how important it is to assess some students' learning needs daily to best meet their learning needs.

Basing my assessment and expectations on the curriculum outcomes is most reliable. I have to remember that if a student struggles and is behind more than a year, it will take him or her more than a year to catch up; teachers simply have to persevere. The goal is not to make all students the same; the goal is to make sure that each individual student is learning and progressing at an appropriate pace. We must challenge students, but not frustrate them to the point that they cannot learn anything.

### Neelam Mal, Grade 3/4 (George)

In the past few months, George has made remarkable growth as a student. He has developed true skill in sketching and drawing pictures and symbols to convey his understanding. He has developed a stronger sense of basic facts in addition and subtraction and is able to articulate if answers make sense. But he has made the most strides in reading. In March he was able to read approximately 75 per cent of the Grade 1 sight words consistently. All of these successes have enormously increased his self-confidence. He is proud of himself. He has experienced first-hand the success that flows from making a true effort. He knows now that there are things he is good at; this knowledge makes all of his difficulties in life less painful. Also, he understands that when we are dissatisfied with his behaviour and his choices, it does not change how we feel about him.

George has taught me that people's basic physical and social needs must be met before they can learn. If his need for compassion and patience had not been met, I am certain that George would not be where he is today. Now his needs must continue to be met for him to continue succeeding.

Professionally I have learned that in order to understand children's learning I need to understand them as whole and complex human beings. I cannot claim to know them if they are compartmentalized and oversimplified. To honour their lives and their learning, I need to spend time and energy to learn from them and about them. Taking the time to truly connect with all of these children is paramount.

*The goal is not to make all students the same; the goal is to make sure that each individual student is learning and progressing at an appropriate pace. We must challenge students, but not frustrate them to the point that they cannot learn anything.*



Standardized tests give us only a glimpse of student learning and understanding; it is much too easy to give in to the false security of “knowing” children from these measures. True assessment and knowing are much more difficult and complicated, and require careful observation, meaningful conversation and continual revision.

*It is important to develop assessment and teaching methods that do not disenfranchise those whose strength lies in their difference rather than their sameness.*

## Where Do We Go from Here?

### Joan King, Grade 1/2 (Asha)

I wonder if Asha will be able to identify with characters and thereby become engaged in reading. I hope that reading will not become mechanical for her, but instead will become a meaningful lifelong skill that brings her enjoyment and personal enrichment. I already see a difference in the older ESL students after our discussion about the naming of characters. One Grade 6 student, who has been in Canada for only two years, now asks if a given name is a girl’s name or a boy’s name. Our discussions in one of the Grade 3/4 classes are no longer just a retelling of details but have become as much about the characters as about the story.

### Keele Kozak, Kindergarten (Abram)

As the end of the year nears, I have been wondering what will happen next year for Abram and what support and resources I could offer to his family for the summer. I decided to encourage a play date at his home, hoping that in this more comfortable environment he might speak to a good friend from school. Unfortunately, Abram’s family is moving, although they have decided to keep him in our school until the end of the year. Because of this, the play date with a friend will not happen, and I am left wondering how Abram will adjust to a new school and new friends in the fall. I have left a note for his next teacher to contact me. I would love to be able to have a conversation with the teacher about the progress Abram made this year and share information about his wonderful spirit.



### Tancy Lazar, Grade 1/2 (Sam)

Sam has made great strides in developing the basic skills a student requires to learn. Sam will get a new teacher at our school in the fall, and his new teacher must know about Sam’s struggles in the classroom. He is entering Grade 3 with some of the skills of a Grade 1 and will require additional supports. Sam’s new teacher will need to follow up with the pediatrician and psychologist, and continue monitoring his learning difficulties and ensure that he gets the supports he needs. Whoever his new teacher is, I know that Sam will be supported in his learning endeavours. I will arrange a meeting with the new teacher to outline some of the strategies that have been successful this year, such as pairing Sam up with another student in the classroom and daily quick assessments. Such a meeting will be beneficial to both Sam and the new teacher.

### Neelam Mal, Grade 3/4 (George)

George has certainly started down the road to his success. He has made real friends and is beginning to make meaningful connections in his learning. George will likely go to a new school next September. His anxiety is growing as summer holidays approach; he can feel that change is coming. I know that this year has given him a sense of who he can be. He is more confident, more capable and happier. He tells us that when things are hard or when he feels sad, he knows what to do—think of the people who love him, and do his best. I know that when he moves on next year he will go with the tools and resources he needs to be successful. He has resilience. He has a desire to work hard. He will do well.

## Summary

We have described in some detail our work with four students: who they are; how we assessed their learning needs; program modifications that we made based on our assessments; and positive changes that resulted from our work together. The reader might think that these children received special attention or that it is not possible to look at each child in such depth. On the contrary, this kind of knowledge is the essence of what it means to be a professional teacher in a complex learning environment.

These strategies are ones we use on a daily basis to assess the learning of the diverse children who attend Cecil Swanson School. These ways of working provide us with the detailed and specific knowledge we need to do our work and enhance the learning of every child we work with.

The knowledge, creativity and professional insight of teachers are the most powerful forces in improving student learning. The teacher's ability to observe and to conduct pedagogical conversations with children produces understanding that far exceeds that generated by any number of standardized tests. Listen to children and help them understand their own learning. If high standards for all are to become a reality, we need to understand the strengths and knowledge of our diverse learners. We will continue to pursue ways to refine and deepen our knowledge of the children we teach. It is important to develop assessment and teaching methods that do not disenfranchise those whose strength lies in their difference rather than their sameness.

The children who come through the doors of Cecil Swanson School each day are the future of Calgary, of Alberta, of Canada, of the world. Their strengths are the strengths we most need now and in the future. Their early literacy development (in reading, writing and mathematics) provides a foundation for future learning. In fostering and assessing their growth, we must capture and make use of the strengths they bring to learning. The tools that we use to assess middle-class, monocultural, Canadian-born, English-speaking children do not apply to all students. Such tools look at children and seek to define them by defining their differences, which then become deficiencies. The tools of professional observation and pedagogical conversations with children must be given validity and importance, because they identify students' strengths and provide teachers with information that helps multicultural, multilingual children to excel. We cannot, nor do we want to, turn a diverse population of children into middle-class white children.

A major goal of public education is to teach children to value and welcome diversity and difference, and to honour the principles of democracy. In order for this goal to be realized at a school level, school boards and the provincial government must be aware of and constantly reaffirm this goal. Truly valuing student diversity involves more than superficial discussions about feasts and festivals; it involves a careful analysis of our daily practices, school directives and provincial policies.



**Current estimates suggest that 1,000–1,500 new students will arrive in Alberta each month in the coming years. How can schools build networks of assessment leaders to meet the needs of this growing and diverse student population?**



# Bassano

*Bassano School*

# School

**Grasslands School  
Division**

# PRETEXT

## *Bassano Green Team*



*The Bassano Green Team (left to right): Linda Holt, Jennifer Schmidt, Cindy Schaffer, Jeneen Armstrong, Linda Andres and Lynn McLellan*

Jeneen Armstrong  
Linda Holt  
Lynn McLellan  
Joanne Medeiros  
Frieda Mennes  
Cindy Schaffer  
Jennifer Schmidt

In cooperation with Linda Andres (Grasslands Alberta Initiative for School Improvement [AIS] coordinator)

The Green Team is part of a school-based professional learning community (PLC) that includes all K–3 teachers at Bassano School. This project was seen as a chance for the team members to work with one another (and perhaps with colleagues in participating schools) to determine how to define assessment, effectively assess student learning, and consider what a balanced approach to assessment consists of. At the outset, the team met several times to consider each of their roles in what they envisioned as a collaborative inquiry and to clarify their action research question: *How can collaborative inquiry focused on the assessment of early literacy and numeracy improve student learning?* A collaborative inquiry approach is a natural for the team, which has been cohesive, flexible and self-contained, and whose teachers share similar philosophical beliefs about education.



Over the course of the eight-month project, uncertainty and frustrations occasionally arose. Though assessment means giving students a target to shoot for, many times it was like shooting arrows into the dark and hoping to hit a target. In the end the team affirmed that assessment is driven by care for students and their learning. The openness with which the members of the team shared their ideas revealed that teachers are assessing all the time and making adjustments every day to better address their students' needs.

### Our School

Bassano School is a K–12 school located in the small town of Bassano (population 368), within the Grasslands Public School District. It is the only school in the small town.

### Our Students

Approximately 25 per cent of the school's students travel to Bassano from the Siksika Nation reserve, just west of the town. About 55 per cent of students are bused to the school.

### Our Teachers

Bassano School has 24 teachers. In addition, the school has 2.5 teacher assistants who work with the kindergarten group, and 2.5 teacher assistants who work with the Grades 1–3 classes. The number of teaching assistants has decreased over the past few years.

The team members are part of a school-based professional learning community (PLC), which includes all Division I teachers and which is known as "The Green Team."

The Green Team was formed four years ago, when a Grasslands program introduced and mandated weekly PLC work in all schools. This PLC was made possible when the division gave teachers lieu days for their time spent after school in PLCs. Staffing in Division I has remained the same for the past five years, and this consistency has contributed to the efficacy of the Green Team PLC. The group is cohesive, flexible and self-contained, and members share similar philosophical beliefs about education. The group members are collaborative; they know and support each other, and they get things done.

The following supports for Division I students have been employed: speech and language assistance from the health unit, occupational therapy aid for ECS students, and high school special project assistants in the classrooms. Transition meetings for ECS students take place in May and June. A Student Support Services team meets weekly to investigate individual student concerns and address them through the school's pyramid of intervention strategies.

Following are some of the literacy-focused programs that the Green Team has implemented within the past four years:

- **Accelerated Reading Program.** This program was implemented after investigating reading comprehension strategies through a school-based Cycle Two Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) project. Huge gains in reading comprehension have been achieved through the Accelerated Reading Program. The AISI project has fuelled continued literacy work within the school and community.
- **Joanne Moore, Spalding and Sound Connections language arts programs.**
- **Math for Success.** The Green Team hosted a workshop with instructor Darlene Kusick, and the program is now being used in all Division I classrooms. Student achievement has improved.

*The group is cohesive, flexible and self-contained, and members share similar philosophical beliefs about education.*

*The group members are collaborative; they know and support each other, and they get things done.*



- **Math and Literacy Bags.** Sharing activities for use at home with families is a project that the Green Team is implementing with help from the Friends of Bassano School Society.
- **Early Literacy.** This is a successful program that Bassano School has continued for Grades 1 and 2 students.
- **Michelle Borba's Character Education program.** This program is supplemented with Kelso's Choice activities.

# CONTEXT



## *Our Research Question*

This project was seen as a chance for the members of the Green Team to work with other school districts to determine how to define assessment, effectively assess student learning and consider what a balanced approach to assessment consists of. In the fall, members of the Green Team met several times to clarify their research question and the roles of all team members. The action research question was: *How can collaborative inquiry focused on the assessment of early literacy and numeracy improve student learning?*

## *Case Study Students*

The research team decided that two or three target students would be selected from each homeroom. It was suggested that at least one First Nations student be included for each grade because First Nations students make up a large percentage of the student body.

Overall, the students chosen were low achieving or had uneven academic success. Some had behavioural issues, and many showed a lack of self-esteem and doubt in their ability to learn. In addition, the targeted students demonstrated few personal strategies for success, displayed minimal self-confidence and achieved inconsistent results. Some had little home support. Because classroom observation of students is an assessment practice that teachers do constantly, there was nothing out of the ordinary about this research. Therefore, neither the students chosen for this study nor their parents were aware that the study was being conducted.

Members of the Green Team looked at the areas of behaviour, literacy or numeracy when observing the targeted students. Initially they identified their concerns and focused discussions on intervention strategies during the weekly PLC times. The final steps of the project included determining whether the strategies they had implemented had made a difference.

Although the research project involved 12 targeted students, we have chosen to report on 5 of those 12 who reacted most positively to the strategies.



**As you read each teacher’s reflections at the outset of the project, consider how case study students were selected, literacy needs identified and learning goals set.**

### Jenn Schmidt, Kindergarten (Carrie)

I chose Carrie because she is struggling. She lacks confidence in her own abilities, does not see herself as a learner, and has difficulty with alphabet and number recognition. Nevertheless, she is a delightful student and a hard worker. I know that we can boost her skills with the right strategies and encouragement.

Carrie is in her second year of kindergarten and has limited preschool skills. She has a lengthy bus ride to and from school, and her attendance is sporadic. She is weak in both fine motor skills and verbal skills. Her verbal communication skills are still limited. When working with a partner, she tends to pick a more dominant classmate to talk for her. I believe that, with the interventions we have in place as well as the five-day-a-week program we were able to offer her, Carrie will receive the boost she needs to develop skills that will be the foundation for future success in school.

My goals for Carrie are that she will be able to

- identify most alphabet sounds,
- begin to identify beginning letter sounds,
- identify and generate rhyming words,
- make connections between pictures and print,
- identify the numbers 1 to 20,
- count confidently from 1 to 20 and
- see herself as a capable and confident student.

#### Baseline data—October 2006

Skill	Score
Alphabet recognition—upper	4/8
Alphabet recognition—lower	3/8
Sound recognition	3/8
Number recognition	5/5
Creates sets	4/5
Rhyme	No concept

Over the past few years I have been working on developing better strategies for literacy development and assessment. I have concentrated on alphabet skills and book knowledge as a foundation for improving reading and comprehension in grades beyond kindergarten. I have done this by having the children study a letter a week and by integrating several modes of learning, including songs, crafts, stories, printing and phonics activities, into the language program. I have been working at integrating more rhyming and syllabication. I have seen an improvement in how much Carrie retains with respect to alphabet and number recognition as well as alphabet sounds.



I also developed literacy bags for math and language that students take home on a rotational basis. Each bag contains a book and three or four activities that relate to the book. Carrie loves these literacy bags, and we use them for one-on-one work with her at the school.

I constantly provide feedback to students on how they are doing and how to improve. I would like to get the students to reflect more on their own work so that they can recognize growth and set goals. Carrie does not have the confidence to reflect on her own work, so I ensure that I celebrate her successes.

### Cindy Schaffer, Grade 1 (Jack)

I chose Jack because he struggles with his reading and writing skills, and has very little support or help from home with his reading. He rarely does his home reading, and he struggles with his letter sounds and decoding skills. He has few strategies for reading comprehension.

Jack has a long bus ride from his home every day. He is the third child in a family of four boys and often has extended family members living at his home. There are many days when Jack does not have a snack or even very much for lunch. Jack is a hard-working student, but he needs a lot of assistance. He is very shy and quiet, and rarely participates in class discussions. Jack has low self-confidence and does not think of himself as a reader.

Jack has frequently been absent throughout the school year and has had difficulty staying caught up. He needs a regular schedule to remain focused.

My goals for Jack are that he will be able to

- learn all his letter sounds and sight words,
- sound out and blend words together when reading,
- write a series of sentences using proper word spacing and conventions,
- sound out words when printing,
- build independence and confidence, and
- participate in class discussion.

#### Baseline data—October 2006

Skill	Score
Alphabet recognition—sound	26/35
Colour words and sight words	29/44

### Joanne Medeiros, Grade 2 (Charlie)

Charlie lives with his father, mother and older brother. His parents both work at their family-owned business. Charlie often spends time playing on the computer at the office while his mom tends to business. In the fall, his family took a trip, and he missed 10 full days of school. He struggled with reading and spelling for most of the six weeks following his trip. It took some extra work at school and home to get him caught up. However, after the Christmas break, he began to show more motivation and confidence in his reading.

During initial screening, he struggled with many of the Dolch Grade 1 sight words and was unwilling to try reading unfamiliar texts. Charlie demonstrated very few reading strategies because he was unwilling to attempt new activities. He had difficulty completing the STAR computer-generated reading test independently, which made it difficult to get an accurate reading comprehension score. After he did complete it, he scored well below grade level.



Charlie’s sight word knowledge was very weak. He guessed at many words when reading, and did not try to make meaning of the text. He became frustrated, gave up easily or refused to even attempt to read.

My goals for Charlie are that he will be able to

- increase his self-confidence through a willingness and desire to read;
- improve his reading level to read books in Accelerated Reading within a two-month range of where he is in school (for example, reading books with a zone of proximal development of 2.6 and scoring at least 80 per cent on the computer test);
- learn and apply decoding skills;
- learn and apply comprehension strategies such as predicting and analyzing;
- increase his reading rate and fluency and become a more confident reader;
- home read at least five nights a week, and practise the Dolch sight words at home and at school with a high school special project student;
- choose to read and see himself as a reader; and
- be able to read 100 per cent of the Dolch Grade 2 list words with 90 per cent accuracy.

**Baseline data—end of October and beginning of November 2006**

Test	Score
Grade 1 Dolch sight word list	46%
STAR reading test (comprehension)	0.9 grade equivalent (GE)

Because the Grade 2 group was very large, it was split for half the day. However, the school received more funding because of the large number of students, and the Grade 2 class was split for 60 per cent of the time. Early in the year, three students moved, which left us with a small group of 12 students in our language arts class. That number has remained constant. Among this group of 12 are some confident readers who work well both independently and in groups. These 12 students remain in the small class grouping for mathematics, language arts and science; they are in a larger group of 24 for the other subjects. When we decided on the split, we kept most of the high-needs students together with about one-third of the more capable students. We felt that the fewer disruptions there were for the struggling students, the better.

Charlie is definitely in the bottom quarter of the class; he is not reading at grade level and is beginning to get frustrated. Nevertheless, Charlie is bright and has a good home life; he has the potential to become a successful student. Once he has some strategies in place, he will feel more confident about attempting new tasks.

**Linda Holt, Grade 3 (Ben)**

I teach some of the Grades 3s in a pullout literacy class for one 40-minute period per day. I also teach a readers theatre class to the whole Grade 3 class, from which I chose Ben. He has poor decoding skills and few strategies for reading text, and because he is unable to articulate very well, his self-esteem is plummeting. Though he works hard, he is relying on guesswork to complete assignments. His comprehension has been steadily declining as the picture cues disappear in the text. He is a student at risk.

Ben lives with his mother, stepfather and three younger siblings. His stepfather works sporadically, and his mother, who is unable to read, stays home with the children. His mother states that Ben does not like school.



Ben does not think of himself as a reader. He needs one-on-one attention to help him focus on text. His constant movement and impulsive calling out and noise making interfere with his learning. Although capable of decoding most sounds, he rarely uses his knowledge in an independent setting. His sight-word knowledge is also very weak.

Ben's inability to read is affecting his self-esteem, and we are beginning to see some negative behaviour as a result. His sister, who is in Grade 2, reads better than he does; his brother, who is in kindergarten, is beginning to learn his letter sounds. So Ben's weaknesses are particularly evident. It is crucial that we give him the strategies to learn how to learn. He is desperate to "keep up with his friends."

My goals for Ben are that he will

- increase his self-esteem,
- learn strategies to improve both oral reading and comprehension scores, and
- show us that he can take some ownership of his learning.

### Baseline data—end of October and beginning of November 2006

Test	Score
WIAT-II* (word reading)	1.9 GE
WIAT-II (reading comprehension)	<1.0 GE
WIAT-II (spelling)	1.9 GE
WIAT-II (pseudo word decoding)	2.1 GE
STAR reading test (comprehension)	1.1 GE

\* Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT II—Teacher Edition)

### Jeneen Armstrong, Grade 3 (Phillip)

Phillip is a twin in Grade 3; his brother is also in my class. He comes from a two-parent family. His father works but seems to have difficulty holding down a job for long. When he is working, he is often gone for extended periods and, according to Phillip's mother, he is very disruptive to the home routine when he returns home. The father is a hockey fanatic and believes that his sons will be NHL players. Because the father feels that school is not a priority, Phillip does not see it that way either, especially during hockey season. Phillip is a hard worker and is eager to learn, but he has very low self-esteem when it comes to school and is easily frustrated. When he is frustrated, he completely shuts down. Phillip struggles with organization and can be easily distracted, and when he doesn't know what is going on around him he becomes flustered.

I would like to help Phillip develop a strong understanding of numbers. I am going to focus on strengthening his number sense to see if that helps him in other areas of math. I hope that through this process he will develop basic math skills and, eventually, a firmer understanding of math as a whole. I would like to make math more meaningful and useful to him.

I feel that developing number sense is essential for the thorough understanding needed for all math concepts. By number sense, I mean one's ability to recognize numbers, identify their relative values and understand how to use them in different ways (for example, measuring, counting or estimating). Number sense is the building block of further mathematics, and a student's number sense must be strong for that student to perform. Simply put, without number sense, math does not make sense. That many students seem to lack number sense prompted me to choose this as my main target in the project.



I will use games and literature to strengthen Phillip’s math skills. Hopefully, his skills will strengthen in a much less threatening environment, and this will build his self-esteem and confidence. As his number sense improves I hope that he will more thoroughly understand all math concepts.

My goal for Phillip is that he will develop number sense.

**Baseline data**

Test/Date	Result
WIAT-11/November 2006	
—Math reasoning	2.9 GE
—Numerical operations	1.9 GE
Math Test 2/October 2006	6.5/16



**How do you go about putting learning first?**

**What process do you use to identify the literacy needs of students?**

**What are some of the challenges you face in mediating external (school, district, provincial) demands and student learning needs?**

# SUBTEXT



**As you read each teacher’s reflections, ask yourself what factors they considered in identifying students’ literacy needs.**

**Jenn Schmidt, Kindergarten (Carrie)**

I wonder if I am doing enough to build the literacy and numeracy foundation that my students require to be successful learners. Are the strategies appropriate for Carrie’s learning style? Are the extra class time and increased immersion in literacy helping her or overwhelming her?

I want to assess my students’ learning in a way that is accurate, fair and informal.



### What Am I Doing to Achieve My Goals for Carrie?

Currently I have a high school special project student for two periods each morning who works with Carrie on shared reading, colour recognition, top/bottom, left/right, beginning letter sound, and spelling and printing her first and last name. Carrie excels during these one-on-one sessions. By late October, Carrie was spelling and printing her first name; by late January, she was printing her last name as well.

### March 2007 assessment

Skill	Score	Score in October 2006
Alphabet recognition—upper	22/26	4/8
Alphabet recognition—lower	20/26	3/8
Alphabet recognition—sound	23/26	3/8
Number recognition (1–10)	10/10	n/a
One-to-one correspondence	Yes	n/a
Rhyme—recognition and naming	4/6	no concept



*I have implemented writing dictionaries, a word wall and “try” cards to assist students with their writing.*

I have had my assistant use Sound Connections with Carrie for five minutes each day to review letter names and sounds. I see a much more confident child who is able to answer questions about letter names and sounds.

I have attended a workshop on using literacy centres to enhance reading and writing programs for K–3. I have also been working on developing a writing rubric for Grade 1 in my AISI districtwide Grade 1 PLC. I have played a literacy or math game every day with the class, and used readers theatre in my classroom. I have listened to each student read to me every day, tried to assess each student every day and made modifications to my methods where needed. I have implemented writing dictionaries, a word wall and “try” cards to assist students with their writing.

### Cindy Schaffer, Grade 1 (Jack)

#### What Am I Doing to Achieve My Goals for Jack?

Jack has struggled with his letter sounds and sight words. Using Joanne Moore’s reading and writing program, I do a daily reading evaluation of decoding words and reading comprehension. In the fall, the students review or learn a new letter sound and word each day. The class watches a puppet show that accompanies the letter sound of the day. Jack is very engaged while watching the puppet show.

Jack loves to be engaged in his learning. He likes interactive play and loves to play literacy games. We begin each day with a math or literacy game. Jack feels as though he is playing, but in actuality he is learning through play. Jack constantly asks if he can play with the word puzzles or play just one more bingo game.

Jack needs to be reminded to track the words with his finger when reading. He knows some words, but he needs help sounding out three-letter words. He finds it difficult to blend sounds together to make words. During a readers theatre activity, Jack was having difficulty following his lines even though they were highlighted.

Jack uses the word wall to help him with writing and enjoys the word-wall games. Jack has a writing dictionary that he uses for help with difficult words when he is writing, although he occasionally needs assistance. For example, I may say, “The word you are looking for starts with *p* and is on a pink background.”



During journal writing time, Jack often has difficulty finding something to write about. He has very little background knowledge or experience of the world around him. When writing, Jack needs someone to sit with him and sound out every letter he wants to print, and he is also having difficulty putting spaces between his words and using correct punctuation.

To help Jack with his reading, I have made blending-word flashcards to help him practise blending sounds together to read words. He also has a set of flashcards with unfamiliar letter sounds and sight words to take home. A high school student works with him every day during class time on his home reading, sight words and letter sounds.

The extra assistance gives Jack the individual time and instruction he needs, and he is now reading every day. Jack receives one-on-one early literacy help for 15 minutes, three times per week, to reinforce his letter sounds and sight words and to get extra reading practice. To boost his confidence, he is often paired with another student in the classroom.

### Jack—spring assessment

Skill	Score	Score in October 2006
Alphabet recognition—sounds	31/35	26/35
Colour and sight words	40/44	29/44
STAR reading test	0.8–1.8 GE	

I started the Accelerated Reader program with the Grade 1 students after Easter. Jack was very excited to start this program. He has gained motivation and self-confidence when reading.

Jack did really well when working with a partner on readers theatre. He was engaged and followed along with his partner, who, along with the group, gave him clues and helped him to remain focused. Jack will now try to sound out words on his own when reading. He is reading colour words and sight words. He will try to write a series of sentences on his own without assistance, he participates in class discussions and he often volunteers to do examples on the chalkboard.

Jack was so proud of himself when he was starting to read. I remember him saying, “I sounded that word out all by myself!” Jack was showing confidence and belief in himself. This demonstrates continual growth and shows that his confidence will continue to grow every day.

### Joanne Medeiros, Grade 2 (Charlie)

I later discovered that Charlie’s older brother has some learning difficulties and struggles at school. It was surprising to me, because I always thought the brother was a strong academic student, and I imagine that this supposition was part of the reason I expected Charlie to be more successful.

My students have assembled a sight word vocabulary with the help of the Dolch sight word list. Charlie does not have a strong sight vocabulary. I have a student helper every day testing all of the students on the Dolch Grade 1 list; students who score 100 per cent move up to the Grade 2 list. While Charlie scored low on the first testing, he scored 76 per cent on November 14, 2006. I had my student helper type up a list of the words that he missed and sent a copy of this list home, while keeping a copy at school for the senior helper to review with Charlie every morning. This strategy would be very difficult to manage in a larger class without the support of an aide or a special project student.

My students have worked on building their sight word vocabulary through the use of a secret password. To provide extra practice reading sight words, I post two sight words by my door—they are secret passwords that the students have to read each time they leave the room.



Another strategy I am using with Charlie is an individual pullout program with our early literacy aide. She works with small groups on reading comprehension strategies, phonics, sight words and sight-word bingo. We found the smaller group activities and the focus on early literacy very helpful.

One strategy I am using with the whole class is readers theatre. Every week we learn a new script, and on Friday we either perform it for another class or students spend time reviewing old scripts with a buddy or in a small group. Charlie is self-conscious and cautious about joining in if he is not completely sure of the answer. He keeps a low profile during the first couple of days with a new script, but he does use his finger to track and comes in at the appropriate time. I have started sending the readers theatre report folders home every Friday to give students extra practice with the scripts and for further exploration of written language. Each child has a sheet in his or her report folder on which the parent records the title of any scripts that the child can read independently. Each sheet also has some suggested activities for the parent to try with the child.

My newest strategy is to use nonfiction reading material (for example, books that explain how things are made, such as how berries become jelly, or trees become paper), which the boys in particular seem to enjoy and have success with.

At the end of November, Charlie scored 0.9–1.8, which was 1.34–0.44 years below his grade-level placement. In March, the class wrote the STAR reading test. Charlie showed significant growth in confidence and reading ability, and registered a ZPD of 1.4–2.4, which is 1.28–0.28 years below his grade-level placement. From these scores and from my observations of Charlie’s work in class, it is obvious that he has maintained steady growth and has begun to close the gap in his reading.

Charlie has shown consistent mastery of the Dolch Grade 2 word list, and I now have my student helper working on the Grade 3 words with all of the students.

### Linda Holt, Grade 3 (Ben)

In January, when I shifted my program to a game-based learning strategy, all of my students improved in their decoding and reading strategies. Ben was ecstatic! Competitive by nature, he would stand up to play each new game and focus intently. He quickly learned the concepts being taught and challenged himself to pick the hardest questions and the most difficult words. His desire to be a leader was evident.

Ben’s needs became more focused when we met with our educational psychologist at the beginning of February 2007. She had tested Ben in November of the previous year, and the results helped us to design a more appropriate program. A significant difference between Ben’s verbal comprehension index and his working memory index on the WISC-IV (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children) suggested that he had a learning disability.

Assessment	Results
Verbal comprehension index	8th percentile
Perceptual reasoning index	27th percentile
Working memory index	50th percentile
Processing speed index	21st percentile

Further testing also indicated the presence of the combined type of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder. Ben was given the Alberta Education code designation 53 (mild/moderate emotional/behavioural disability). These diagnoses affected



the strategies that were used to meet Ben's goals: multisensory strategies are no longer just an option with Ben—they are a requirement for his success

Ben's psycho-educational report recommended that he receive more time for processing and providing alternative output tasks. Vocabulary is now taught using pictures as reference points in Ben's book. The words written beside the picture are reviewed and used in writing and rereading. They then become the new sight words. Ben will use the pictures to successfully cue himself in sentence building.

Ben now writes his own sentences by breaking the words down into their component parts. He can remember the small bits of sound and form the word he wishes to spell. This has been a powerful tool for Ben and has given him a wonderful sense of independence. He is no longer quite as afraid.

In the small group setting, Ben had no behavioural issues. He was focused and received enough adult intervention to ward off frustrations. Each class included at least one activity in which Ben would excel.

### **What strategies have I implemented to ensure Ben's success?**

Each day, I have assessed Ben's responses to my teaching objectives and means of delivery. I frequently jotted down key points as part of an anecdotal record. This determined my objectives for the next day.

Working collaboratively with the homeroom teacher, I have monitored Ben's successes and weaknesses and tracked which strategies he used in his day-to-day work.

I have supported the daily reading through the Accelerated Reading Program. The rereading of texts, the reading with adults and the levelling of reading material in the school have all helped Ben. He understands that he must read books at his instructional level when reading alone, but he knows that he can choose harder texts when reading with an adult. This allows for paired reading, chiming in and other supports. It also allows him to read chapter books that are too difficult for him at an independent level.

As the readers theatre teacher in Grade 3, I have set up projects that support Ben's learning. He has been paired with stronger readers, worked on choral speech and had the opportunity to repeat text many times. In addition, we play literacy games every day. I have found that Ben enjoys the interaction with the other children, and I am amazed at how the game situation encouraged oral language and vocabulary practice too.

I started a vocabulary book of picture references related to our novel text by locating pictures of specific vocabulary words related to his novel study and then gluing them into his scribbler. He then labelled the picture and used the words to write sentences.

Each day I read orally with him and to him. Like all other students, he loves listening to stories.

I have also used the Firm Foundations program and worked through strategies to teach letter sounds, rhyming, syllables, phonemes and phonograms, which were reinforced with games. I have also tried to scaffold my teaching to build competence.

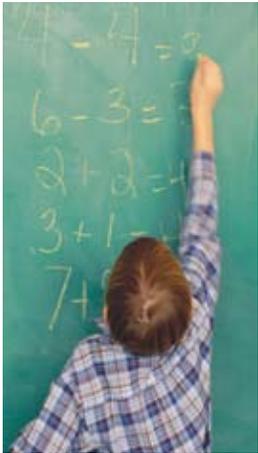
I used the Sprint Reading series from Scholastic as the basis of our novel study. I focused on prediction, comprehension and fluency. Ben started his seventh novel last week. This successful program is very supportive and varies the texts between fiction and nonfiction.

Ben writes sentences for practice in rereading and using his sounds for spelling.

Choral reading, fluency practice and tracking with his finger have all helped, as has our daily oral reading.

I have shared my struggles and successes with my PLC Green Team, who are so helpful and supportive. Because they know Ben, they have been able to suggest additional strategies.

*We have found that the majority of our students have become much better problem solvers and are using their math skills much more confidently since the program's inception.*



### Jeneen Armstrong, Grade 3 (Phillip)

K–3 teachers in Bassano School have implemented math methodology that focuses on connecting math concepts to real-life situations. This methodology (Math for Success) incorporates all the strands in math daily rather than through units. It is a problem-based approach to math that uses manipulatives whenever possible to enhance learning. Students work on connecting math skills and concepts to their existing number sense through daily life connections. We have found that the majority of our students have become much better problem solvers and are using their math skills much more confidently since the program's inception. Phillip is among those students who have difficulties connecting math to real life. For example, when asked "What comes after 7?" Phillip could respond quickly with "8." When asked "What does 7 plus 1 equal?" Phillip would figure out the answer on his fingers and was unable to see a connection between before/after and adding/subtracting. A lack of number sense seemed common to most of the students who had trouble with math.

I could empathize. When I was a student, I used to simply memorize mathematical facts. I had to learn that there is a much deeper understanding involved. I have been teaching math for many years now, and I have found that children without a strong number sense experience difficulties with all strands of math. I felt that if I could make math more meaningful for Phillip, his math skills would improve, and he would have a much stronger understanding of math and its use in daily life.

#### What steps did I take to ensure Phillip's success?

Things I am doing in my classroom to improve number sense include the following:

- Repeating place value daily
- Representing numbers in a variety of ways
- Playing games (learning through play)
- Making connections to numbers through real-life situations
- Using hands-on activities to connect concepts
- Visually representing all concepts in a variety of ways
- Involving children in their own assessment (graphing and analyzing test results)

Each day we take one number and use a variety of ways to demonstrate place value and represent number, as indicated below:

- Place value chart (numbers)
- Place value cups (sticks)
- Tally chart
- Number line (multiples, skip counting)
- Base-10 block pictures
- Expanded notation
- Addition or subtraction, or addition and subtraction number sentences
- Make it 1 more, 1 less, 10 more, 10 less, 100 more, 100 less, 1,000 more, 1,000 less

Each day we use the following real-life items and ideas to create problems involving all strands:

- Calendar (days in a week, months in a year, how many days ago)
- Time
- Money



- Measurement
- Probability
- Weather
- Statistics

At least once a week we hold a games day to reinforce all the concepts we have been working on. Numbers and place value have received a special emphasis.

I try to incorporate hands-on activities in as many lessons as possible. And I observe and assess the children as they work through problems using manipulatives.

Phillip is beginning to understand numbers and see relationships between them. Today he eagerly showed me a pattern that he noticed on the math test. It was a patterning question, and he was looking for a much more difficult way to solve it. As he saw the ones, tens and hundreds columns changing in a simple way, he was eager to show me. He really thought he had found the easy way to answer the question. Phillip's confidence is growing, and I see him beginning to increase classroom participation. When I call on him he is willing to work through the question with my guidance, even when he has not put up his hand. After we work through the question together, I find that he is willing to try a similar question on his own the next day. This is when repetition becomes a valuable teaching tool.



**What process do you use to decide how to address identified literacy needs of students?**

# RETEXT



## *Teacher Perspectives*

### **Jenn Schmidt, Kindergarten (Carrie)**

The discussion at our last PLC meeting centred on how to get students to assess themselves. Instead of the teacher saying "Good job," the teacher could ask, "What do you think of your work today? Why? What could you have done differently?" We want to get our students to learn to think critically.

What will I do now?

I am going to continue to use our PLC time for reflection, collaboration and refinement of what is already working. Although strategies I have implemented are working, we need to request additional funding to support the classroom teacher with more classroom assistants.



I see formative assessment as a key factor in my classroom because it is a positive process that includes the student. My students need to pinpoint where they are in their learning and where they want to go.

### Cindy Schaffer, Grade 1 (Jack)

I found this project valuable because it gave me time to self-reflect and realize that the many things that I am already doing on a daily basis are so beneficial.

Students love to be involved in interactive literacy and math games, because games make them feel that they are not really working, whereas in actuality they are learning through play, which is great motivation. Using readers theatre in the classroom enhances group work, vocal expression and reading fluency.

Students benefit from self-reflection because it increases their ownership of their own learning. I have also learned many quick assessment tools, such as red to mean stop and green to mean go, as well as the following:

- Thumb up—meaning that the student understands or is ready to go on
- Thumb in—meaning that the student is still thinking or is unsure
- Thumb down—meaning that the student needs more time, extra help and so on

Teacher assistants and one-on-one or small group work also benefit students by allowing for more individual attention and assistance. Jack showed considerable growth when he had extra help and one-on-one instruction.

Time always seems to be a factor. I was continually trying to make time to meet Jack's needs in order for him to progress. It seems as though there is never enough time to collaborate with other teachers, to share ideas and teaching strategies, and to discuss resources. I have found that teachers want to get out of the isolated teaching mode. Teachers want to have the opportunity to share good resources and strategies.

### Joanne Medeiros, Grade 2 (Charlie)

Initially, I was very interested in this project as an opportunity to continue my PLC group's goals with a renewed focus and some fresh insights into our work. I hoped to gain new perspectives on what I have been doing well and what I could be doing better. I was under the impression that we would do some video conferencing with the other schools involved in this project. As it turned out, the collaborative part of this project involved only our school group; we have never had any sort of communication with the other schools involved. I guess the collaboration with the other schools will happen during the sharing and rewriting at the writing retreat.

During this project I sometimes felt unsure. The development of our question was very frustrating to me, because I kept getting hung up on the word *assessment*. I have finally come to realize that my problem with assessment stems from the traditional connotation of the word, because I had no formal way of measuring the effectiveness of many of the strategies I used in my classroom. I just knew that it was another strategy to try if what I was doing was not working.

I use formative assessment every day in my interactions with my students. Formative assessment helps me know what we should do next, how we should repeat something, how we should move on to the next activity and when to give a concept a rest or revisit.

I still struggle with the word *assessment* at times. I teach mostly Grade 2, but just this year I have taken on some junior and senior courses. As a primary teacher I always focused on the learning; sometimes as a junior high teacher, I worry more about the report card mark. This teaching to the test will definitely continue to be an area for inner debate if I continue to teach



older students and have to report or justify marks in a traditional way. (Aren't we trying to use assessment for learning in Divisions III and IV as well?)

This project has made me focus more on the strategies I use, how useful they are and how I assess students and activities. My own confusion about the direction of this project has made me more aware of students' need for specific goals.

I think that when we talk about *assessment*, we talk about giving students a target to shoot for. Many times during this project, I felt like I was shooting arrows into the dark and hoping that I might hit a target. Is collaboration supposed to be like solving a mystery, or is it about having a predetermined question or target, determining how to get there and sharing ideas together? In the end, collaboration comes so naturally to the Green Team, it really does not need defining—it happens all the time in the daily interactions we have as professionals, the desire we have to help all students achieve and the openness with which we share our ideas.

Students are more confident, particularly with the readers theatre, because the material is familiar and the week's structure is predictable. Students look forward to Monday, when they get the new script. With readers theatre, I become more aware of students' need for repetition, and I make sure to provide many opportunities to revisit the familiar text. As well, I am able to use the new texts to consistently review word skills, such as long and short vowels, compound words, contractions, punctuation, synonyms and antonyms. With each new script comes the opportunity to expand students' vocabulary and review language concepts and comprehension strategies using a familiar piece of writing. The daily sight-word password on the door has really improved the students' ability to read those words quickly.

### Linda Holt, Grade 3 (Ben)

My district AISI group in special education has been very supportive. Collaborative work can be extremely useful; there are so many knowledgeable, capable people willing to advise me and offer alternative teaching strategies.

I have turned to our psychologist, our special education coordinator and my fellow special ed team members on staff for ideas and comments. It is vital to have a team approach and crucial that each student has a supportive group of collaborative leaders.

### Jeneen Armstrong, Grade 3 (Phillip)

I have learned that what happens in the classroom really makes a difference. As we work with our students, we learn about them and ourselves through a reflective process. We must acknowledge the importance of what happens in the classroom, because the value of this knowledge supersedes everything else. We must acknowledge the importance of developing assessment among ourselves. Assessment and evaluation go hand in hand.

I have also learned that it is essential to develop consistency throughout K–3. Teacher communication about what has and hasn't worked from one year to the next and small classes give teachers time to work one on one with students and to develop programs.

Focusing on two case studies has made me aware of the amount of time and energy that is needed to meet the individual needs of all the students in my classroom so that I can effectively handle the diversity and challenges faced in the classroom.

### Jenn Schmidt, Kindergarten (Carrie)

Carrie has improved immensely. Our plan to bring her into kindergarten five days a week has proved to be worthwhile. Her confidence is improving and so is her academic success.

Carrie came to us last year not knowing the difference between a letter, a number and a shape. As she leaves kindergarten she knows the first three letters in her name, as well as most colours and shapes. Big improvement.

*With each new script comes the opportunity to expand students' vocabulary and review language concepts and comprehension strategies using a familiar piece of writing.*

This is my first year using Sound Connections for a full year, and I feel that students who use it have better sound retention and alphabet recognition. Carrie's success is largely due to combining this program with Denise Gagne's alphabet songs and a printing/phonics program.

### Cindy Schaffer, Grade 1 (Jack)

I am going to continue to use literacy and math games on a daily basis. I am going to start using more literacy and math centres to enhance student learning, and I plan to start a literacy and math bag program to send home with the students. I will continue to work on writing rubrics for Grade 1 with my AISI districtwide PLC and will continue to try to engage parents in their child's learning.

The Green Team PLC continues to meet weekly to discuss teaching strategies, ideas and resources. We are a collaborative team that learns from each other every day. We are a great support for one another, and we can see how everything we do on a daily basis is making a difference.

Time is of the essence. Teachers need time to collaborate and share ideas, resources and teaching strategies. Our PLC makes time to discuss these issues and ideas every week. We support each other and will do whatever we can to help our students succeed.

We are assessing all the time at our grade level, and continually modifying and making adjustments every day to better suit the needs of our students. We work toward mastery of a particular concept. Sometimes you forget about all the little things you do and how important they really are.

### Joanne Medeiros, Grade 2 (Charlie)

I am going to try to videotape students reading their readers theatre script and being guided through a self-reflection sheet. This will be an opportunity for them to assess what they do well and what they can improve upon.

I will use more nonfiction reading and writing activities from the start of the next school year. I am curious to know if the boys are more motivated to read such material because it is familiar and concrete, or if they are interested because they have read enough other texts to make them proficient readers.

I will continue to use the secret password activity, which I have expanded to include some math concepts, such as counting sets of coins.

Readers theatre has been a very useful teaching tool and a way to quickly do an assessment for learning. When the children struggle with any words, that gives me a chance to do a minilesson.

I will continue to work collaboratively with the members of the Green Team. It has always been reassuring to know that I can go to a team member with my questions or concerns and come away with suggestions and a sense of peace, knowing that my colleagues face the same struggles.

### Linda Holt, Grade 3 (Ben)

I have learned that I need to have fun: all my students, including Ben, learn more when I am excited about a concept. And enjoyment helps me keep my methods fresh, varied and multisensory.

I need to celebrate small successes: learning is developmental, and sometimes the increments are very small. Sometimes children have learning disabilities, and often environmental factors, such as troubled home lives, affect their performance. I have learned that any growth is exciting.





I need to be a consistent, predictable, calm force in Ben's life; he needs to trust me and believe in what I am teaching. I need to be honest, explicit in my instruction, immediate with my feedback and insistent that Ben be accountable.

I need to keep learning. Each reflection on and assessment of Ben's learning requires that I know what to do next. Researching best practices is a time-consuming job. I belong to the Alberta Reading Council, the Southeast Alberta International Reading Association and the International Reading Association (IRA). All of these organizations offer a wealth of material for my learning. I subscribe to the IRA research journal and magazine and rely on the *Alberta Reading Association Journal* for material. Three times a year, I meet with Alberta council members to discuss reading issues. I am constantly reading research in the area of reading, which, I have learned, is an enormous field.

I need to teach more than reading—I need to teach Ben how to cope with his temperament. If he doesn't become aware of his special mental functions and abilities and how to deal with them, he will fail.

I have learned that we have excellent teachers in our K–3 group. Our district AISI team has also been extremely supportive of our work at the school.

Small classes make a huge difference. We were fortunate enough this year to have two small Grade 2 classes: one with 12 students; the other with 13. By the end of the year, every student was reading at or above grade level.

### What am I going to do about it?

I will take my learning and apply it to all of my classes. I will continue to assess students individually and then set up programs to suit their needs. I will continue to read, study and collaborate with other teachers to improve my own teaching.

Every day I tell myself that children do well if they can. It is paramount, then, that I provide the environment, the strategies and the consistent encouragement needed for Ben to meet his goals. I must teach to his strengths while strengthening his weaknesses. Learning should be fun, and that is why he loves the games; he will repeat a concept many more times if it is fun. Ben has also begun to use text-to-speech computer-assisted reading in the classroom for some of his assignments. This is a good ego-booster, because it offers independence.

### Jeneen Armstrong, Grade 3 (Phillip)

I am going to continue to strive to meet the individual needs of all my students through games, repetition and connecting math to real-life situations. Creating an atmosphere in which students are actively engaged in their own learning will continue to enhance my math philosophy. I will continue to use my students' needs to fuel my teaching and to ensure that assessment and evaluation continually go hand in hand.

Our Green Team will continue to discuss and share best practices to help all our students become successful learners. When I look at the definition of collaborative inquiry, I see how effectively our team fits this definition and has worked for many years on this process. We are constantly collaboratively discussing and planning, and trying to make sense of the complex work of teaching and learning. Using our PLC time to talk about different students in our class and what has and what hasn't worked has been very beneficial. This project may have focused on a few target students, but as we worked through the project we could see how many other students benefited from our concentrated efforts.

*I will take my learning and apply it to all of my classes. I will continue to assess students individually and then set up programs to suit their needs. I will continue to read, study, and collaborate with other teachers to improve my own teaching.*



### Team Reflections

Overall, collaborative inquiry that focuses on assessment of students helped to improve student learning. Members of the Green Team acknowledge the importance both of what happens in the classroom and of formative and summative assessments. Extraneous information about students is important, but what happens in the classroom is paramount.

This project and our case studies provided us with a focus for reflective teaching. All of the students improved when we used assessment-for-learning strategies in the classroom.

When students see themselves as capable, they become even more capable and their self-esteem increases. Students exhibit more confidence as their skills improve, and they are much more willing to take risks when they are self-assured. When students are engaged, learning takes place naturally. Many of our students were more engaged during hands-on and game-centred activities, or readers theatre, when they didn't view learning as work.

Learning experiences must be real. Some of our reluctant readers did very well reading nonfiction books, because to them, nonfiction was more meaningful and related to their world. They have a keen desire to understand their environment, and we can build on this in our classroom activities.

It is important that students be part of the learning process. We need to give them the big picture so that they set reachable goals. It is important that students help set criteria and judge themselves according to the set criteria. Exemplars make it easier for students to assess their existing abilities and figure out what they need to do to progress to the next level. Self-reflection is as important for the student as it is for the teacher. Students need to build skills in using self-evaluation strategies and exemplars in the younger grades, so that they will become reflective learners as they go through school. We need to teach to their strengths and strengthen their weaknesses. Giving students regular descriptive feedback and having them involved in their feedback help them to identify ways to improve.

It is necessary to include observations as part of the assessment of children in our classrooms, because observations help us to implement intervention strategies and change or continue these strategies based on further observation.

*Learning experiences must be real. Some of our reluctant readers did very well reading nonfiction books, because to them, nonfiction was more meaningful and related to their world.*

### On the Art of Collaborating

Our group is very supportive of each other. There is a real trust—a comfort zone when taking risks. The trust within our group also means that we are honest with each other and not afraid to talk about struggles and problems, or strategies that have failed miserably.

Sometimes, though, collaborating can make us feel as though we're not doing as much as we should or guilty about not doing what another teacher is doing. The amount of information and the number of strategies to try can be overwhelming.

Action research is about helping professionals cross the boundary between self and other, me and not me, known and unknown in order to improve their instructional practice.



#### What have the teachers learned about

- themselves?
- the case study students?
- literacy?

#### What have you learned about

- yourself?
- literacy?



# St Michael's School

# Michael's School

Medicine Hat Catholic  
School Division

# PRETEXT

## *Our School*

Medicine Hat's St Michael's School is a magnet school that draws students from around the city. It is also the home school for northwest Crescent Heights, the southwest Hill area and Redcliff.

St Michael's School first opened its doors in 1965 but was officially opened after the addition of a gym and east wing in October 1968. Further expansion included the addition of the drama facility and one classroom in September 2000. State-of-the-art renovations were completed in September 2004 for the LAP classroom.

In 2006/07, St Michael's School celebrated its 16th anniversary as the designated fine arts school for the Medicine Hat Catholic District. Since 1990, instructional minutes have been maximized to provide an overall Catholic education with a fine arts focus. Our motto is "Works of art in the making."



*The St. Michael's team (left to right): Bev Fune, Maria Sehn, Anne Tomcala (principal) and Karen Gloin*

## *Fine Arts Focus*

Music, movement, art and drama are integrated throughout the curriculum into students' daily learning. An options program featuring various visual and performing arts selections is offered to all Grades 4 and 5 students. Each term, students select from various options based on student and teacher interests. Recent options have included black light theatre, hand chimes, puppetry, guitar program, theatre/musical production and paper arts. A small annual fee is charged to cover costs for all fine arts activities, including attending productions and guest performances.



## Our Students

St Michael's has 170 students in Grades K–5 and LAP. Most (85 per cent) of the students are bused to St Michael's every day. There is an out-of-school care program.

## Our Staff

St Michael's has 9 teachers (including 1.5 resource room teachers), 18 support staff and a caretaking staff. The school offers full-day, daily kindergarten, and literacy and numeracy programs.

Team members: Bev Fune, Karen Gloin, Maria Sehn

# CONTEXT



In September, staff had two main professional development opportunities: district AISI workshops, led by David Leahy, and district PDL Dier focus Effective Schools.

In addition, professional learning community (PLC) time was timetabled into the school week to allow for collaboration and collegial conversation about student writing. Staff also attended three ATA workshops on how to improve student writing, which used the second edition of *Refocusing* (an Alberta Assessment Consortium publication) as its basis. Teachers learned how to

- use assessment *for* learning as effective instruction,
- develop assessment-for-learning rubrics (staff saw samples of student work, exemplars and anchor papers) and
- devise an assessment-for-learning plan for at-risk students.

Additional supports in the school were materials from the Alberta Assessment Consortium; United Streaming, which gave us access to resources for supporting learner outcomes; and Smart Boards, an interactive whiteboard that provides endless possibilities for involving students in their learning.

Given that we had already identified student writing as a priority, we were happy to receive an invitation to work on an action research project that would focus on how teachers can improve student writing. This action research project would build on the work we had already done, but there would be additional supports, such as

- Highest Level of Achievement Test (HLAT) resources (from Edmonton Public), which were very useful;
- resource personnel who had worked with the HLAT materials;
- writing-prompt development; and
- help in developing rubrics.

As we began the project, the school principal reflected on some of the challenges that the team faced in relation to work on assessment with the entire school staff. We realized that assessment *for* learning includes a dialogue with students and a need to be aware of students' abilities. We also had to offer quality feedback and develop quality rubrics. We had to



remember that this was not a quick fix; it needed to be longitudinal, and teachers required time for collaboration, collegial conversations and reflection. Our project question was: *How will assessment for learning and assessment tools (rubrics) help improve student writing?*

Our goals were to

- unpack the curriculum; that is, come to understand the intent of the program of studies and then relate the general and specific learner outcomes to that intent, so that we had a continuum of goals from K–5;
- have students write effective “I can” statements; and
- create a useful rubric for each grade level.

One staff member, Bev Fune, described her participation in the project in this way: “It will be an excellent opportunity to work with teachers from other grade levels on a collaborative project. I am doing this not only to help my children, but also to help myself improve as an educator.”

Teacher Karen Gloin described her perceptions in this way:

I think we all have a pretty common interest—to improve student learning and instruction, and in particular, writing, by incorporating assessment for learning techniques into our individual practices. The goal is to incorporate those techniques into our collective practices (in my opinion, this is a goal held by the majority of staff). Prioritizing needs, pacing, and the scope and sequence of the steps necessary to effect change varied among teachers. We were at different places in our AFL journeys, and excited and ready to take small steps to improve in our own chosen area.

Teacher Maria Sehn provided further reflection:

We were brought together to improve student writing. This goal became the focus of our professional learning communities, which, in our case, consists of the K–3 teachers. Our K–3 team was then approached by our administrator regarding the LAP (Leadership in Assessment Project). After our initial meeting with Robert Hogg, of the Alberta Assessment Consortium, three members of our team decided to continue. Our PLC goals were to map out the writing outcomes from the language arts curriculum from K to 3 in order to see the progression. From there, we would write those outcomes in learner-friendly language in the belief that making students aware of the goals would help them improve their writing.

### Targeted Students

Following development of the question and reflection on proposed goals, the team members identified target students.

#### Bev Fune, Kindergarten (Amy)

I chose a student named Amy, who presented severe language-communication delay. Amy knew only a few of the letters in the alphabet and had difficulty communicating her ideas in a coherent manner. She didn’t like to try difficult things. She had weak fine motor control, so printing and writing were very difficult for her.

My goal was for Amy to be able to

- express herself through drawings,
- explain her drawings using sentences and
- write simple words and sentences on paper.



We set out to develop rubrics because we thought they would be important and would help improve student writing. However, we soon learned that a rubric would not be a useful tool for kindergarten.

Where did we go once we discovered that? We created writing prompts. The schoolwide prompt—“Finally I said to myself as I jumped out of bed...” —was too wordy for kindergarteners, so I simplified it. The children were asked to think about the perfect Christmas and to illustrate and describe what they saw when they woke up on Christmas morning. I told them what I expected in their drawing (the students themselves had to be in their drawing, as well as the people and things they would see on a perfect Christmas morning; they were to use different colours to show detail; and they had to describe their picture using a complete sentence). Their sentences were to describe how things might look, taste, feel, sound and smell. Either the student would write the sentence kindergarten style (phonetically) or an adult would write it for the student.

When I was describing the writing assignment to my students, we brainstormed various Christmas-related words. Then we discussed how we could bring the sentences into our writing. The students were given a set amount of time and were told to treat it like a test. Within that time, they were to plan, write and edit their work.

Amy met the criteria for her drawing. However, when she first began describing her drawing, she began by simply labelling things. Amy and I reviewed the criteria then organized her ideas, beginning with the writing prompt.

The key things that were beneficial to Amy in this writing project were

- clear criteria,
- feedback and
- opportunities to draw and write.

Throughout the year, Amy had daily opportunities to write and draw. She was encouraged to sound words out and write them as they sounded. By writing and drawing daily, her fine motor control and her confidence increased, and she began to experiment with sounding out words.

In March, the children had to draw a picture of something they like to eat. Amy drew a picture of mashed potatoes and gravy and wrote “MPG” above the picture. When she brought her book to me, she read the sentence “I like mashed potatoes and gravy.” This was certainly something to celebrate—the first sentence that she had written independently.

In May, we completed a second schoolwide writing prompt. We provided a picture of a situation in which a class pet had gone missing. As a class we discussed what was happening in the picture. The students’ assignment was to decide what the pet was and where it had gone.

Amy was quite excited about this project because she loves animals. She eagerly began to draw a picture of a lizard and the principal in her office. She labelled the lizard and then she began to write her sentence. As she began sounding out the word *principal*, she turned to me for assistance, but I wanted to see how much she could do on her own. When she said, “I can’t do it,” I asked her to turn to previous pages in her journal where she had sounded out some words by herself. She was quite proud of this. We then turned back to the page that she had been working on, and I asked her to say the word slowly. She completed the sentence by herself. She had written the words *lert* (for lizard); *psrp* (principal’s) and *ofes* (office). Then she read it to me: “It is a lizard. It is in the principal’s office.”

We celebrated the good things in her writing. Amy was very proud of her drawing of the lizard and the principal looking out of the window. She was also very proud of her spelling, but had trouble forming the letters correctly, and she asked me to help her change it.

How did assessment for learning help Amy improve her writing skills? What worked for Amy? When children are first learning to express themselves through drawing and writing,

*Amy was quite excited about this project because she loves animals. She eagerly began to draw a picture of a lizard and the principal in her office. She labelled the lizard and then she began to write her sentence.*



the most important thing is to give them frequent opportunities to engage in drawing and writing activities. For Amy, setting criteria and clear expectations was the next most important thing. Guiding her through the process, providing feedback and helping her reflect on her writing were also crucial.



**How is the development of textual literacy enhanced by a teacher's ability to draw on a sophisticated approach to multi-literacy?**

### **Karen Gloin, Grade 3 (Eden)**

I chose Eden, the weakest writer in the class, who had considerable difficulties articulating her thoughts on paper. Her sentence structure was very weak and lacked organization and coherence, and she had considerable difficulties recognizing her errors.

My goal was for Eden to be able to identify and acknowledge the problem with her writing and use the tools that I gave her to rectify them.

This project contributed to student learning in that it allowed me to collaborate with peers and take assessment for learning tools, like the rubric, and test them for their effect on student writing and then to reflect on this process. The steps I took with my targeted student, Eden, also benefited the rest of the class. Contributing to the students' success was the implementation of assessment-for-learning strategies, such as communicating to students where they are, where they need to go and how they can get there.

Other tactics that were valuable in Eden's improvement were

- checklists of required criteria for good beginnings, middles and ends;
- checklists for what good sentences contain; and
- "I can" statements for what I expect her to be able to do.

Eden improved after one-on-one guidance using a formatted sentence-builder task. She also improved when her peers pointed out her errors to her. When given a student-friendly checklist of the mechanics necessary for good writing, she was better equipped to amend her mistakes.

### **Maria Sehn, Grade 2/3 (Liam and Eric)**

Because I am teaching a Grade 2/3 split, I decided to choose one student from each level. The Grade 2 student I chose is Liam. He has limited ? though but does show great interest and willingness to improve. Liam entered the resource program to boost his performance to grade-appropriate levels. I chose him because I would like to help him reach the level of his peers. According to the tests, Liam is an average student, but his writing skills are slightly below those of his classmates.

The Grade 3 student I chose was Eric. He enjoys and is good at writing, which seems to come naturally to him. I wanted to see if different assessment and writing strategies would help improve even the natural writers like Eric.

#### **Liam**

Liam was entered into the resource program with the intent to give him a boost. Testing showed that he did not have a learning disability, but he did have some areas of weakness that,



with short-term intervention, could be reversed. His progress was immediate—so much so that we removed him from the resource program after Christmas break. After leaving the program, he continued to do well.

With this dramatic improvement, I felt he would be able to continue the same writing projects as the rest of the class, with the same expectations as outlined in the rubric. With the focus on organization, and after being shown what a beginning, middle and end were, Liam was able to add a considerable amount of detail to his stories, as can be seen in his later planning pages.

### **Eric and Pizzazz Words**

As the project continued, several colleagues and I began to attend 6 + 1 Writing Traits inservices provided by our AISI co-coordinator, David Leahy. It was the combination of the Leadership in Assessment Project, our AISI project and our learning of yet another writing tool that made me realize that Eric needed more than the original rubric could provide him, because his writing had advanced beyond the basics of the rubric.

As the project year came to a close, it occurred to me that in addition to solidifying beginnings, middles and ends in his stories, what Eric really needed was to learn how to add pizzazz to his writing. So I began using the 6 + 1 Writing Traits program to show all the children how this should be done.

The initial lesson about word choice revealed that the students loved learning about new pizzazz words, they loved how they sounded and they loved using them. They would need more time to practise using such words in their writing. Given that our school has decided to continue with our original goal of improving student writing and to implement the 6 + 1 Writing Traits program to accomplish that goal, I feel confident that all of my students will develop this skill and other writing skills in the years to come.

## SUBTEXT



### **Bev Fune, Kindergarten (Amy)**

Rubrics were a bit of a fly in the ointment for me, because I did not know how to make an effective rubric, and so the Grade 1 teacher and I failed to create a rubric that was useful for us.

### **Karen Gloin, Grade 3 (Eden)**

We developed a summative rubric with the idea of assembling the requirements and expectations of Grade 3 writing in rubric form. We then used this rubric to ascertain our students' abilities in relation to the other students in the school. I worried as I asked my class to write about this prompt because I had not yet covered all of the criteria within the rubric, and I fretted over the fact that we had spent days constructing this teacher-friendly rubric when what I really wanted to find out was how a student-friendly rubric would benefit my students.

When I introduced the writing task, I didn't even mention the rubric, other than briefly stressing the importance of planning content and good sentence building. So why did we spend valuable time creating this rubric when it didn't seem useful? That was my question and, in hindsight, I think that I should have looked more carefully at what kind of rubric would be the best tool at the front end of a writing task, where it would be the most helpful.



*I think that all staff were keen to put the writing outcomes we unpacked into student-friendly language.*

Using the rubric after writing was good but not entirely useful, since I wanted to give my students a set of criteria—guidelines they could follow to help them write a good piece. The story my target student wrote using our prompt was at the emerging level of our rubric.

I think that all staff were keen to put the writing outcomes we unpacked into student-friendly language. As an entire staff, we were leaning more toward doing this than developing rubrics. I believe that this is when what should have been one project became two. We got sidetracked by the rubric thing, which was, in hindsight, a detour on our road to improving student writing. We were too hasty in looking for a question to focus on because the LAP required one. Our question really should have stemmed from our schoolwide professional development. For example, I think that the following question would have been a better one: How does the use of writing outcomes delivered as “I can” statements improve student writing?

The rubric focus wasn’t a good one, and we ended up veering away from it after spending considerable time developing a schoolwide writing rubric and writing sample prompts. The intention was to classify grade-level writing and answer these questions: What does K–5 writing look like? and What, in our experience as K–5 teachers, are our standards for writing? That intention was never fully realized due to lack of professional learning community timing and other issues. I realize now that this agenda didn’t have much to do with the goals of this project. We did, however, think it did and veered off on a tangent trying to find ways to make it relevant.



**Time for teachers to collaboratively discuss assessment practices can far exceed the time they spend evaluating student work in isolation. What can be done to shift this balance?**



The second problem involved each team member focusing on one student. Since the rubric was never put into student-friendly language, the results for this focus were inconclusive. I was unable to use the rubric as it was to direct students prior to a writing task. What was conclusive, however, was that the rubric we spent much valuable time on was, for the purposes of this study, unusable because of its limited benefits. I used it only for judging the level at which my target student fell on the rubric. I know that a rubric is a valuable tool for gauging student abilities, but for rubrics to improve writing, they must be issued to the students. They must also be well written and have lots of details that give specifics for each criterion. This allows students to identify where they need to improve.

### **Maria Sehn, Grade 2/3 (Liam and Eric)**

My initial personal goal for this project was to learn something that I could take back to my students. In my heart, I felt that students would experience success by leaps and bounds. Although this has not been the case in such a short period of time, I've learned that this is just the beginning of their learning and mine.

Did I have clearly defined goals for each student? No. I simply wanted to see an improvement. Frankly, I didn't think I needed specific goals for each individual student. The curriculum would take care of this, wouldn't it?

Initially I thought that I had to focus on everything in the rubric at the same time. I realized from this project, though, that success would come from focusing on one part of it at a time. Although I had been teaching specific skills of story writing, it seemed from the beginning of this project that if I could just complete a great rubric, show it to the students and explain it clearly enough, their writing would improve dramatically. I thought that by doing this, my students would know exactly what was expected of them, and they would do it.

Deep down I knew this could not happen without my teaching the skills first, but where to start? The rubric seemed so huge, and the students hadn't been taught everything from it yet. It wasn't until the March meeting with our group that I realized that I didn't have to use the whole rubric—that using parts of it may be helpful during the process of learning writing. The entire rubric would be more useful as an end-of-year summative assessment tool. Giving students one aspect of writing on which to focus and practise is one of the keys to their developing good writing skills.

So we focused on organization. We practised writing beginnings, middles and ends, and discussed what each should look like. Then we began putting them together. This narrowing down and homing in on one aspect of writing gave students the opportunity to strongly develop this skill and block out distractions. The difference was noticeable in their later writing.

I believe that if I had had a clear target, my students would have had one as well. In fact, in hindsight, many things would have been different. Perhaps we would have chosen writing prompts only for our three participating teachers instead of including the entire staff. Trying to gather everyone together to plan and explain what we were trying to accomplish took precious time and effort away from our project. Perhaps confusion came from trying to combine this project with our school and PLC goals. The goal of our PLC group was to map out the writing outcomes from K–3 and then write them in child-friendly language. This alone was meant to take a full school year but, when combined with this project, it seemed too huge to complete in one school year. Confusion ensued, and time became a big issue. When we were ready to move forward, the rest of the school wasn't.

When we were initially approached about doing this project, I had no idea what it was about. All I knew was that it would relate well to what we were doing as a district with our AISI project and with our school's goal of improving student writing. I never really understood the goal of the project. Looking back, I suppose my confusion stemmed from the fact that we did not prepare our own question to research. One thing this project has taught me is the importance of a concrete goal.

# RETEXT



## Team Reflections

There were dissenting opinions about where to start because of team members' different experiences with assessment for learning. Should we start by making a rubric or unpacking the writing curriculum, which the PLC groups were already doing? The next item on the agenda was to put those writing outcomes into child-friendly language. Many did not buy into building the rubric before unpacking was complete, but we did it anyway.

We discovered early on that our rubric wasn't functional. We had to begin with the end in mind, so we went back to the foundation. We began unpacking the curriculum to get a clear idea of what the students were expected to learn. Unpacking the curriculum is a huge undertaking, so we narrowed our focus to unpacking the writing outcomes only.

The challenges in this project began very early on. We didn't have a clear sense of the purpose of this project, our goal or what we were being asked to do. Just as AFL suggests directing students toward the target or communicating the desired end, we were waiting to be set in the right direction or shown an end product. Not knowing what on earth we were doing was a huge stumbling block.

Another stumbling block was the fact that we were already in a schoolwide AISI project aimed at improving student writing, and staff were already unpacking the writing outcomes. This project was not meant to be an add-on to that one, but it ended up becoming one because

*Mistakes are bound to happen, but, as we so often tell our students, one learns from one's mistakes.*





of inexperience with AFL and a lack of thoughtful merging of the two. In all fairness, however, the learning and method-adopting curve is steep with this work. There is no flight manual—it takes a leap of faith to step off the cliff. Mistakes are bound to happen, but, as we so often tell our students, one learns from one's mistakes.

## Timing

Our first writing sample was not given until November. Ideally, we should have had a sample in September, or early October at the latest, but our first Leadership in Assessment Project meeting didn't occur until late October. Trying to get an entire staff together in a short period of time and devising a prompt that would work for all K–5 students was not easy. As a result of the time shortage, our school ended up with only two solid samples of writing that our students completed using the rubric or some form of it prior to writing.

As we were putting this project together, we all realized that we didn't have the time we really needed to develop a proper writing project and rubric. The fact that this project was based on a theme around a time of year (Christmas) meant that we had to complete the project before that special occasion was over. In the future, we will avoid stories based on special occasions in the year so that we can have more time to prepare and allow students more time to finish. It is also important to clearly communicate our goals to the entire staff and to each other, so that we can effectively communicate our expectations to our students. If we don't know what's expected, we can hardly expect our students to know.

## Working Together as a Staff

Before actually giving the Christmas prompt to the children, the three of us felt that we needed to finish a rubric that was originally meant to be given to all the children. Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to develop that portion of it. We did, however, finish a Grade 3–level rubric for teachers. We gave a copy of it to all our teachers and asked them to develop a similar one for their own grade level.

Prior to assigning the writing project, we discussed ways of introducing it. One suggestion was to have the students bring in their sentences. We no longer felt that we completely understood what we wanted from the children, even with the rubric.

With respect to our rubric, most of the children's stories were excellent in the areas of organization, clarity and content. However, most stories lacked originality, unless students had planned or done something out of the ordinary with their families on a given Christmas Day.



**Developing rubrics through collaboration is a means not an end in itself. Would you agree?**

## Summary and Conclusions

### Bev Fune, Kindergarten (Amy)

The process of improving student writing is not linear. Things progress at a slow and, hopefully, steady speed. Therefore, do not expect to proceed by huge leaps and bounds. Instead, celebrate small steps.



Rubrics helped in some ways but limited us in others. They are best used as a tool. The more information in them for later grades, the more effective they are as an assessment tool for teachers and students alike.

Students need meaningful feedback. They also need opportunities to discuss the feedback and reflect based on specific criteria.

Some things worked in spite of what we did rather than because of what we did—working as a team, using each other’s strengths and knowledge, sharing with each other all helped.

Another tool that some of the teachers are using to help improve student writing is 6 + 1 Writing Traits.

The key is collaboration—working together to unpack the curriculum, to write “I can” statements, to assess the children’s writing. The discussion with colleagues was invaluable, because often someone would notice something that others had not. Furthermore, I was able to collaborate with the Grade 1 teacher, who is not part of this project—it was important that we get together and set criteria for our grade levels.

Clearly, assessment for learning is important for student learning, success and student self-evaluation, and clear expectations and feedback are an important part of it.

HLAT materials were very useful for K and Grade 1, because they outlined the curriculum expectations, and the dialogue that was written for each expectation was effective. The students were able to look at the criteria and check to ensure that they had included them in their writing or drawing projects.

### Karen Gloin, Grade 3 (Eden)

When we decided to rewrite using a picture prompt, I refocused on my original idea that clear targets should be given at the beginning of the writing task. I concentrated on breaking down the parts of a story and emphasized the necessary qualities of each part. After reading and comparing many stories, as a class we developed criteria for good story beginnings, middles and ends. I then asked the class to meet these criteria when writing their own stories. My targeted student’s writing improved only marginally. And I was dismayed to see many of the strong writers negatively affected by these criteria—in their attempts to conform to the criteria, they simply added insignificant details. The flow of their stories was interrupted because they didn’t know how to include, for example, a description of the characters that sounded as though it should be there. In light of this, I see now that differentiating expectations and instruction depending on students’ abilities is critical. Writing is a tricky thing to teach. Having a regimented set of guidelines may well help those who struggle in their writing, but stronger writers can pull off a good piece without any guidelines.

On the road, I discovered that it takes many mistakes to come to an “Aha!” moment. I am happy to say that I had many of these moments, although most of them did not necessarily relate to my target student. Is this to say that these moments had no impact on this student or others in my classroom or school? Not at all. And that is what most excites me. It’s because of these “Aha!” moments, most of which occurred as a result of this project, that I am excited about my future impact.

This project has helped staff make important discoveries about planning that have indirectly improved student writing. Furthermore, the whole process of searching for answers, clues and motives—despite the occasional confusion, disjointedness and tangents—has definitely led to critical discussion and a heightened awareness of the importance of open, honest talk about how we as a school and as teachers need to improve.

As for progress, the outcome of this project was the biggest area of success for me. Had these challenges not occurred, the depth and breadth of learning and realizations along the way would not have happened either. This project affirmed the importance of a clearly articulated goal and the necessity of narrowing the scope of broader goals. Stemming from



this entire process, I discovered the undeniable value of trying new things, of sharing with colleagues the successes and the disappointments, of putting aside fear of judgment and of revealing our inadequacies to change how we reach and teach our students. Coming to the realization that all teachers struggle with assessment for learning and with lowering our guard enabled us to see whether or not what we do as educators helps our students to meet the requirements or exceed them. Sharing, planning and consistently meeting with colleagues made us more accountable.

### Maria Sehn, Grade 2/3 (Liam and Eric)

What I learned was that using parts of a rubric may be helpful during the process of learning writing, but the entire rubric would be more useful as a summative assessment tool.

I also learned that each student must be treated as an individual. The outcomes from the curriculum serve as a guideline, but each child has different abilities. Both the teacher and the student need to have clear goals to effectively teach and learn as they progress from one goal to another.

### *What We Learned*

We quickly saw that the rubric was by no means the key to developing good writers, but merely a tool to that end. A rubric must be developed with a very clear intent of its end purpose. It must be used for a specific purpose, either summative, to gauge where students are at, or formative, as a functional tool for student use. We developed a summative rubric with a tentative purpose to assemble the requirements and expectations of Grade 3 writing in rubric form.

The rubric seemed so huge, and the students hadn't been taught everything from it yet. It wasn't until our March meeting with our group that I realized that just because the whole rubric was completed and available didn't mean I had to use it. I learned that using parts of a rubric might be helpful when teaching writing, but the entire rubric would be more useful as an end-of-year summative assessment tool. Giving students one aspect of writing on which to focus and to practise is one key to their developing good writing skills.

*Giving students one aspect of writing on which to focus and to practise is one key to their developing good writing skills.*



**To what degree are “off-the-shelf” rubrics more of a help than hindrance in trying to develop a shared understanding of what determines quality writing?**



### Grade 3

	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
Audience appeal	The reader's interest is maintained throughout the writing.	The reader's interest is maintained through most of the writing.
Content planning	All ideas are on topic. Details are specific and consistently effective.	Many ideas are on topic. Details are specific and generally effective.
Vocabulary and usage	Words are well chosen and used effectively.	A variety of well-chosen words add interest and detail.
Organization and clarity	Follows a logical, sequential order. The beginning, middle and end are clearly developed and capture the reader's interest.	Mostly follows a logical, sequential order. Beginning, middle and end are well developed.
Sentence structure	Sentence beginnings are consistently varied. All sentences express complete thoughts.	Sentence beginnings are often varied. Most sentences express complete thoughts.
Mechanics: spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization	End punctuation and capitalization are correct. All words are spelled correctly. Errors that are present do not affect the clarity or effectiveness of communication.	End punctuation and capitalization are correct most of the time. Most words are spelled correctly. Errors that are present may occasionally affect the clarity or effectiveness of communication.



Skilled	Emerging
The reader's interest is maintained some of the time.	The reader's interest is not maintained.
Some ideas are on topic. Details are general and may be predictable, but are appropriate.	Few ideas stay on topic. Details are few and may be repetitive.
Common or ordinary words are used to add interest and detail.	Choice of vocabulary is limited and words are misused.
Sometimes follows a logical, sequential order. The beginning, middle and end are present, but merely present information	Does not follow a logical, sequential order. Beginning, middle and end are unclear, missing or present little information.
Sentence beginnings are sometimes varied. Some sentences express complete thoughts.	Sentence beginnings have little or no variety. Few sentences express complete thoughts.
End punctuation and capitalization are sometimes correct. Most familiar words are spelled correctly; unfamiliar words may be spelled phonetically. Errors that are present often affect the clarity or effectiveness of communication.	End punctuation and capitalization when present are inconsistent. Most words are misspelled and/or spelled phonetically. Errors interfere with the clarity of communication.



These are the criteria Karen's class developed together.

### Good Story Beginnings

Criteria	Details
1. Setting	Include when and where the story takes place.
2. Characters	Include the names of the characters. Describe their character traits.
3. Problem, challenge or wish	Mention or hint at the problem, challenge or wish. Make it clear. Make it interesting or magical.

### Good Story Middles

Criteria	Details
1. Build up the problem, challenge or wish	Develop it clearly and fully. It must be understandable to the reader.
2. Events	Describe the events fully. Make them interesting. Take care to put them in logical order.

### Good Story Endings

Criteria	Details
1. Must solve the problem, deal with the wish or challenge	Must solve the problem, answer the wish or take care of the challenge in a way that makes sense.
2. Events	Details of how the problem gets solved must be in logical order. Make it interesting.



# Horace *Horace Allen School* Allen School

Livingstone Range  
School Division

# Celebrate!

By Cherry Carl

How do we honour the very young child?  
The eager explorer, so wiggly and wild?  
If we look we can see that each one is yearning  
For that pat on the back to celebrate learning.  
But trust is a must if we're seeking success  
When we ask our students to self-assess.  
We must teach them and reach them to show that we care  
As they learn to listen, to respect, and to share.  
A few fear the risks, the reluctant and shy,  
But we've got to give them the freedom to try.  
And in the end they can cry out loud,  
"I've learned a lot and I am proud!"  
—Reprinted with permission of the author

## PRETEXT



### Our School

Horace Allen School, which sits near the base of the Crowsnest Mountain, in Coleman, Alberta, was built in 1963. The school is named after Horace Allen, the first principal of this school.

Originally, Horace Allen was a high school. To accommodate changing population needs, however, the school was reconfigured as a Grades 3 and 4 school for several years. In 2003, renovations were completed, and Horace Allen became a kindergarten to Grade 3 school.

Horace Allen School serves the communities of Coleman, Blairmore, Frank, Bellevue and Hillcrest, in the Livingstone Range School Division. These communities are all situated along Highway 3, west of Pincher Creek, and are part of the municipality of the Crowsnest Pass (CNP), which is in the southwest corner of Alberta. This mountain community is a historic mining town, and indeed, coal mining continues to be the main economic activity. Historically, because of the low cost of living, the CNP area was home to single-parent and low-income families. However, the area is widely used for recreational purposes, including quadding, snowmobiling, hunting, fishing, camping, and cross-country and downhill skiing. The community is currently in transition, as property is being purchased and developed for recreational and weekend use, and property values are increasing dramatically. All three schools in the CNP area are experiencing decline in enrolment. The school serves a population of long-time local families, and a few families that have moved to the area from larger urban centres.



## Our Students

The school population is currently broken down as follows: 40 kindergarten students, 45 Grade 1 students, 52 Grade 2s and 66 Grade 3s, for a total of 203 students. Of these students, four are English as second language (two Canadian born and two foreign born), six students are coded with severe learning disabilities, and two are coded with mild and moderate learning disabilities.

## Our Research Question

The team's action research question was: *How can a clinical focus on the literacy development of one student enhance my assessment practices?*

## Team Members



Team members (left to right): Karen Cox, Bonnie Spahmann, Lenore Tarcon and Pam Reed (principal)

# CONTEXT



The following conditions, which existed in the school before the project began, influenced how the project unfolded.

## Materials and Classroom Practice

- We used basal readers because of a lack of other resources.
- We used Gates-MacGinitie and the Alberta Diagnostic Reading Program for assessment.



## Leadership in Assessment

- There was no common literacy block or common-denominator materials.
- We had a schoolwide reading time that obligated us to stop whatever we were doing at a prescribed time.
- We implemented several timetabling changes: instead of a bell ringing every 40 minutes, we have no bells, except for recess, lunch times, entry and dismissal. A common literacy block has been established in the morning, and our afternoon PE/library/music schedule is based on 30-minute rotations rather than 40 minutes, as it was in the past.
- Classroom use of portfolios was not systematic.
- We had established schoolwide literature themes for each month and weekly literature contests.
- We did assessment of learning based largely on testing and quizzes.
- We had small classroom libraries; classes were scheduled into library for one book exchange per week.
- Art classes were not literature based.
- We did not use exemplars, rubrics or performance assessment.

## Students

- Students were not actively engaged in goal setting and self-assessment.
- Students were not expected to attend parent-teacher meetings, and not all parents were invited to attend the November and March interviews, only the parents of “problem” students.

## Staff

- We had one new staff member who had never taught Grade 2 before, a new Grade 3 teacher, one teacher with one year of experience in Grade 2 and a new principal with one year of experience. In fact, teachers are still adjusting to the change of administration that occurred last year.
- Staff were collegial but not comfortable taking risks with each other. We lacked a feeling of being a true school community.
- Teachers did not know what to use for assessing student reading, and not all teachers were able to locate a copy of the program of studies for language arts. However, each teacher received a collection of professional books on literacy and assessment in the spring of 2006.

## Project History and Goals



At the beginning of the project, the team members were unfamiliar with how to develop rubrics and also with the range of assessment tools that were available. The concept of assessment *for* learning was still unfamiliar. We were quite surprised at the extent to which students could be involved in their own assessment—and the value of having them do so. We were not entirely certain about what makes a student at risk in literacy or that we should be developing a common assessment language with the students.

Initially, we were concerned about not being able to meet our goals. We were also concerned about what kind of support we would get from the ATA



and the AAC, and whether or not we would get buy-in from teachers. As with any educational project in schools, we were also concerned about having enough time to implement new reading and assessment tools. Finally, we were concerned about our students—would these new materials and methods positively or negatively affect their scores? Robert Hogg, of the AAC, told us that it is common for scores to decrease the first year that new methods are tried.

Still, we could see that this project would coincide nicely with our AISI project, and because teachers are always looking for ways to improve student learning, we were enthusiastic about the project and went into it hoping to gain a thorough understanding of assessment for learning and balanced literacy, and to implement practices that reflect this understanding. We also hoped to attain a thorough knowledge of the program of studies for language arts and planned to base our planning and instruction on this document, rather than on teacher guides from reading series.

We wanted all students, not just those targeted in the project, to experience success and gain a love of reading, writing, listening, viewing, speaking and representing that would be embedded in practice not only in language arts but across the curriculum.



**What challenges do you anticipate from the team's decision to include all students in this project? Would a focus on a few students have been more manageable?**

Finally, we hoped that we would find joy in the journey upon which our school was embarking, that teachers would accept the challenge to step out of their comfort zone, and that the value of the project would be evident in increased student learning.

## How Was the Team Brought Together?

The teachers involved in this project would have to be committed and would also have to be around for a while. They had to be energetic people open to trying new things. I gave a copy of the proposal to Lenore Tarcon, Karen Cox and Bonnie Spahmann. They expressed interest, and one of them asked specifically about time commitment. I realized then that they needed to be at the meeting to see the correlation between our AISI project and the pilot project. We met for half an hour before meeting with Jean-Claude Couture, of the ATA, and Robert Hogg, of the AAC.

Horace Allen School became involved because Stephen Harris sent admin an e-mail. He felt that this project would correlate nicely with our AISI project. I wholeheartedly agreed. I decided that I needed to be involved for my own accountability to the school and the staff.

## How Were the Students Selected?

We chose the students who might be at risk for delayed literacy development based on the following indicators:

- They were achieving below the 49th percentile in comprehension on the Gates-MacGinitie reading test.
- They were achieving below grade level expectations on the Alberta Diagnostic Reading Assessment.
- Student survey results indicated that they do not like to read or write.

*We wanted all students, not just those targeted in the project, to experience success and gain a love of reading, writing, listening, viewing, speaking and representing that would be embedded in practice not only in language arts but across the curriculum.*



- They showed inconsistent participation in home reading programs (indicator of poor parent support).
- They used only one or two reading strategies (according to teacher records).
- Their writing was below grade-level expectations (using language arts curriculum exemplars).
- They showed very few interests (this information was garnered from parent surveys and teacher observations).
- They displayed verbal skills and short attention spans (as per teacher observations and anecdotal records).
- They appeared to be ignorant of their weaknesses and failed to make the link between making errors and using those errors to learn, despite daily conferencing about this with teachers (this information garnered from teacher observation and anecdotal records).

### Karen Cox, Grade 2 (Ryan)

Ryan is a Grade 2 student who is not academically inclined. Hockey is his life, although his interests are beginning to broaden. His parents support and encourage his sports activities. His mother reports that she is concerned about his reading ability. He scored in the 27th percentile on the spring 2006 Gates-MacGinitie testing for reading comprehension. In September 2006 his score for instruction level according to the Alberta Diagnostic Kit was mid-Grade 1. His sight vocabulary on the Dolch list (second level) Part 1 was 37/44 (not mastered). In September he wrote one sentence in his journal, and it was not structurally sound. Despite this, Ryan thinks that he is a good reader and writer.

When I choose a book for Ryan, he does read. The books I choose are high interest, low vocabulary. When he chooses a book for himself, it is high interest but often too hard, or full of facts. As for home reading, Ryan is on the eighth story, while the majority of his classmates are on the tenth. With respect to reading skills, Ryan reads word by word and uses phonics. In writing, he often fails to use capital letters or punctuation, often spells phonetically, and writes complete simple sentences most of the time.

Ryan displays few interests other than hockey and hunting. He has weak verbal skills, a limited vocabulary and does not use descriptive words. He has a normal attention span and does not appear to be aware of any weaknesses. Somehow he does not make the link between making errors and improving, despite daily conferencing about this with the teacher. He is proud of his work as long as he writes neatly. Ryan is beginning to reread selections he struggles with independently and to ask questions.

### Bonnie Spahmann, Grade 2 (Debbie)

Debbie is a bubbly and enthusiastic eight-year-old Grade 2 girl. She lives with her mother and younger sister, and visits her biological father every other weekend. Her father has expressed concern, through her mother, about her poor reading skills. He has told Debbie's mother that he'd like Debbie to go to Sylvan Learning Centre this summer. I have not met or spoken to Debbie's father.

Debbie is happy and enjoys school. She has told me several times this year that she loves school and that it is her favourite place. She also loves music, dancing, aerobics, reading, writing stories and animals, especially dogs.

When I met Debbie in September 2006, she was not confident in her ability to read and had a poor self-image as a reader. Her comprehension was below grade level as was her spelling, and she used inventive spelling in her journal. She responded to praise and needed lots



of encouragement and opportunities to read. She arrived at school tired and seemed to have difficulty focusing on her school work.

In October, Debbie was still having difficulty focusing independently and needed to be kept on track. She was easily distracted and often wandered around the classroom socializing. She did not like to be told to do her work.

Debbie lacked a basic knowledge of phonics, her decoding skills were not developed and her oral reading was at a low- to mid-Grade 1 level.

Debbie has had little exposure to literature or reading at home. She did not know or recognize many basic nursery rhymes or children's stories, and her family did not participate in my home reading program, even though I encouraged them to do so. Debbie told me that she does not like to read because she can't do it well. She does like to write stories, and has lots of stories to recount, but only when I help her spell the words. I began a home reading program in November, and Debbie is the only student who has not returned one story yet. I have phoned her mother and written her several notes, but have not received a response. This parent did not attend the November parent-teacher conferences and did not respond to my message about rescheduling.

Debbie tries to sound out or even memorize words. She has difficulty understanding vocabulary in context, has a very short attention span and memory, and has a limited vocabulary. She deliberates before speaking.

Debbie does not appear to be aware of her weaknesses and fails to make the link between making errors and improving. She starts each day without considering what was learned the previous day or what is expected of her. She appears to be listening, but when I talk with her, she will often ask me what she is supposed to do or ask me to repeat something. Her mother tells me that her hearing is fine, but I think she should see a pediatrician to make sure that she is in good health.

Debbie had a Gates-MacGinitie score of 27th percentile. Her Grade 2 diagnostic reading score was mid-Grade 1. Her math skills were below grade level as well. Her Grade 2 report card identified oral reading, comprehension, word attack skills and spelling as problem areas. During the first semester we worked daily on vocabulary, spelling, phonics, comprehension and oral reading. Debbie's attitude improved when I gave her suggestions on how to approach reading. She has become very interested in books and loves to be read to. Her comprehension, however, remains an area of concern. She has demonstrated a keen effort to learn how to read and tries to use the strategies we have developed, but she needs lots of repetition and practice to retain reading vocabulary and to comprehend what she reads. She reverses letters, whole words and sometimes whole sentences.

Since September, she has developed more self-confidence and understands, through self-reflection and discussions with me, that she needs to focus and concentrate. She needs concise step-by-step instructions, and works best when her time is structured and supervised. She is easily distracted when she works in small groups.

Debbie has, however, started to self monitor and to take risks while reading. She has become more comfortable reading aloud or reading with a partner. She particularly enjoys reading with me.



### Lenore Tarcon, Grade 3 (Randy)

In September 2006 Randy was assigned to my Grade 3 classroom. Cumulative files were examined to identify the target students (between 25th and 49th percentile on the previous year's Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test). I chose Randy because he scored in the 38th percentile



rank on the Gates-MacGinitie. Randy was not particularly interested in reading and often pretended to be reading in small groups or during the DEAR program. His self-esteem was low, and he would often ask to leave the room or go to his cubby if he thought he would be asked a question.

Randy was very interested in sports, especially outdoor activities such as hockey and soccer. Randy spoke little about what he was doing in school when asked—sports seemed to be the only thing that he focused on. Indeed, he knew a lot about sports and could recite many player and team names.

Randy's work habits were very poor, and he put little effort into his work; he often failed to complete homework and classroom assignments. Reading Inventory showed his clear dislike for reading. This inventory was placed in his portfolio.

Randy was aware of his weaknesses and viewed himself as a very inadequate reader. During our intake interviews he stated that one of his goals was to be a better reader and writer in Grade 3. This would be a goal that teachers, parents and Randy himself could focus on together throughout the school year.

*Another strategy that has given Ryan confidence and increased his fluency and comprehension is to read, reread and then paraphrase what was read.*

### **Karen Cox, Grade 2 (Ryan)**

Ryan had three goals:

1. To enjoy figuring out all the words in his DEAR book for one week
2. To get 20/20 on his mad minute by May 9
3. To think about what he read for two weeks

With respect to his first goal, Ryan was more conscientious of what books he chose for DEAR. His second goal related to mathematics and made me more reflective of what work he could use to assess his success. To accomplish his third goal, I suggested that he keep a reading journal so that he could record what up until then he had only been verbalizing.

I employed the steps outlined in *The One Minute Teacher: How to Teach Others to Teach Themselves*, by Spencer Johnson and Constance Johnson. These steps are goal setting, praise and recovery. Following them helped Ryan take more responsibility for his learning. In doing so, he was able to note when his behaviour was not supporting his goal and to verbalize how he needed to change that behaviour.

Ryan is now writing three or four sentences at a time, though he often repeats what he has written using slightly different words.

Ryan participated in a Parents in Partnership tutoring program. He loved the hockey story he made with a peer and was very proud to share it with his classmates. I had to keep it at school so he could use it for his show and tell. What a confidence booster!

Ryan also struggles to assess peers' written work. If he is interested in the subject, he automatically says the writing is good. When prompted, he does suggest ideas for details that could have been added to a given story, but he definitely needs more practice assessing written work.

Another strategy that has given Ryan confidence and increased his fluency and comprehension is to read, reread and then paraphrase what was read. I believe that this strategy will eventually help him in his written work as well.

### **Ryan's May 2007 Results**

Alberta Diagnostic Inventory: Instructional level: End of Grade 2 (mid-Grade 1 in October test)

Dolch list: Mastery of second level: Parts 1, 2, 3 and 4 (previously failed to master part 1)

Flynt-Cooter Reading Inventory: Adequate silent reading comprehension and oral reading accuracy: Level 3.



Another positive development is that, although I concentrated on Ryan's reading comprehension, other students, some of whom had lower abilities than he, have benefited because they were able to participate in many of the activities that helped Ryan.

### Bonnie Spahmann, Grade 2 (Debbie)

In December, I gave the Alberta Diagnostic Reading Program comprehension test, and Debbie scored mid-Grade 1. She is keen on trying to work independently. She likes poetry but has difficulty identifying words that rhyme. She is starting to write short stories. Debbie has a Partnership Approach to Literacy (PAL) tutor once a week. She loves this; it has become a confidence booster and gives her something to look forward to.

In January, though, Debbie suffered a setback, probably due to the holidays and a lack of structure and repetition that we had before Christmas. It has taken a while for her to adjust to routine again. She seems completely unaware that she needs to settle in and continue her work in school. She needs to follow directions more consistently. She is having some problems with friends and classmates that are interfering with the learning process. Unfortunately, I see little evidence of support from home.

I implemented a combination of the following strategies:

- conversations with Debbie and with my colleagues;
- structure, repetition and reinforcement;
- checklists; and
- differentiated teaching strategies, which involve such things as role playing, peer teaching, individual instruction, small- and large-group instruction and portfolios.

In addition, I instituted a system of goal setting, whereby each student sets a daily goal. Debbie always had the willingness to learn and improve. She wants to be a good reader and has demonstrated a sincere effort to do her best. Debbie has had a parent tutor this year and has enjoyed the experience. She loves to read and play games with her tutor. She also loves to write stories in class and on Story Book Weaver. She chooses to read over other activities such as drawing, Lego and puzzles.

Instead of claiming ignorance, Debbie is starting to ask for assistance and to seek clarification if she is uncertain. She is starting to take time to think about information received before saying she doesn't understand it.

By February of 2007, Debbie started to self-correct and to ask for help spelling unfamiliar words. She is using her personal dictionary more and is demonstrating a keen understanding that she needs to take ownership of her own learning.

By April, Debbie was keeping focused for longer periods of time and getting her work done. She was very proud of herself and said how much she loved school. She is learning to associate new information with information previously learned and is making connections. She is starting to problem solve, and her oral reading, spelling and comprehension have improved.

Some of the key moments of change for me occurred when

- I felt I had some understanding of the program of studies and learner outcomes for Grade 2, as I had no previous experience at that grade level, and
- I collaborated with colleagues to discuss Debbie and the implications of this project.

### Lenore Tarcon, Grade 3 (Randy)

As the school year proceeded I became concerned about Randy's reading and writing skills. In October 2006 I administered the Alberta Diagnostic Reading test, and Randy was at the Instructional Level for Grade 3 Form A Level 1. Randy was then given the option of using reading highlighters, arrows and reading eyes to help keep him on track. These items seemed

to work well for him. During this time, although I was unaware of it, Randy was having problems at home that were affecting him. He was having a lot of difficulty focusing and concentrating on his work. Throughout the parent–teacher–student interview his mother told me about the domestic situation, and I told her that we would continue to monitor his progress. We agreed to keep each other informed about happenings.

In December and January Randy started to show a more positive attitude toward reading and writing. He had started to participate in the home reading program. Also, his reading attitude survey had shown an improvement—he was starting to show a liking for reading. Also, he approached me and asked me if he could take home some of our classroom library books over the holidays. This took me by surprise. After he returned the books, I told him how proud I was of him.

His mother informed me that she too was proud of Randy’s accomplishments and that she was pleased to see the positive attitude at home toward reading. It wasn’t a struggle at bedtime to get him to read. Randy became more confident and willing to share ideas with the class when asked. His reading levels were continually monitored through diagnostic reading and running records.

In April, the Flynt-Cooter Reading Inventory was completed with a narrative passage. Randy read very fluently and scored Form A Level 4 at the instructional level. Randy appeared to use the reading bookmark to remind him of strategies to use. He stopped and reread passages that did not make sense. Miscue analysis was used. We discussed the errors together. He had a tendency to substitute or omit words when he read orally. Randy appears to do very well in a one-on-one situation. This helps keep him focused. Randy was aware of his growth and was able to self-reflect in his portfolio about his growth.



**A variety of commercially produced diagnostic assessments are being used by teachers in this project. To what degree are these resources helpful to you?**

By May, Randy appeared to be in a slump; he was putting no effort into his work and wasn’t very enthusiastic about his learning. He did not perform as well as he had previously on Part A of the provincial achievement test for language arts. His mother informed me that his father had not been around for the last little while, which might account for the shift in learning attitude. We agreed to keep an eye on him.

Randy was absent for the May 22 Canadian Achievement Test (CAT) Part A and B. When I called his mother, she said that she was unaware of the test but promised that Randy would be there the next day. Randy was at school the next day, and I administered the test. Part of it was done in the hallway and the other part outside the library. It was very interesting to watch Randy go through the test. He was checking and rereading the text before answering the questions. I was impressed. I couldn’t wait to see how he had done. And I was pleased to see that Randy had made considerable growth by scoring in the 74th percentile rank.

I used a number of informal and formal assessment tools to track Randy’s growth:

- Observations—anecdotal notes
- Checklists
- Home reading program
- Parent support/communication book (agenda)
- Alberta Diagnostic Reading Inventory



- Flynt and Cooter Reading Inventory: Narrative and Expository
- Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills
- Jerry Johns graded word list
- Reading surveys (inventory)
- Parent reading survey
- Student portfolios
- CAT
- PAT

When I applied new teaching strategies and methods with all of my students to better understand their learning styles.

May Schnolle Spelling : 2.2

# RETEXT



## Summary and Conclusions

To ensure the success of this project, we posed the following three questions to ourselves: What have we done to support student learning? What have we learned to support student learning? What are we going to do about what we have learned to support student learning?

The answers to these questions underscored our thinking about student learning, and we now use these reflective questions when we meet as AISI teams and during PD sessions.

We realized that our answers to these questions had to be based on the real world as it plays out in our classrooms and had to be informed by what our students tell us and show us. We realized that we had to refine our understanding of the meaning of *at risk*, identify one student to concentrate on and use the reading comprehension strategies with that one student. We realized that we had succeeded when one of the target students chose academic goals; in other words, she was saying that she wanted to learn, and no teacher can ask more than that of a student.

*When given the right chance, students are capable of articulating their learning.*

## What We Have Learned

When we dissected the language arts curriculum and supporting documents and started to investigate our new language arts materials, we increased our success. Family conferences gave parents the chance to be meaningfully involved in their child's education. We learned the value of celebrating students through such things as posting student work in the hallways, focusing on goal setting and working hard to create a positive environment for all.

We also learned that we need measurable goals, that anecdotal records are valid and that we need a better reading survey.



## Leadership in Assessment

Perhaps one of the most important lessons was that we need clear information about our students and that, when given the right chance, students are capable of articulating their learning.

In order to continue the momentum of this project, we need to

- examine curriculum,
- examine appropriate and current teaching of literacy practice,
- implement more formative assessment,
- try to increase student involvement in assessment, and
- share our successes.



**The above goals are ambitious efforts to maintain the momentum of the project. What challenges do you see in meeting these goals in your school?**

Students are much more aware of their learning and what they can do to improve it. As teachers, we have built a common vocabulary of assessment that we use with all of our students and across all subject areas. We have built portfolios with children and have focused more on student learning and student-centred instruction. We started incorporating student self-assessment into our practice across all subject areas. We examined the program of studies and aligned assessment with it. We examined the curriculum for the grades both above and below our grade levels, and identified important outcomes. We realized that we were overemphasizing some outcomes at the expense of some others. We are working on aligning our assessment with the learning outcomes in the Alberta program of studies, and utilizing exemplars and rubrics to assist us with this work. We investigated and utilized resources that are aligned with the program of studies, and we added differentiated instruction techniques into our repertoire of teaching strategies.

Building trusting relationships with the community as a whole is another crucial component of our work. Student-led conferences allowed all of our children to celebrate their learning accomplishments with their parents and to set learning goals with them in a low-risk, supportive environment. Parents became more comfortable coming to the school, as demonstrated by a 95 per cent attendance rate at these interviews, where we also presented a multimedia presentation about the six strands of the language arts program. Communication and collaboration among staff are improving, as evidenced by monthly staff meetings, where teachers share ideas, challenges and resources and celebrate accomplishments. Knowing the children, their backgrounds, their interests, their learning styles and their personalities is crucial in our work. It is important that we take the time to make connections, form bonds, and communicate our caring for students to be comfortable and encouraged to take the risks they need to take in order to learn. Informal feedback from the community at large is that Horace Allen School is a positive place for students and families to learn.



**Building**

**Capacity**

*Building Capacity for Teacher Leadership  
in Assessment in Alberta Schools*

**for Teacher**

**Leadership in**

**Assessment**

**in Alberta**

**Schools**



# Looking Forward

The premise of this project was the realization that while teacher leadership in assessment is an emerging focus in the literature, there are few substantive documented examples of this work in the context of Canadian schools.

As teachers in the four school sites explored the attributes of literacy development, they came to realize, through the continual re-examination of and deliberation about taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves and their practice, that their sense of efficacy and making a difference for students was enriched.

The four case studies provide compelling examples that resonate with a growing body of research on teacher leadership that speaks to the emergent complexities of collaborative relationships in practical classroom applications (Ritchie 2007) and quiet leadership—helping people think better without telling them what to do (Rock 2006). The lived experiences of the teachers who laboured through questions such as, Can writing be assessed by grade level? and What does literacy mean in a world of multiliteracies? cannot be appropriately honoured in a summary of the four school site reports contained in the preceding pages. Rather, what follows are cautionary notes that guide further encounters with schools and jurisdictions that wish to participate in this kind of inquiry within the four texts of action research in the interest of enhancing teacher leadership in assessment.

In each of the four sites, the emerging forms of teacher leadership resonate with the international work of Naylor, Alexandrou, Garsed and O'Brien (2008), which examined the formal and informal ways that teachers are drawn into leadership positions and advocacy roles in their schools and teacher organizations. Their initial observations, clustered around five themes, are reflected in many of the experiences reported by teachers in the schools:

- Leadership roles evolved naturally and were not planned.
- Leadership occurred and evolved when the teachers felt passionately about tasks or approaches that they felt must be completed or addressed.
- Leadership was not necessarily recognized as it was assumed rather than proclaimed.
- Credibility among peers was crucial to taking leadership roles.

Some of the teachers had very positive role models who both modelled leadership and supported and encouraged teachers to assume particular forms of leadership.

The forms of leadership that emerged during the course of this study trace many of these five themes. The deliberative inquiry, imbued within the collaborative spaces teachers created, cannot be reduced to simplistic formulas or best practices. Rather, we share the conclusion with Madeline Grumet (2005, 53) that literacy functions as a way of being in the world and

The world is not a given that we think about. What we can think about it is an event that subsumes us and the world. We need to let life happen, both inside and outside our classrooms.

As the project unfolded, culminating in the year-end writing retreat in Waterton Lakes in the early summer of 2007, leadership in assessment came to be framed by three foundational principles:

1. Commitment to individual student success lies at the core of our work in early literacy development.
2. Building the leadership capacity of teachers as reflective practitioners focused on improving assessment practices that reflect the diversity and complexity of classrooms results in higher levels of student performance.

*The deliberative inquiry, imbued within the collaborative spaces teachers created, cannot be reduced to simplistic formulas or best practices.*



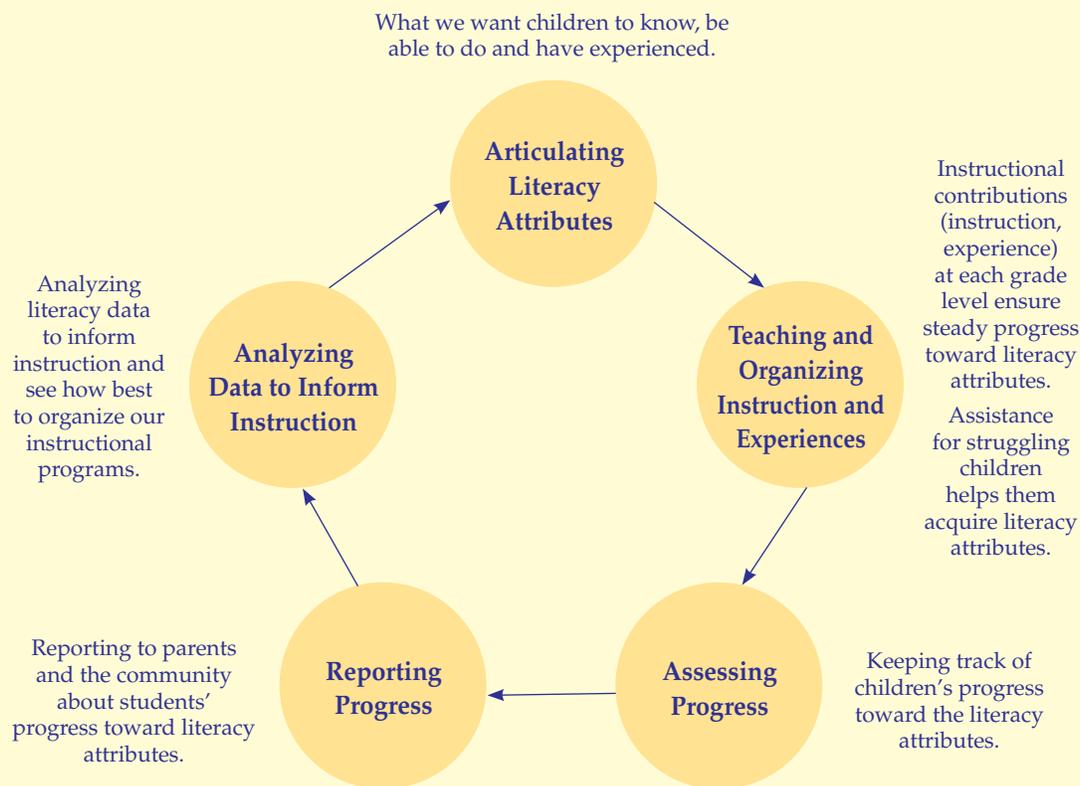
3. A comprehensive, sustainable and scalable program of classroom assessment can support and improve the quality and authenticity of teacher-managed assessment and evaluation.

## *Closing the Literacy Cycle— A Student-Centred Approach*

While the four texts of action research provided a powerful platform for teacher reflection on instructional practice, the case study focus on improving student learning remained the driver behind our work. As teachers focused on individual students the need to mediate the gap between the broad conceptual discussions regarding such concerns as the meaning of literacy and age-appropriate developmental expectations became increasingly apparent.

Walmsley (2008) has outlined a powerful design model for looking at literacy programs at a school and system level. This rather linear and somewhat reductionist model presents a conceptual map for K–12 literacy reform helping to clarify or focus on improving student learning.

### A System-Centred Framework for Closing the Literacy Circle



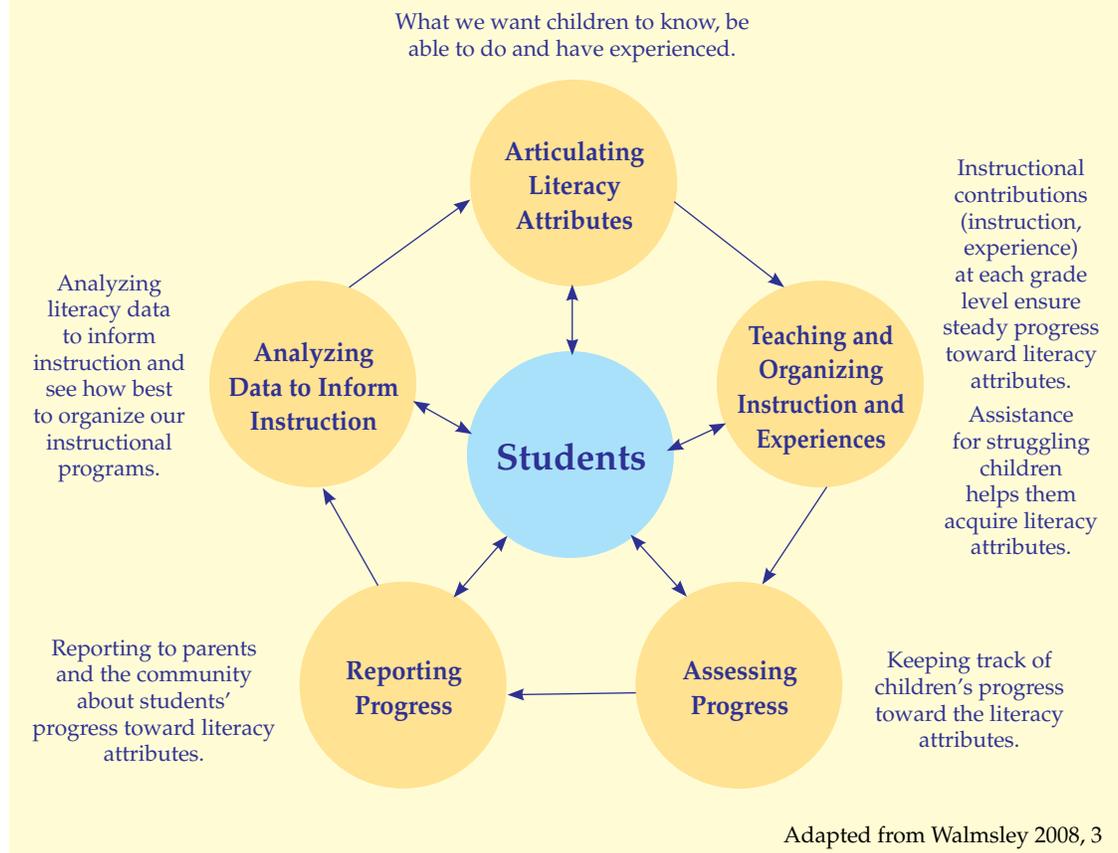
Adapted from Walmsley 2008, 3

Yet as the teachers and external critical friends (representatives of the ATA, the AAC and Alberta Education) moved through the four texts of action research during the study, the growth of teacher efficacy as leaders continued to deflect from a straight or predictable path through the ongoing focus and reflection on one student. Indeed, the fulcrum for our role



as critical friends in the project became the ongoing (and at times frustrating for our site team members) insistence on discussing responses to three questions in terms of individual students: What have you done? What have you learned? and What will you do about it? (adapted from David Townsend and Pamela Adams, 2004).

### A Student-Centred Framework for Closing the Literacy Circle



The resulting adaptation of Walmsley's model reveals a significant refocusing on the impact of anchoring teacher reflection on individual students. This modified model situates the student at the centre of the learning cycle and invites a continual recursive move through the interactions with colleagues, outside critical friends and efforts to work with the student.

### *Five Provocations for a Student-Centred Framework for Closing the Literacy Cycle*

Leadership in assessment, informed by the textual interruptions of the continual return to the specificity of the individual student, is a way to develop an approach to leadership in assessment that recognizes the original difficulty of teaching, or what Smits (2003) draws from Joseph Dunne's (1993) evocative phrase, to return teaching "back to the rough ground" where smooth trekking is not at all guaranteed.

Perhaps no greater risk exists for school improvement efforts than the simplistic appropriation of techniques such as collaboration, learning communities and action research applied to



interpreting the results of extensively developed examinations or off-the-shelf tests. Coffield (2007) describes the results of these “insidious processes” in England as it moved “running ever faster down the wrong road” in its school reform efforts.

Smits (2003) compels us to consider the continual return to a focus on the individual student as a “provocation.” In his view, “to be *provoked* is, in literal terms, to be called to something, to be summoned by something.” In this respect, individual students act as a buffer or an antidote to “passing judgement too quickly”—what is at the core of how a provocation functions (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2324–25).

Throughout the four site reports we see teachers shifting away from technical and epistemological concerns (eg, How are rubrics used? What do test scores mean? What theory is the best one here?) to ontological ones (eg, What does it mean to employ this particular practice with this specific student? What does literacy mean in this context?).

The debate over whether or not teacher professional inquiry and action research is *real* research is one that refuses to go away for reasons that have to do with power and economic interest (Maxwell 2004; Lincoln and Cannella 2004). In their view, against the growing neo-liberal tide that focuses on “best practices” and narrowly defined limits of “what works,” teacher research is increasingly marginalized by so-called scientific critiques that have nothing to do with science (Popkewitz 2004, 63). Typically the criticisms levelled against teacher research focus on the lack of scalability (ie, Can this be replicated?) or validity (ie, Did you consider other factors that may have influenced the outcome?)

In what follows, we offer five closing provocations that will help to sustain the conversations as teacher leadership development work continues in other schools and jurisdictions. These provocations are offered as ways to articulate possibilities for further work while avoiding the temptation to lapse into simplistic next steps or best practices. Instead these are offered as necessary difficulties to be walked through the “rough ground” of both the encounters of teacher identity and the original difficulty of teaching practice.

## **1. Articulating and mobilizing meaningful indicators and measures of early literacy attributes into instructional expectations is a point of departure—not the ultimate goal.**

For teachers, determining literacy attributes is a process of ongoing cultural meaning-making, contestation (a dispute where there is strong disagreement) and courageous conversation. Teacher efficacy in leadership is a recursive process where inserting externally predetermined literacy attributes into instructional activities and experiences slowly evolves into developing the confidence to establish robust “non-negotiables” (Walmsley 2008, 2).

Teaching as an intellectual and theoretical pursuit can no longer be overlooked; it is the cornerstone of advancing professional practice (Darling-Hammond and Sykes 1999). Certainly the pressure to meet some predetermined and at times narrowly defined externally developed indicators of student learning (ie, norm-referenced standardized tests) in Alberta schools has not been conducive at times to fostering the kind of learning cultures where ingenuity and risk-taking are valued in professional learning communities.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) remind us that professional inquiry thrives only if supported by a comprehensive set of supports such as depth and conservation strategies. Depth strategies include considering the need for deep learning in schools by recognizing that inventiveness and ingenuity are fostered through attention to conservation through “slow learning” focused on locally determined priorities and needs. In this approach, real learning is connected to the emotional engagement as well as the intellectual growth of teachers.

Assessments should become cultural artifacts in a school that are continually the focus of observation, conversation and analysis.



### 2. The leadership skills developed by teachers must be contextualized by the specific realities (ie, pretexts, contexts and subtexts) of their school communities.

Leadership in assessment must be immunized against sloganeering and becoming appropriated by “leadership adjectives” that ebb and flow in the literature (Leithwood et al, 2004a; 2004b) such as *distributed leadership*, *instructional leadership*, and *transformational leadership*. The literature on organizational improvement underscores time and again that “it is about learning as a community” (Stoll, Fink and Earl 2003, 132). Collaborative practitioner research applied in a learning community is more than a clever turn of phrase: in order for schools to learn, community must come first. We must remind ourselves that we must think of “learning” and “community” as multiple possibilities if we are to succeed in our goal: “learning of community; learning *from* community; learning *with* community; learning *for* community; and learning *as* community” (p 134).

If learning of, from, with and for community is the fulcrum for school development, in the context of a student-centred framework for closing the literacy cycle, teacher research must be anchored by the need to respond to the immediately given realities of students’ learning needs. This is accomplished while attempting to influence and shape the contexts of learning and teaching. Reflection and critique about the conditions that create the learning environment for students (ie, societal contexts such as childhood poverty) are a moral necessity.

The four texts of action research remind us of the duality of teachers’ work: while teachers’ questions about particular students’ lives flow to localized problem solving in a particular setting, teacher-leaders invariably and quickly realize that these local problems are inextricably connected to larger societal challenges and societal forces (Herr and Anderson 2005, 67). From early literacy and numeracy development to improving high school completion rates, teacher research is inevitably pulled, as research is in all professions, between traditional patterns of practice and the need to innovate and push frontiers of teacher identity (Luce-Kapler 1997, 2005).

### 3. While support for teacher leadership development with the assistance of outside critical friends is essential, this work is challenging.

As the four school site projects unfolded, we found our role as the critical friends moved across three impulses: evaluation, advocacy and caring, as described by Mello (2005). Upon each site visit our persistence in returning to the questions, What have you done? What have you learned? and What will you do about it? (adapted from Davis Townsend and Pamela Adams, University of Lethbridge, 2006) was seen as both a source of ongoing support and (necessary) provocation, challenge, and difficulty at times.

In our site visits and in preparing this final report, “closing the literacy gap” means living through the healthy tensions of evaluating, advocating and caring for the site team members and the students involved.

Assessments should become cultural artefacts in a school that are continually the focus of observation, conversation and analysis.



The three roles of the external team

	Evaluation	Advocacy	Caring
Key concerns	Judging Assessing Achieving targets	Project maintenance Resource acquisition Well-being of the project	Support to team members Emotional stability and growth Well-being of individuals
Major activities	Reporting Triangulating data	Troubleshooting Technical support	Listening Reassurance
Typical questioning strategies	Probing Validating	Ongoing checking-in Needs assessment	Informal networking Clarifying

Adapted from Mello 2005

As the projects progressed and teachers conveyed their journeys through the four texts of action research, we realized that, despite our somewhat naive efforts, we could not easily shed one role and then adopt another. At all times, we were both insiders and outsiders. The external members shared a concern about all three roles described by Mello (2005). However, each of us had particular core commitments that were non-negotiable or “deal-breakers,” such as the need to ensure that focus of our conversations during team meetings remained on particular students rather than wavering into stories about entire classes or groups of “those kinds of students.”

**4. Support for the dissemination of collaborative inquiry projects in literacy development must become a priority in order to build capacity in student assessment. Exemplary assessment practices are one of the best kept secrets in Alberta’s K–12 education system.**

Publication and dissemination of publications is both a professional and an ethical imperative that action research calls us to. For several years John Willinsky has argued forcefully for teachers to recognize that the production and dissemination of knowledge about what they do is central to their professional responsibilities within an open and democratic society. His work on the Public Knowledge Project (<http://www.lled.educ.ubc.ca/faculty/willinsky.htm>) exemplifies the kind of commitment that Alberta teachers must embrace. Being able to demonstrate the difference that one makes in a student’s learning and life might seem to be a taken-for-granted assumption—yet, as Willinsky asks, how do we know that our school communities effectively communicate this commitment and capacity to the community?

In the context of Alberta’s burgeoning population and the growing classroom complexity and diversity, teacher research will become vitally important both as an intellectual pursuit and as a moral imperative.

Systematic support for teacher research will help us respond to these challenges and opportunities. Andy Hargreaves (2003) reminds us that educators live in a paradoxical relationship in between the promised land of the *knowledge economy* and the threat of its lack of “inclusiveness, security and public life,” and the tendency of policy makers to default to “standardized



*Leadership in assessment means addressing the needs of each student one at a time.*

solutions” and *best practices* that ignore school contexts (p 10). *Teaching in the Knowledge Society* points to the key role of depth strategies (ie, focusing on leadership succession, building engagement and commitment to core values and deep learning across the system) that builds a localized body of knowledge that can be shared and disseminated beyond the school. While this new localized knowledge is worth disseminating and writing about, its real potency rests in its mobilization within particular school contexts.

### **5. Patience is more powerful than brilliance.**

A surgeon friend recently reminded us that she learned early on in her practice that “we cannot skill our way out of limitation.” She went on to describe her frustration with initial “ham-handed attempts” to tie off veins and arteries—impossibly difficult until one decides to “just like a dog, pick up this bone and not let it go.” The social philosopher Robert Borgmann (1992) would describe this kind of professional commitment to improving one’s practice as “patient vigour in a focal practice.” For Borgmann, the practice of professional work in uncertain times calls for a combination of deep emotional engagement in the seemingly invisible things that a skilled professional does well and a commitment to making a positive difference in the specificity of one individual’s life. Of course, all of this is lost in the brilliant glare of comparing jurisdictional test scores and comparing Alberta students with students from other countries. Leadership in assessment means addressing the needs of each student one at a time.

## *Leadership for Learning in Assessment*

Student learning and success are at the heart of leadership in assessment and “if we are to learn from our mistakes, then we must begin our journey with an acknowledgement that we have an educational Enron waiting to happen if we fail to recognize that the demands of leadership are more complex than intimidating students and teachers into short-term test score gains” (Reeves 2006, 3). Student results can be improved through applying a comprehensive framework such as the adapted Student-Centred Framework for Closing the Literacy Circle (Walmsley 2008) and the Leadership for Learning Framework (Reeves 2006).



## Leadership for Learning Framework

Achievement of Results	<p><b>Lucky</b></p> <p>High results, low understanding of antecedents</p> <p>Replication of success unlikely [high results, but leaders and teachers are unable to link professional practice to results because they do not know how their practices influence achievement]</p>	<p><b>Leading</b></p> <p>High results, high understanding of antecedents</p> <p>Replication of success likely [high results and leaders and teachers are able to link professional practice to results because they know how their practices have influenced achievement]</p>
	<p><b>Losing</b></p> <p>Low results, low understanding of antecedents</p> <p>Replication of failure likely [low results and leaders and teachers are clueless about what practices can influence achievement]</p>	<p><b>Learning</b></p> <p>Low results, high understanding of antecedents</p> <p>Replication of success likely [low results, but leaders and teachers are able to link professional practice to results because they know how their practices can influence achievement]</p>
<p><b>Antecedents of Excellence*</b></p>		

\* “Those observable qualities in leadership, curriculum, parental engagement, and other indicators that assist in understanding how results are achieved” (xix)

The Leadership for Learning Framework (p 133), from *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*, by Douglas B Reeves, Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2006. Adapted and reprinted by permission. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a worldwide community of educators advocating sound policies and sharing best practices to achieve the success of each learner. To learn more, visit ASCD at [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org).

It is at the team level that teachers have the greatest opportunity for engagement, dialogue, and decision-making. When teachers have collaboratively studied the question of “What must our students learn,” when they created common formative assessments as a team to monitor student learning on a timely basis, and when they have promised each other to teach essential content and prepare students for assessments, they have exponentially increased the likelihood that the agreed-upon curriculum will actually be taught.

Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2007, 58)

While we realize that teacher leadership in assessment continues to be an emerging focus in the literature, with few substantive documented examples of this work in the context of Canadian schools, we trust that this project will inspire a multijurisdictional research project, and inform student assessment practices and policy development in Alberta and in other provinces and territories in Canada.

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