

**THE EFFECTS OF STRATEGIC AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP
ON IMPLEMENTING BALANCED LITERACY AND ITS IMPACT ON
READING SCORES AMONG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS**

JILL WILKINSON

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Jill Wilkinson

Approved:

Supervisor: Amy von Heyking, Ph.D.

Date

Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in Education:
Kerry Bernes, Ph.D.

Date

Abstract

School leadership is a complex multi faceted responsibility that is most strongly associated with improving teaching and learning when it is strategically shared or distributed among participants. Leaders must develop common goals that unite teachers to improve student learning. Defining this moral purpose requires the leader to analyze the culture of the school and identify the needs of the students using data. Building a culture of success requires structures that support a purposeful approach to teaching and learning. Through professional learning communities, leaders facilitate the process to affect change and improve learning by building teacher leadership in pedagogy. Alberta Education has set forth a vision for leadership competencies that acknowledge the significant responsibilities for ensuring quality student learning and for promoting an effective learning culture in the school community. Bookland School Division embraced Alberta Education's vision through strategic and transformational leadership practices when embracing an assessment-based reading program, balanced literacy, to improve reading comprehension. Changes to instructional practice do not happen easily. By studying the effectiveness of the program and involving teachers in the gathering of data, teachers were provided with evidence that increased student comprehension occurs with balanced literacy. Sustainable change cannot be mandated. Through strategic conversations, observations, and supports, changes to instructional practice begin. Through professional and collegial learning, changes to instructional practice flourish. Through analysis and reflection of the effectiveness of the program, change is sustained.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction	1
Role of Leadership in School Culture.....	3
Moral Purpose	4
Bookland School Develops Balanced Literacy as Moral Purpose.....	4
Analysis of Results at Bookland School	6
Quantitative Measures of Effectiveness.....	6
Qualitative Measures of Effectiveness.....	7
Shared Vision and Strategic Leadership	8
Developing a Shared Vision	10
Structural and Cultural Supports.....	11
Transformational Leadership through Professional Learning Communities.....	13
Transformational Leadership	16
PLC's at Bookland School Division	17
Facilitation	18
Challenges.....	20

Literacy and Society	20
Research on Student Learning, Assessment and Teaching in Balanced Literacy	22
Student Learning.....	23
Assessment.....	24
Strategic Reading Instruction.....	26
A Balanced Approach	27
Alberta A.I.S.I. Study	28
Reflections	29
Next Steps	31
Powerful Learnings.....	32
Conclusion	33
References.....	37
Appendix.....	44
A: Comparison of Reading Results.....	44

Introduction

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (A.I.S.I.) has enabled school divisions to address student learning needs through innovative projects that use targeted funds allocated to the professional learning of its teachers. Many projects have been tremendously successful while others have had minimal gains. Why the discrepancy? Research informs educational communities that leadership makes a difference in schools: it impacts the direction a school heads; it has a major effect on developing a learning culture; and it creates the processes and structures that enable participants to focus on teaching and learning (Reeves, 2002).

Bookland School Division's A.I.S.I. journey began in Assessment for Learning. The move to a broad student assessment program throughout the division did not occur by chance. The understanding, support, and encouragement of Assessment for Learning practices was made possible by investing resources into educating the division's leadership team and hiring an A.I.S.I. coordinator to keep the momentum going. General assessment practices included rewriting the curriculum to express student friendly language, providing checks for understanding, involving the students in self and peer assessments, providing second chances, and balancing and aligning assessments to the curriculum. In addition, individual schools were focusing their time and energy into specific assessment areas to meet the needs of their students.

Midway through the project, many changes occurred to the senior administration team at central office. The former A.I.S.I. coordinator became the superintendent, and as a result, coordination of the project became my responsibility as the new A.I.S.I.

coordinator. Although general assessment practices were embraced by all schools, I was unfamiliar with the unique assessment projects that were occurring at each of the schools. Visiting individual schools helped me to survey the landscape of projects so that I could put supports in place to further the learning.

Although there were many assessment projects throughout the division, one project warranted further attention and exploration. The assessment-based literacy project originated from a school that wanted to improve the comprehension strategies of students. Having researched and observed assessment-based reading programs in October 2006, the school staff concluded that balanced literacy would best meet the needs of their students. Upon visiting the school it became evident that the school was experiencing success with balanced literacy. Other schools needed to hear about this program, however, commitment and motivation could not be mandated.

This paper will share the leadership journey of how an assessment-based literacy program was embraced throughout a division. It will begin with an understanding of leadership and examine the importance of establishing a moral purpose within a school and how data is used to measure its effectiveness. The paper will then describe how strategic leadership developed a shared vision throughout the school division and ensured its success with structural and cultural supports. It will further explain the need for transformational leadership to develop people through the establishment of division-wide professional learning communities. Sharing the need to improve literacy levels in Alberta and the research into the effectiveness of the balanced literacy approach to the teaching of literacy will impress upon the reader to consider how this approach differentiates instruction to meet the diverse literacy needs of students. Division-wide data will be

provided to support the claim that balanced literacy positively impacts reading scores among elementary students. Final reflections upon this leadership journey will reveal that leadership and learning are requisites to one another.

Role of Leadership in School Culture

As the new A.I.S.I. coordinator, understanding my role as a leader within the division was essential. Leadership is the ability to empower others to accomplish goals. Davies (2009) described leadership as “direction-setting and inspiring others to make the journey to a new and improved state for the school” (p. 2). It is through this empowerment that vision can become reality. The goal of any great leader should be to inspire those around them to reach their greatest potential. To inspire others, leaders need to build culture through vision, capacity through collaboration, and cohesion through decision-making. Sergiovanni (1999) stated that “Authentic leaders anchor their practice in ideas, values, and commitments” (p. 17).

According to Glanz (2006), culture is the glue that binds the components of the school community. The author defined culture as “the values, beliefs, and attitudes that exist among teachers, students, parents, staff, and community (p. 2). Fullan (2007) stated that, “school leaders with moral purpose seek to make a difference in the lives of students” (p. 17). Glanz (2006) further proposed that moral purpose may “build and sustain a community that values learning for students, educators, and community members alike. In other words, cultural leaders shape beliefs and values of members of the community in order to emphasize learning above all else” (p. 85). Educators have been entrusted to build a school culture that supports high expectations for students. Barth (2002) noted that creating a culture of high expectations “dramatically affects the

capacity of a school to improve – and to promote learning” (p. 8). The principal is responsible for building this effective culture by empowering others to accomplish goals. It is through this empowerment that vision can become reality.

Moral Purpose

Although principals are central to improving the culture, leaders cannot mandate commitment and motivation. In order to focus on what is needed to improve student learning, principals and teachers must unite “in pursuit of higher-level goals common to both” (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 24). Davies (2006) asserted that “if strategy is to move beyond the strategic document that lies on the shelf in the principal’s office and is instead a framework that guides current and future action, then how the strategic policy develops is of critical importance” (p. 5). Leaders with a strong moral purpose centred on learning realize that the learning must “be embedded in a culture that values teachers, invests in their learning, and encourages their professionalism” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p. 50). Teachers have a desire for purpose, meaning, and significance in what they do. When the moral purpose of schools place learning at the centre, teacher knowledge and practice improves.

Bookland School Develops Balanced Literacy as Moral Purpose

Upon visiting Bookland School in March of 2008 to become familiar with its assessment project, it became clear that a comprehensive balanced literacy program was the assessment focus for the school community. Prior to my visit, the teachers at the school had made a presentation to the board in December of 2007 highlighting key practices. Teachers stated that reading comprehension was improving and students loved the resources. Teachers were excited to share their knowledge of the program in order to

provide me with key understandings. I learned that it is a strategy-based approach to meet the diverse literacy needs of all students. The components of the program connect how students are learning and accessing information in the classroom to how they function in the world outside of the classroom. A variety of fiction, non-fiction and info-fiction texts engages and motivates students. Pamphlets, brochures, posters, ads and games reflect real-world reading. Balanced literacy acknowledges the reality that being literate is more than learning to read (Pressley, 2002).

Balanced literacy targets its instruction to all levels of literacy resulting in continuous improvement. The importance of ensuring the highest levels of literacy in our students is clear. The earlier these skills are introduced, the longer they will have the time to reap the rewards of improved literacy (Spiegel, Vickers & Viviano, 1999).

Providing support in reading, writing, oral language, word study and media literacy is the focus for the early grades from kindergarten to grade three. This focus continues for students in the older grades but also uses a variety of comprehension strategies and incorporates purposeful writing in a variety of forms. In addition they learn questioning techniques that encourage them to think critically and delve more deeply into topics (Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins, & Socias 2009). The combination of fiction, non-fiction, info-fiction, media literacy with real-life reading results in a balanced approach to developing literacy skills.

Balanced literacy as a moral purpose at Bookland School was not an item ticked off on a checklist of to-do's. It was a commitment towards improvement. Great things were happening at the school; how was it benefiting the students? I needed evidence of its effectiveness before attempting to share this program with other schools.

Analysis of Results at Bookland School

Although Bookland school teachers felt that the program was effective, quantitative and qualitative measures would provide evidence. According to Bernhardt (2000), educators rely too much on feelings and instincts:

All too often, schools in this country conduct their education program with little formal analysis of how well those programs work. Teachers and administrators rely instead on “gut feelings” about what’s working and what isn’t. They try to be optimistic, hoping that they are doing the right things, but they never get a clear sense of whether their program is working particularly well. (p. 33)

Quantitative data would provide objective evidence of success while qualitative data would provide a detailed description of success.

Quantitative Measures of Effectiveness

An analysis of school data in June 2008 revealed quantitative measures that students were learning: the grade three class who had been taught using Balanced Literacy for two years showed PAT reading scores in June of 2008 at 100% acceptable level and 83% level of excellence. The CAT results showed the growth of reading from September 2007 to September of 2008 in the grade two class on average to be 1 year 4 months. For those students starting out below grade level, the average growth measured 1 year 2 months. For those students starting above grade level, the average growth measured a minimum of 1 year 6 months. Since the CAT test could only measure growth up to grade 4.9, there were students who even exceeded that level so the growth was actually higher than that calculated. Quantitative data provided evidence of success,

however, what components were working? Qualitative data was needed to understand the effectiveness of the program.

Qualitative Measures of Effectiveness

To gauge the effectiveness of the program, teachers were asked to provide specific examples as to how balanced literacy was helping student learning. The following statements detail their responses:

- “You know exactly where the students are in their reading as you read with each student at least once a week in Guided Reading.”
- “I can gauge their growth much more easily. The gains they make are much more evident within these small groups. Also, the improvement the children have made is amazing especially when you consider where they started.”
- “As a result of working together in Centre groups, students have become more independent and cooperative as they don't always have someone there to lean on.”
- “I have found children read better, with more confidence, and can talk about reading strategies they use. All children progress.”

To gauge the effectiveness of the program, students were asked to provide specific examples as to how balanced literacy helped them learn. The following statements detail their responses:

- “I like Guided Reading the best because our group and I get to read lots of different books and learn new words. I also like it because our teacher is always there to help and teach us.”

- “I like Guided Reading because you get to read books that are really interesting.”
- “I think Guided Reading is the best because it is fun to read.”

The students also shared what they liked at the literacy centres:

- “The Listening Centre is my favourite because you get to read along and listen to all kinds of books.”
- “The literacy centres are so fun and you get to try something new.”
- “Reader’s Theatre is the best because it’s like you’re in a play. Everyone gets parts and lines. No one’s left out”.
- I like Reader’s Theatre because you get to act out the people’s voices. I like poetry too because you get to learn poems.”

To sum up the quantitative and qualitative measures, the program appeared to be effective; the teachers knew exactly where their students were and could help them. But most important of all, the kids were learning and they loved it!

Shared Vision and Strategic Leadership

How was I to introduce this successful and effective practice to the other elementary schools in our district? Alberta Education (2011) has determined visionary leadership as one of seven key professional practice competencies principals must display throughout their careers. It is expected that a leader “facilitates change and promotes innovation consistent with current and future school community needs” (p. 5). In education, we have been entrusted to build school cultures that support high expectations for students. Bringing school communities together to create and sustain a culture that has at its core the belief that all students can learn and be successful is key to exceptional

leadership. Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) asserted that it is critical to develop a shared vision:

People are motivated by goals which they find personally compelling as well as challenging but achievable. Having such goals helps people find meaning in their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context. (pp. 46-47)

Before building a shared vision, a leader needs to reflect upon the current culture to understand the environment.

Through strategic leadership, past successes are celebrated and used to help build a moral purpose for the future. The strategic leader involves the school community in an active capacity, as Davies (2006) described

With strategic conversations we have constructed a common vocabulary that helps to build a common vision. It is through that quite intensive personal contact with the key stakeholders to create an understanding that we could make things happen in the school division. (p. 7)

These strategic conversations enable the school community to contribute, clarify and commit to the shared vision. Alberta Education (2011) states that when leaders “meaningfully engage the school community in identifying and addressing areas for school improvement” (p. 5) through the analysis of data, they are further demonstrating the professional practice competency of visionary leadership by creating and sustaining shared values, vision, mission and goals.

Developing a Shared Vision

Reflecting upon the culture of Bookland School enabled me to understand why balanced literacy became the motivating force that put student learning at its centre. To celebrate and share successes in balanced literacy with the rest of the teachers in the Bookland School Division, I asked the teachers to share their knowledge in an introductory presentation to create an air of authenticity and excitement. The grade one, two and three teachers agreed to present an overview of the program and how it impacted their students in April, 2009. To advertise this opportunity, I visited each of the schools to personally invite the grade one, two and three teachers to the upcoming presentation. The presentation to grade one and two teachers was a success with 78% of teachers in attendance. Fifty percent of grade three teachers chose to attend. Those who came to hear about the program told others “you should have been there!”

To further the understanding of the school division’s elementary teachers, they needed to see balanced literacy in action. Teachers were invited to observe their colleagues’ classrooms in May 2009. This time, 87% of the teachers in grade one, two and three came to observe their colleagues’ classrooms. Indeed what they saw was exciting: engagement of the students at the literacy centres; teachers guiding the growth of their students in small group settings; students focused on the task at hand despite the extra eyes (and voices) taking it all in! Teachers realized that this strategy would allow them to assess formatively each of their students on a regular basis. Talking with the students about what they were learning solidified this instructional practice. Teachers couldn’t wait to begin! As a result of the presentations and observations, all grade levels within all schools had at least one teacher committed to the program.

Having established the shared vision, strategy was translated into action by “establishing a strategic picture of what we want the schools to look like in the future and setting guidelines and frameworks for how to move forward to that position” (Davies, 2006, p. 12). Supports now needed to be put in place in order to actualize the vision.

Structural and Cultural Supports

Research demonstrates that staff commitment and motivation towards achieving the shared vision continues to improve in direct proportion to the cultural and structural supports for staff (Mulford, 2005). Our structural supports for the implementation of balanced literacy began with the division providing funds through A.I.S.I. to purchase leveled reading resources to support the schools. Funds were also used to provide professional development by a former teacher from Calgary. She provided cultural supports by sharing her knowledge of the process of the gradual release of reading. An experienced teacher from Toronto presented sessions on read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, working with words, modeled writing, shared writing and independent writing. These sessions were not mandatory and were offered to teachers of kindergarten through grade eight. I organized school visits to Lethbridge so teachers could see balanced literacy in action in grades three to six. Contact lists were created so that our teachers could communicate with teachers throughout Alberta who had experience with balanced literacy. Finally, I provided teachers with support material for literacy centres based on the work of Debbie Diller. Providing the structural and cultural supports through strategic conversations, observations, and resources, enabled changes to instructional practice in literacy to begin.

Nourishing these changes would require continual support, reflection, and collaborative learning. Who better to nourish these changes than the principals at each of the schools? Presentations were offered to the leadership team in November of 2009 to build their knowledge base of the components of balanced literacy so they had a common understanding and key vocabulary. They were also provided with essential characteristics that all balanced literacy classrooms had in common. These characteristics provided the leadership team with key areas to watch for and take an interest in. Most important of all, principals engaged in discussions about how they could support the program through timetabling and resources. These professional opportunities were open to all the elementary and middle schools. All elementary principals chose to attend the session, however, the middle schools principals did not. Both middle school principals cited management issues as the reason for not attending. It is interesting to note that balanced literacy has been a success at the elementary level whereas the successes at the middle school level have been sporadic. Without our middle school principals taking an interest in the literacy program and encouraging teachers to put away the one-size-fits-all class novels, school-wide change is not likely to occur.

Transformational leaders set direction for their school, develop people, and redesign the organization (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009). Alberta Education (2011) has determined instructional leadership as one of seven key professional practice competencies principals must display “throughout their careers” (p. 2). In order to meet this competency, a school leader:

1. implements supervision and evaluation processes to ensure that all teachers consistently achieve the *Teaching Quality Standard Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta* and/or other provincial requirements;
2. demonstrates a sound understanding of effective pedagogy and curriculum;
3. ensures that teachers use appropriate pedagogy to respond to various dimensions of student diversity;
4. ensures that students have access to appropriate programming based on their individual learning needs;
5. implements strategies for meeting the standards of student achievement;
6. ensures that student assessment and evaluation practices throughout the school are fair, appropriate and balanced;
7. recognizes the potential of new and emerging technologies and enables their appropriate integration in support of teaching, learning and reporting; and
8. ensures that teachers and other staff effectively communicate and collaborate with parents, and when appropriate local community agencies, to support student learning and development. (pp. 4-5)

Leaders must be aware that although managing the operations of a school is important, it is but one of the seven key professional practice competencies that principals must display.

Transformational Leadership through Professional Learning Communities

Mutualism refers to the collaborative relationship that forms between teachers in learning communities. The social bonds of mutualism can be a driving force behind

student learning when teachers examine pedagogical practice and deepen content knowledge. Mutualism builds the capacity of schools and generates new knowledge to enhance student learning. The most important skill of the twenty-first century has been described as learning to learn. Fullan (2002) suggests that “to ensure deeper learning – to encourage problem solving and thinking skills and to develop and nurture highly motivated and engaged learners...requires mobilizing the energy and capacities of teachers” (p. 17).

Successful learning communities are focused, and directly link to the school vision of student learning. Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) suggest that they “provide opportunities for colleagueship and professional growth by engaging members in varied activities” (p. 674). A learning community enables teachers to work with others who examine new pedagogies and deepen content knowledge. Sergiovanni (2004) states that “The collaborative configuration encourages both individual and collective dialogue and reflection. Teachers share best practices, successful approaches, failures (which sometimes teach more than successes), and new ideas” (p. 52). Significant improvements for teachers can be attributed to their involvement in professional learning communities (PLC). One of the main benefits is increased professional collaboration (Davies, Herbst-Leudtke & Reynolds, 2008; Hord, 1997; Hord, 1998; Leo & Cowan, 2000). Teacher collaboration can include sharing expertise, best practice, mentoring, team teaching, and reflective dialoguing. As teachers begin to realize the value of working collaboratively, they are able to envision how this is related to their ongoing professional development. PLC work is viewed by the participants as a

part of their professional responsibilities (Schuman, 2005; Townsend & Adams, 2009).

All of these forms of collaboration lead into another significant benefit of PLCs, which is a reduction of teacher isolation (Hord, 1997; McEwen, 2006). Teachers have historically taught behind closed doors and collaboration motivates teachers to seek out one another therefore reducing isolation.

Other benefits include the increased, shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success (Cowan & Capers, 2000; Hord, 1997, Hord, 1998; McEwen, 2006). Both of these benefits lead to a stronger sense of community, which includes shared visions, goals, and collegiality (Hord, 1997). When teachers make long-term commitments to their students and student learning is the centerpiece, teachers have reported feeling professionally renewed (Hord, 1997) which further strengthens the professional community. Townsend and Adams (2009) conclude that "Successful school teams engage in cycles of learning rather than in episodes of learning and, in reality, their learning through collaborative inquiry complements their career development as educational practitioners" (p. 133). With educational researchers linking the sharing of best practices through professional discussions, learning communities can become competent and reliable forums for the exchange of knowledge and information. Creating a forum where teachers felt confident and comfortable sharing their knowledge with colleagues was crucial in sustaining collaborative learning for our balanced literacy initiative.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders are committed to building leadership capacity by dispersing leadership throughout the school community. They do this by encouraging a culture of success and knowing when to release the leadership to others. Releasing control to teams of teachers demonstrates trust and acknowledges the importance of teacher leadership in pedagogy. Although transformational leaders step back, they facilitate the process to model that they care deeply about the culture of learning. Fullan (2002) believes that professional learning communities (PLCs) are critical where “creating and sharing knowledge is central to effective leadership. Information, of which we have a glut, only becomes knowledge through a social process” (p. 18).

Ideally, for a collaborative culture to work, Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) state “to remain effective, networks must tread a fine line between the explicit assignment of organizational responsibility and the temptation to create hierarchical structures to manage the network’s growth or to respond to mandates or constraints imposed by outside funders or governmental bodies” (p. 676). Transformational leaders understand that if they begin to use their authority to direct the PLC, true professional dialogue will disappear. Difficulties with new leadership roles, quality of collaboration, timetabling teams of teachers and learning how to learn from colleagues are areas of challenge that are faced by the transformational leader when building a collaborative culture. However, Fullan (2002) states that “transforming culture – changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it leads to deep, lasting change” (p. 19). A transformational leader realizes that the benefits of supporting PLCs

far outweigh the challenges. Transitioning the mindset from working individually to learning collaboratively requires a process of developing a social interactive context.

PLCs at Bookland School Division

Embedding time throughout the school year for PLCs to gather together to improve learning specific to contexts increases the likelihood that this learning will be sustained (Smylie & Hart, 1999). In addition, when PLC meeting times are embedded within the district's calendar, it places a high value on the learning communities and helps to ensure that meetings will occur on a regular basis (Leo & Cowan, 2000; Moore & Shaw, 2000; Rasberry & Mahajan, 2008).

With many districts in the province of Alberta averaging less than six professional development days per school year, Bookland Division scheduled more than ten days with an additional three days available to each teacher through the A.I.S.I. project. These additional days were set aside for teachers to work in professional learning communities on curriculum and assessment projects. These learning communities provided an opportunity for teachers to identify areas of student learning that needed to be focused on. Through this identification process teachers were able to take ownership over their professional learning.

It was the desire of teachers to make this time significant and meaningful and the move has fostered belief in a “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” system (Rasberry & Mahajan, 2008) by which teachers and school administrators can effectively achieve school improvement goals through a shared vision and collaboration that focuses on student learning.

Facilitation. Much of the literature surrounding educational reform includes discussion regarding teacher collaboration. Dufour and Eaker (1998) state that “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (p. xi). A successful learning community needs to have a skilled facilitator who understands the process of a learning community, has experience in specific areas of learning, knows the importance of establishing group norms and is able to create a safe, collegial environment for maximum participation (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009). Smylie and Hart (1999) maintain that the success of the group is attributed to group members having confidence in the facilitator. The facilitator takes the time to set clear expectations with the group so that they are more unified and able to focus on productive collaboration. These groups share ownership in the success of their PLC and access additional A.I.S.I. time to meet, share, and work toward their learning goals.

A key leadership dimension in the Alberta Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders (2011) is to lead a learning community. A leader “promotes and facilitates meaningful, collaborative professional learning for teachers (p. 5). With this competency in mind, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) of grade level teams were created with the pilot school to facilitate discussions about balanced literacy. Initially, I approached the facilitators to lead the literacy learning communities because they had prior leadership experience, knowledge of balanced literacy strategies, and an ability to work in a collaborative environment. Creating the conditions of collegial work

requires the group to have frequent and precise talk about teaching practice, time to work with curriculum materials, and opportunities to share new knowledge by teaching others what they have learned (Glaude, 2005). Prior to the first scheduled PLC meeting, I met with all the facilitators to teach them protocols to create collegial work conditions. They were provided with a handbook that contained samples of guiding questions, how to set group norms and identify passions.

These teams of grade level teachers began to work together once a month to share ideas, learn how to level books, share assessment practices, reflect upon the successes and challenges, and brainstorm solutions when issues arise. Through A.I.S.I. days, I offered a variety of balanced literacy workshops to teams of teachers. These workshops included learning how to assess students' reading levels; focusing on the traits of writing through modeled, shared and guided writing; and providing alternative strategies to the teaching of spelling through constructing and sorting words. I also met with each elementary grade to create an outcome-based report card to reflect the components of balanced literacy.

I requested that the technology department set up a repository for balanced literacy resources in a division wide computer folder that each teacher could access. As teams of teachers created resources to support balanced literacy, I uploaded the files to the repository and communicated with grade level teams to thank them for their work and for sharing it with others.

Teachers who were hesitant about the program heard the excitement from others and felt confident enough to begin using components of the program. As teachers began to realize the value of working collaboratively, they were able to envision how PLC work

became part of their professional responsibilities, created a stronger sense of community, and made commitments to student learning.

Challenges

Challenges are inherent with change. At an individual level, difficulties that have arisen include the pressure that teachers bring upon themselves to teach all the components of the balanced literacy program immediately, particularly when they observed the program operating at full capacity. It is important to remind teachers that teaching all the components of balanced literacy will take at least three years to incorporate.

As our district has implemented balanced literacy, some challenges have arisen. Although the program exists in all schools and at each grade level, the components of balanced literacy being used by teachers varies from classroom to classroom. Currently, 59% of teachers in grades two to six are using all the components of balanced literacy to various extents ranging from daily instruction to monthly instruction. For example, guided reading is occurring in 22% of classrooms daily, 35% of classrooms a few days a week, 22% of classrooms once a week, 10.5% of classrooms monthly and 10.5% of classrooms rarely or never. With continued discussion, sharing of ideas and stories of student success, the number of teachers choosing to teach the components of balanced literacy may improve, however, teachers need evidence of student success that is based on research in order to fully commit to change.

Literacy and Society

The Bookland School Division's teachers understood that literacy is foundational to their students' educational years, however, what is its impact on society as a whole?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization met in 2003 to define literacy as

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 to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society. (Nordtveit, 2005, p. 4)

Reading and writing provide the foundation for learning. Literacy skills allow students to obtain and use information effectively (Bitter, 2009). As adults, literacy skills affect the ability to learn, to participate in government and society, and to contribute to the economy. Specifically, they enable adults to make informed decisions about health care and parenting and manage household finances. (Alberta Education, 2009). A foundation of literacy skills enables Albertans to thrive and contribute to a society that is constantly changing and demanding its individuals to think and learn independently (Alberta Education, 2009).

Improving literacy may result in economic gains for society. It is projected that if literacy skills are addressed to raise the literacy of Canadians to an adequate skill level, the benefit would be close to \$80 billion (TD Bank Financial Group, 2007). Albertans need to have the opportunity to gain and improve these literacy levels that are essential to live and work fully in their communities.

Canada participated in the 2000 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which measured the performance of 15-year old students in reading, math and science. Although it appeared that Canada's achievement had risen over time, a closer

analysis by Learning Matrix Inc. revealed that “39.3 per cent of Canadian youths age 15 had literacy scores below the adequate level” (TD Bank Financial Group, 2007, p. 5). Consequently, these students do not have adequate literacy skills to understand high school curriculum and are unable to complete high school (Government of Alberta, 2008). The Max Bell Foundation (2006) asserts that “Today in Alberta, 25% of our youth do not complete high school within five years. Thirty-six percent of our population, aged 16 to 25, have literacy levels below those required in the knowledge-based economy” (p. 9). This group of people struggle with their ability to understand and use information from texts including news stories and instruction manuals. The results of low literacy rates contribute to poverty, unemployment and higher crime rates (TD Bank Financial Group, 2007). It is clear that there are many benefits to improving literacy and should be a priority.

Finding a solution to address the needs of all students is important to our province economically, socially, educationally and morally. Approaching the teaching of literacy through a balanced literacy approach may help to address this problem. It is designed to differentiate instruction to meet the diverse literacy needs of students.

Research on Student Learning, Assessment and Teaching in Balanced Literacy

Providing instructional leadership is an essential professional practice competency for school leaders. Alberta Education (2011) states that “a school leader must ensure that each student has access to quality teaching and the opportunity to engage in quality learning experiences” (p. 6). This requires leaders to ensure that student diversity is accommodated by using appropriate assessments and programming to meet students’ learning needs.

What does research suggest about the effectiveness of balanced literacy in regards to student learning and instructional practice? After examining six major reading research studies from 1967 to 2000, Cowen (2003) synthesized a definition for balanced literacy:

It is research-based, assessment-based, comprehensive, integrated and dynamic, in that it empowers teachers and specialists to respond to the individual assessed literacy needs of children as they relate to their appropriate instructional and development levels with the purpose of learning to read for meaning, understanding, and joy. (p. 10)

When teachers know what reading skills students have and what areas they need to improve in, they can target their instruction to support student learning. Improvements in literacy rates may occur when teachers use assessment to drive instruction.

Student learning

How do students learn? According to Vygotsky (1978), learners operate on two levels: the actual developmental level and the potential developmental level. “The zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance” (p. 86). How does this apply to reading? The actual developmental level is where the pupil reads fluently with comprehension. The level of potential development is where the pupil needs guidance and quality instruction to comprehend and read fluently.

Although Vygotsky did not use a term to describe the movement between the actual and potential zones of development, Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) described the process of enabling “a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be

beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90) as *scaffolding*. One framework for implementing instructional scaffolds is the gradual release of responsibility model. It provides a structure for the teacher to assume "all the responsibility for performing a task...to a situation in which the students assume all the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, pp. 210-211). The components of a balanced literacy framework require differing levels of support from the teacher and respect the levels of independence of the students (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The elements of a balanced literacy program scaffold the learning by following the gradual release of responsibility model through read alouds, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading.

Assessment

In order to facilitate student learning, teachers must first determine the actual development level of the students. To do this it is important to use objective assessments. A study conducted by Meisinger, Bradley, Schwanenflugel and Kuhn (2010) concluded that teachers often overestimate their students' reading skills, especially in reading fluency by as much as 23.6%. Relying on objective reading assessments rather than teacher perceptions of students' reading abilities will result in teachers being able to target instruction in the zone of proximal development.

It is clear from this study that in order to provide reading support for students, teachers need to accurately assess students' reading skills. Relying on objective reading assessments rather than judgments of students' reading abilities will result in teachers being able to target instruction in the zone of proximal development. When choosing an objective assessment, it is important to determine what information will be garnered. According to Afflerbach (2005), using results from standardized reading assessments that

reveal grade level or estimates of individual growth are “at best an approximation of the students’ actual achievement level” (p. 158). Dennis (2010) argues if standardized reading assessments reveal that a student is below grade level, that student is likely to “receive intervention in an instructional program that focuses on phonemic awareness and decoding skills” (p. 288). Franzak’s study (as cited in Dennis, 2010) noted, “If ‘reading’ is defined and treated as a set of hierarchically listed tasks, some readers will continue to occupy the bottom rung of the literacy ladder” (p. 288). Conducting a series of reading assessments that determine the varying needs of individual students will guide instruction according to their individual abilities and needs.

What kinds of assessments provide teachers with diagnostic information that show the actual developmental level of students? To assess reading fluency, Fountas and Pinnell (2009) maintain that students need to read non-fiction and fiction text orally. There are different skills involved in reading each of these texts and it is important for teachers to observe the behaviors by recording the level of accuracy and noting what kinds of errors students are making. The oral reading is followed up by assessing the students’ comprehension. Students read the text for a second time, this time silently before completing the comprehension assessment. Vellutino (as cited in Meisinger, et al., 2010) discovered that readers who have difficulty with decoding or reading fluency may have difficulty comprehending the text so it is important for students to read silently in order to have a more accurate assessment. How readers are expected to demonstrate understanding is important. According to Keenan, Betjemann and Olson (as cited in Meisinger et al., 2010), “A reader may be asked to respond to literal or inferential questions, respond orally, write an essay, select a picture, complete a multiple choice text,

retell, or apply information learned in a text to complete a task” (p. 57). It is important to use a variety of responses in order to improve the accuracy of the assessment. Teachers use the behavioral evidence to infer strengths and needs in the students’ processing systems. These patterns in assessment data allow teachers to more accurately address students’ literacy needs.

Strategic Reading Instruction

Spiegel, Vickers and Viviano (1999) suggest that a lack of comprehension skills is the greatest problem with students. They hypothesized that poor questioning techniques, a lack of student motivation and lack of self-monitoring during reading led to poor comprehension. Through data gathered from teacher observations, student and parent surveys, comprehension checklists, teacher journals and reading inventories, an analysis of 2nd and 4th grade students living in an affluent, large midwestern community revealed that teachers need to teach comprehension strategies that go beyond decoding directly. These reading interventions include using literal, inferential, and critical questions, teaching students how to self-monitor their reading, increasing direct instruction of comprehension strategies, and implementing a balanced reading program. The results of these interventions indicated an increase in students’ use of comprehension strategies leading to a greater level of understanding. Their research provides a number of factors that advance reading comprehension skills.

Duke and Pressley (2005) support the premise that all students have a right to instruction designed with their needs in mind. In their article, they claim that an intensive version of curriculum matched to students’ reading levels is needed. Explicit skills instruction and small-group reading time is required to help students improve in fluency.

Students need to read books at their level as well as books that challenge them. Seven key strategies need to be introduced to students to improve comprehension: predicting, reflecting, visualizing, connecting, questioning, self-monitoring and summarizing. The earlier these strategies are introduced, the earlier students will realize that reading is about meaning.

A Balanced Approach

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) agree that teachers need to support a literate community and at the same time meet the needs of individual readers. They outline how to best create a balanced literacy program that supports individual readers through guided reading supported by reading aloud, shared reading and interactive writing. The components of a balanced literacy framework are linked by oral language and by comprehension strategy. In every component of the framework, children use language to learn, and teachers use language to extend children's learning. Reading and writing activities are connected in a purposeful way. Fountas and Pinnell maintain that teachers need to use assessment to guide instruction. These assessments will help to create a dynamic grouping of readers which uses sets of leveled books at the group's instructional level. The elements of the program are integrated and provide differing levels of support from the teacher to meet the needs of the students.

The research studies from the United States revealed three main strategies that can lead to an improvement in literacy: use assessment data to guide instruction; teach explicit comprehension skills; and instruct to promote higher-level thinking and accountability. What is missing from the studies is how the components of balanced

literacy affect reading scores in students. Are there certain components that affect literacy rates more than others or is the greatest effect caused by a combination of components?

Alberta A.I.S.I. Study

Knowing that literacy rates need to improve in Alberta, it is vital to study the Canadian context to reveal how balanced literacy affects reading comprehension. Bookland School Division studied the impact of balanced literacy in reading comprehension in grades two to six through its A.I.S.I. project #40141 (Alberta Education, 2012). The study investigated the extent to which the components of balanced literacy affect comprehension. The research relied upon quantitative survey methodology to examine changes in reading results and the extent to which balanced literacy was being implemented through a year-long project in balanced literacy instruction in second through sixth grade classrooms.

The school division is comprised of eight elementary schools of which six are urban and one rural. The number of students involved in the study from grade two through grade six was 942. Forty-six teachers using various components of balanced literacy with different frequencies were involved in the study. To measure the extent to which balanced literacy instruction was being taught in the classroom, teachers responded to a survey that I administered through Zoomerang which asked them to identify the frequency with which components were being taught. Components of balanced literacy included: modeled reading, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, working with words, oral language activities, modeled writing, shared writing and guided writing. The frequency measures included: daily, a few days a week, weekly, monthly and rarely or never. Pre and post assessments were conducted to measure the growth in

reading comprehension using *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test 2nd Canadian Edition form 3 and 4.*

Since there was a relationship between one dependent variable, reading scores, and an independent variable, the extent to which the components of balanced literacy were being used in the classroom, and both could be measured, quantitative survey research was the appropriate methodology for this study.

Large-scale data was used from the division's language arts teachers and students from grade two to six so I could make the correlations with a measure of statistical confidence. To further ensure validity of results, the reading test for each class was followed up with the teacher's self-report of the frequency with which selected balanced literacy activities were implemented. The ordinal scale enabled me to tabulate the extent to which the frequency of the components of balanced literacy was being taught within each classroom.

The results clearly showed that the highest average growth in reading comprehension corresponded to the highest frequency of components of balanced literacy being taught in the top three schools. It was also remarkable to note that these schools all averaged over two years of grade level growth for those students who began the year significantly delayed at a minimum of two years below grade level (see Appendix A).

Reflections

"If a school wants to improve student learning, it has to use data" (Bernhardt, 2005, p. 66). To continue to involve the school community in sustaining the literacy goal for providing optimum learning and development of all students it became important to collaboratively analyze data to determine progress towards growth in reading

comprehension. As a result, teachers in Bookland School Division were asked to conduct pre-assessments in September 2009 and post-assessments in June 2010 using a standardized reading test and miscue analysis to determine the actual reading level of students. It was important for Bookland's teachers to use objective assessments. A study conducted by Meisinger, Bradley, Schwanenflugel and Kuhn (2010) concluded that teachers often overestimate their students' reading skills, especially in reading fluency by as much as 23.6%. Relying on objective reading assessments rather than teacher perceptions of students' reading abilities will result in Bookland's teachers being able to target instruction in the zone of proximal development.

A second positive result from the analysis of the data involved teachers in the PLC's establishing literacy goals to meet the varied needs of their students. Little stated that "improved student learning and teaching result when teachers collaboratively focus on achievement and assessment" (as cited in Schmoker, 2006, p. 109). It is necessary for teachers to identify and recognize the benefits of sharing best practices gained through research and professional dialogue and how this impacts student learning. Reflecting with colleagues about successes and challenges enables teachers to continually grow throughout their career. Marzano, Waters and McNulty concluded that professional collaboration increases efficacy which leads to the belief that teachers can improve the effectiveness of schools within the division (2005). As Bookland teachers realized the potential of opportunities to share with their peers, the power of a PLC was recognized in Bookland School Division.

Teachers cannot rely upon their perceptions of students' reading skills. Objective assessments that use fiction and non-fiction texts with the opportunity for students to read

and respond in a variety of ways provide teachers with the information they require to target instruction for student success. Balanced literacy instruction requires teachers to plan lessons based on a systematic study of student needs, to think deeply about teaching decisions in the classroom, and to reflect on lessons in a purposeful and student-centered manner. “Analyzing data not only helps inform decisions and challenge assumptions, but also helps teachers view their instructional and collaborative practices with a new perspective” (Feldman & Tung, 2001, p. 10). When teachers plan in a collaborative and purposeful manner as part of a professional learning community, student learning is impacted even more. A balanced literacy approach may be the answer to help an additional thirty-six percent of Alberta’s students reach sufficient levels of literacy to function and thrive in a knowledge-based society. By having teachers analyze pre and post assessments they became aware of the variety of learning needs within their classrooms. Furthermore, they recognized that using the components of balanced literacy provides instruction at each student’s instructional level.

Next Steps

Although an analysis of the balanced literacy program showed growth in reading comprehension, particularly with students who were at least two years behind, teachers in Bookland School Division are concerned for those students whose delays are significantly behind every other student in his/her peer group. Because their level is so low, it is difficult to place them in a guided reading group that is at their instructional level. It has been decided that a leveled literacy intervention is needed for those students who need intensive support to achieve grade-level competency. Each school will either timetable an intervention time or offer this program during guided reading so that small

groups of students can work together for eighteen weeks with the goal of bringing them to grade level. The use of authentic texts, explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, extending understanding of texts and words through writing and its combination of semantics, syntax, and graphophonemic cueing systems enable teachers to assess miscues so that instruction can support the reader.

Powerful Learnings

The journey over the past four years highlighted the importance of focusing a vision on learning. It has to be clear to all that everyone, students and teachers alike, can and must learn. Teachers need opportunities to learn, apply, and develop deeper understandings of the process of learning. It is not enough for leaders to merely understand what transformational and instructional leaders are. They must understand why developing a culture of learning is necessary and important, and how becoming a transformational and instructional leader will assist them in growing the learning culture of their school.

How does a culture guide us? Goldring (2002) claims that culture guides us at three different levels: “The first level refers to things that can be observed, such as the way time and space is arranged at a school” (p. 33). When a culture is focused on learning, time and resources will be allocated in a manner that supports the learning of all.

“The values we believe in that support all of those elements in the first level make up the second level. These can be felt through the behaviors and relationships of staff members” (Goldring, 2002, p. 33). A culture that places learning at the centre continuously strives to help each other become more educated. This is true for the entire

school community. “The third level refers to the collected assumptions gathered by a group over time. This third and most powerful level dictates everything that is seen and spoken” (Goldring, 2002, p. 33). Once a culture of learning guides us at this deep level, it becomes who we are and what we are about.

Balanced literacy has become the focus of the culture of learning at Bookland School Division. At the first level time was provided for teachers to observe balanced literacy in action and listen to presentations from colleagues and experts in the field. Resources were purchased to support the learning for teachers and students. As this learning culture grew, more grade level groups chose to focus on balanced literacy in their professional learning communities. Balanced literacy was something they valued and wanted to support one another in. Now that the learning culture is continuing to grow and move into the third level, the importance of analyzing student data has become obvious to the teachers. Targeting instruction at student levels of need is integral to the program. Being confident instructors of balanced literacy, some teachers have opened their classrooms to neighboring districts in order to share their knowledge. These teachers are proud to describe themselves as leaders of balanced literacy practices.

Conclusion

Research informs us that leadership makes a difference in schools. It impacts the direction a school takes, has a major effect on developing a learning culture, and creates the processes and structures that enable the school community to focus on teaching and learning (Reeves, 2002). Strategic leaders build a shared vision with the school community by guiding the process that connects the needs of the learners with instructional practice. This vision becomes the moral purpose of the community when it

becomes the raison d'etre. Strategic leadership sets up a framework that translates the moral purpose and vision into reality by providing structural and cultural supports. It involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of a vision for the school which is based on clear values. The leadership at Bookland School Division developed a framework of strategic conversations, observations and supports in the form of time, resources, and professional development to embark on a journey of change in literacy practices.

Transformational leaders develop a cultural mindset from teachers working individually to learning collaboratively. Strong leadership is required to develop collegial relationships in the pursuit of shared goals. Leadership is then distributed and supported to establish priorities that focus on student learning. Transitioning the mindset from working individually to learning collaboratively allows for encouragement of innovation and problem solving. It welcomes critical reflection with colleagues as a source of support, feedback, and ideas. It embraces a culture with a collective sense of responsibility and goal-setting that fosters solidarity and creates shared expectations (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000). When student learning becomes the focus for learning teams, teachers acknowledge the importance of being life-long learners (Chappuis, Chappuis & Stiggins, 2009). A culture of learning begins when leaders model life-long learning and then communicate learning to staff through initial presentations and practical application to classrooms. The emphasis on transformational leadership is clear. Through collaboration, the goal for teachers is to examine how to better meet the learning needs of their students to engage, enable, empower and find success. When teachers are intrinsically motivated through collaboration, capacity is built. Professional development

in Bookland Division that supports PLC's through effective structures have created a culture of learning, built the capacity of schools, engaged teachers, and benefited student learning. Senge (1994) describes the power of the PLC with these words: "If we want the world to improve, then we will need schools that learn" (p. 4).

Teachers cannot rely upon their perceptions of student learning. Teams of teachers work together to assess students, determine areas of greatest need, develop strategies to support student learning, and find solutions to challenges. In the case of Bookland School Division, students' reading skills were the focus of improvement. Objective assessments that used fiction and non-fiction texts with the opportunity for students to read and respond in a variety of ways provided teachers with the information they required to target instruction for student success. Balanced literacy instruction required teachers to plan lessons based on a systematic study of student needs, to think deeply about teaching decisions in the classroom, and to reflect on lessons in a purposeful and student-centered manner. Through careful study, Bookland School Division concluded that a balanced literacy approach may be the answer to help all our students reach sufficient levels of literacy and beyond so they can function and thrive in a knowledge-based society.

When teachers identify and recognize the benefits of sharing best practices gained through research and professional dialogue and how this impacts student learning, communities can become competent and reliable forums for the exchange of knowledge and information. Reflecting with colleagues about successes and challenges enables teachers to continually grow throughout their career. Professional collaboration increases efficacy which leads to the belief that teachers can improve the effectiveness of schools

within the division (Marzano et al., 2005). As teachers realize the potential of opportunities to share with their peers, the power of a PLC is recognized.

John F. Kennedy once stated “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” When leaders learn to build culture through vision, capacity through collaboration, and cohesion through research, they inspire those around them to do their very best. The result is a committed school community with high expectations of learning for all.

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Appendix A

Comparison of Reading Results

School	Average Growth	Average Growth +	Average Growth -	Survey – all BL Components
School 1	1.07	0.92	0.43	20.33
School 2	0.97	0.46	1.28	15
School 3	0.97	1.26	1.42	19
School 4	1.24	1.27	2.7	20.67
School 5	1.3	1.14	2.2	25.4
School 6	0.71	0.33	0.85	19
School 7	1.26	0.18	2.53	25.33
School 8	1.09	0.81	0.52	19.1

Correlation: 0.69

Average is a minimum of 2 years above grade level

Average is a minimum of 2 years below grade level

