

Aurora

Action Research

Community Of Practice

Annual Report
2015-16
Volume 1

Aurora Action Research Community of Practice

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Rationale for the Development of an Aurora “Research Professional Learning Community (PLC)”

Dr. Dale Bischoff
Superintendent of Aurora Charter School

On December 8, 2014, representatives from Alberta Education (AE) delivered a “Charter School Evaluation Report” to the Board of Directors of the Aurora Academic Charter School. One area of the report provided recommendations and required changes of Aurora Academic Charter School before renewal of the Aurora charter. One specific recommendation suggested the development of an Aurora “Research Professional Learning Community.” They (AE) stated that, although

there is evidence the school has been able to respond effectively to the U of A study recommendations related to the recommendations of the 2012 report... Teachers should consider developing action research projects... based on individual or team teacher observations of their students and the subsequent development of a project to increase academic success.

AE also suggested specific topics for investigation including “assessment of student engagement” and required that Aurora

focus on the use of research by teachers and administrators to inform innovative practice and achieve enhanced outcomes... Aurora must take greater responsibility for designing its own research agenda, in a manner that aligns with the school charter and the school planning documents... The board, administration and professional staff must work together to develop a research plan for the school.

Other possible research issues related to our charter goals like “direct instruction,” technology implementation,” and “academic excellence” were also identified as pertinent action research topics for an Aurora research PLC.

To address the Alberta Education requirement to “take greater responsibility for designing its own research agenda” and “work together to develop a research plan for the school” the superintendent invited Aurora teachers and administrators to initiate a learning community that could develop an Aurora research program. After open meetings in December and January, seven Aurora teachers committed to participate in action research projects. The first meeting of the action research cohort, under the direction of Dr. Jim Parsons (professor from the University of Alberta) took place February 9, 2015. Full-day seminars for this PLC were scheduled about once every six weeks from spring 2015 to spring 2016. It was hoped that our action research projects would assist us to improve instructional performance as well as help our teachers become more reflective about their instructional practice. Our initial cohort goals included sharing the results of teacher studies with the broader educational community by disseminating data at teacher conferences and possible journal publications. The Aurora action research PLC also invited other Edmonton area charter schools to support teacher researchers in joining the Aurora PLC.

Action research assists educators to measure and improve their teaching practices. The process allows teachers to design a study of interest in their regular classroom professional practice. Action research is widely considered a positive professional development opportunity. Using this research method, teachers can assess instructional strategies, curriculum, and/or pedagogical methods. Participating in action research has been found to be the impetus for improved professional practice exemplified by professional self-reflection, and enhanced classroom practices. Action research can be engaged in by an individual teacher targeting individual goals, a collaborative staff group sharing a common concern, or utilized by many teachers to examine school wide improvement targets.

Expanding Purposes for the Aurora Action Research PLC

While the initial rationale for the Aurora Action Research PLC was to deliver on the Alberta Education “mandate” to establish an in-school research community, other strong benefits became increasingly apparent as teachers in the PLC cohort developed and shared their respective research agendas. It was apparent that teachers were not only learning to systematically collect and analyze their data, but we were seeing teacher growth in other areas including:

- a) Teachers are collaborating and becoming more “**reflective about their professional practice.**” When teachers conducting action research systematically collect data in their classroom, they enhance their practice and enable continuous growth. When self-reflection on their instructional performance becomes an empirical investigation into factors affecting teaching and learning and when

analyses of their lessons inform the next day's instruction, teachers will inevitably improve their instruction. Participating in an action research project enhances self-reflection of professional performance and engenders continuous progress toward instructional excellence.

- b) Teachers are focusing on “**making progress on school wide priorities.**” Aurora Academic has long had a common focus on excellence in student outcomes. In the last three or four years the Aurora Board of Directors began to talk about ways to increase “student engagement” and the “implementation of technology” in the Aurora educational program. These new targets were examined by the Aurora action research PLC. Improvements in these identified system goals made progress as they were recognized by the PLC as research priorities.
- c) Increased opportunities for collaborative dialogue contribute to a “**strengthening of our organizational professional culture**”. While the Aurora teaching staff had a common focus on quality education with a direct instruction approach, there was not a well-defined staff Professional Development (PD) program. Common planning release time on PD days at Aurora was enhanced at about the same time at the action research PLC was developed. While multiple research projects occur at Aurora simultaneously according to the teacher/researcher priority, teachers understand that various research reports will contribute to overall organizational learning.

Conclusions

We have been at this action research PLC for only one year so it is early in the process and difficult to demonstrate tangible benefits. However, there have been some good indicators of growth. We are starting to receive completed research papers from teacher participants and participating teachers are reporting satisfaction with the process. We believe that our teacher action research PLC participants are increasingly reflective, focusing on school priorities and contributing significantly in our staff professional culture. Finally, we suspect that our teacher action research PLC has helped to build bridges and partnerships with like-minded teachers in other Alberta charter schools and with staff members at Alberta Education.

Although I accept that Aurora and TAAPCS have a “research mandate”, I think we miss important benefits of an action research PLC if we are only doing this because it is a charter school “mandate.” The potentially bigger benefit of hosting teacher action research is that the process supports reflective teachers achieving improved instructional practice. Improved instruction is a by-product when teachers are directly involved with the research process, the research questions, the data collection and analysis of the data. The participating teacher/researchers have demonstrated confident changes in their practice. Our students thereby enjoy improved student learning opportunities. Imagine a charter school system that has better teachers as a result of their reflective CoP that was organized around an action research process. We might lead the “excel-

lence” movement in public education by engendering a culture of Charter school collaboration and reflective professional practice.

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Action Research and Teacher Collaboration

Jim Parsons

Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

Introduction

My research, specific studies and in synthesis, tells me that when teachers collaborate to work on (and to research) school improvement issues that are real to them, they not only “solve” those issues but gain efficacy as they build (1) community, (2) agency, and engage in (3) service. A synthesis of my own decades of research and my reading of other research suggests that these three characteristics motivate teachers to become and remain “professional.” These are also the foundations of action research, where professionals work together to engage and solve their own issues at the site in which they work and then share their findings with a broader community of practice. With these ideas in mind, during the 2015-16 school year, we worked to help schools become sites of action research. What follows is our first attempt to share our work more publically.

Specifically, we engaged a process of building action research projects with teachers for the first time during 2015-16 with Edmonton-area Charter Schools. As you will see, these teachers conducted, produced, and are now sharing (many will publish these more formally later) action research studies across a wide range of issues. We will repeat this process again this year, further working to help schools become sites of research and teachers become active and engaged researchers and professional communities of learning practice. Our goal is simple: we care about children’s learning and we desire to

help children learn and schools to improve – along the lines teachers see relevant. In this work, we trust teachers as professionals.

As you will read and see in this first compilation of our work, the work teachers have done is – we believe – radical. They set out to do research, and they completed that process. Some are completely complete. Some are complete for where they are: in this discovery, teachers have come to see that action research never ends. The end of one project is thus a step towards another project they will continue. Some teachers have only begun their work, and the time working with their collaborative community of other teachers and a research coach has brought them to the place where they are now ready to engage a full project this next year. Yet, all teachers have shared a rich experience of growth and collaboration; and, we believe they are stronger teachers for it. The strength of these teachers' work and their courage to engage in this difficult action research path can only, we believe, augur well for their students. We want to continue.

We are moving forward; and, to do so, we are working to build a plan. The following plan reflects our hope of engage action research in other school sites This plan calls for us, as at-elbow teachers of research, to work with teacher-researchers in their own school communities and to coach the research process from the conception of an action research project to the completion and sharing (perhaps through publication or conference presentations) of the findings and learnings of that research project. Our own experience as active, action researchers will be engaged in this process.

The following steps will be engaged throughout a school year, working closely with teachers as they complete their action research projects. Each step will be a half-day of teaching and a half-day of working (with coaching) on action research projects. Although we will ask teachers to read and work between monthly steps, our process was built upon the understanding that teachers are already working full-time in their own classrooms and any work they undertook as action research would be grounded in the daily work of their students.

Step One: Shaping one's interests into Action Research

During Step One, our group addresses the questions: What do you care about individually or as a school? What is the nature of teacher action research? How might the issue/topic you care about be turned into a research question you might pursue? [We will study examples of teacher action research that exist and discuss what they look like?]

Step Two: Settling on and becoming specific about an Action Research Project

During Step Two, we address the questions: What is your topic/question? Who should be your participants? How do you think you should “do” your study?) Who will you ask? What will they tell you? How will you ask them? [During Step Two, we will also seek other research on a topic and engage in a Literature Review.]

Step Three: Introducing the Basic Elements of Action Research

During Step Three, we engage in a thorough review (with specific examples) of the basic elements of Action Research. Throughout this step, general issues of Action Research will be directed back to the work teacher-researchers have engaged during their first two steps. Ergo, all discussion will be “personal” and directed back to mirror teacher-researcher decisions about their own work. [Teacher-researchers are directed to fit their own work into an Action Research template.]

Step Four: Finalizing an Action Research Project and Sharing that Work with Others

During Step Four, we ask each teacher-researcher to share her/his in a PowerPoint or Prezi Presentation. During this presentation, each teacher-researcher considers the following points as they currently are seen.

- 1) What am I trying to find out? What is my action research project as I see it today?
- 2) What problem does your research address? What (initial) action will you take? What do you hope to accomplish? What does your research aim to understand? What does your research aim to change?
- 3) List the research questions as they appear at this time. What might these research questions mean for my practice?
- 4) Are you, the researcher, also a participant in your research? Specify your role (teacher, supervisor, principal, counselor, etc.)
- 5) For this research, will you gather data about your normal pedagogical practice or on changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment you could normally make in your regular professional role and with your own professional judgment? Would this research ask you to make changes from the way you normally engage in your practice?
- 6) What is the time frame of your project? Is it a one-shot project or might it involve several cycles? Have you already done any work towards this research?
- 7) What do I already know about my area of research interest? What can I find out by doing a literature search?
- 8) What data allows me to best answer my action research question? What kinds of data will I collect (e.g. field notes, taped interviews, writing samples)?
- 9) How can I best analyze my data?
- 10) What will be the practical implications of my findings? [Over what time frame? What people will the action research involve? How widely might the answers to this project be generalized?]

Step Five: An Introduction to Action Research Methods

During Step Five, we engage in and finalize specific research methods. As well, Action Research Ethics will be discussed. Teacher-researchers leave with a working “lesson plan” of what they will do during their study. [Teacher-researchers read articles on Action Research Ethics and book a meeting with individual principals to share their project (research questions, method, ethics, and to identify how the teacher researcher may need assistance/support) using a short ethics form. If all is good), the principal signs off on the ethics form.

Step Six: Visioning your Action Research Project

Step Six looks ahead at where one’s Action Research findings might be shared. Beginning with the end in mind offers a renewed sense of where teacher-researchers are headed and what they might need to arrive there. [Presenting one’s research helps focus on ways to work through a project with principals and superintendents and consider how to present work after an action research project is completed.]

Step Seven: Working with Action Research Data

During Step Seven, teacher-researchers consider what data they have collected and how to present that data to others. This step finalizes the literature review and discusses how to analyze data (including what data will look like).

Step Eight: Pulling the Action Research Together

During Step Eight, teacher-researchers finalize their work. These work steps reveal individual project needs and help teachers collaborate to solve these. The following template will be used.

Template/Format for Writing Up an Action Research Project

You may use the following headings (and word counts – these are rough guidelines) as a guide to writing up your project report – or you can tweak these if you choose:

- 1) Title
- 2) Keywords
- 3) Summary/Abstract (up to 100 words)
- 4) Context (about 250 words)
- 5) Aims and objectives (about 400 words)
- 6) Related literature (about 500 words)

- 7) Strategies [action research methods] (about 700-800 words)
- 8) Your Data (400 words)
- 9) Outcomes/Findings (about 500 words)
- 10) Key learnings (about 400 words)
- 11) What's Next? (about 250 words)
- 12) Contact details
- 13) Supporting documents

Step Nine: Finalizing and Presenting Action Research

During Step Nine, final aspects of Action Research projects are engaged. The work points towards presentation (sharing) of the projects in a variety of ways. Conference presentations are discussed as well as potential public sharing through publication. Discussion and advice is given for both presentations.

Conclusion

The work we engage is based upon the belief that teachers are professionals who benefit as they collaborate on self-directed goals. Action research is needed because there are learning issues to study and school problems to solve. In my experience, action research promotes successful teacher collaborative professional learning that achieves two goals: it completes needed research and it edifies a collaborative teacher community of practice committed to building sustainable relationships. The test of collaborative professional learning is how relationships advance student and teacher learning. Perhaps the biggest success of collaborative teacher professional learning is changed school cultures; and, the biggest cultural change is breaking down teacher isolation.

Collaborative teacher professional learning thrives on inquiry. We are moving as teachers towards the light of empowering action research because most teachers' first language is the language of practices that work. Teachers who want to share their successful practices go far towards building truly successful professional learning communities. To this point in time, teachers have not been trained to be meta-cognitive about research. We wish to change that by creating and engaging models for collaborative teacher professional learning through action research. Collaborative teacher professional learning begins with research conversations about learning needs – for both teachers and students. These conversations ask teachers to collaborate by bringing both their individual and collaborative experiences and skills to the work.

Collaborative action research is an exercise in hope that schools can be led to improve by those who know schools best – teachers. Perhaps this hope is the most novel aspect of our work. Although we have just begun, we have produced something of value. We mean to do more.

Effect of Daily E-reading on Grade Two Reading Comprehension

Mary E. Healy
Teacher Aurora Academic Charter School

Abstract

This study examines the effect of daily e-reading on reading achievement in a grade 2 classroom located in an academically focused school in Canada. The participants included 9 males and 12 females who ranged in age from 7 to 8 years old. Students read daily for 30 minutes in the classroom for eight weeks. The online program Raz-Kids was utilized and students accessed the program using Ipads. Students were given instruction on how to use the Ipads and the Raz-Kids program prior to the implementation of the study. All students were given a pretest to determine their initial reading level and a posttest was administered after eight weeks to assess final reading level. The Raz-Kid benchmark passages were used for the pretest and posttest assessments. The results were analyzed using a paired sample T-test and the findings were statistically significant ($p < .01$). In this school context, the study findings indicate a benefit for using daily e-reading to improve student reading achievement. Further research is needed to examine the novelty effects of the e-reading program over a longer period of time. This research would be useful for primary educators and schools that have similar contexts.

Keywords: Raz-Kids, e-reading, primary reading

Introduction

Over the past decade, technology has grown rapidly and has become a major part of our society. Plowman and McPake (2013) refer to technology as devices that include electronics such as computers, cell phones and products or outputs – such as DVDs, websites, games, e-books, and interactive stories. Technological devices allow users to view, read, play or create digital products. Technology has also become more accessible to the general population enabling the instantaneous exchange of information and ideas on a global scale. The increasing number of e-reading devices and the authors' embracing of e-books would indicate that the technology is more than a passing fad.

Technological devices are readily available and children are exposed to various forms of technology from an early age. Television, computers, and hand-held devices have altered the way children acquire knowledge, communicate, and interact with their environment. Plowman and McPake (2013) suggest that there is a learning benefit for three and four year old children who have technology in their homes. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education released a report that stated students who did not have access to technology-based environments would be at a greater disadvantage in their ability to plan and organize their future academic endeavors. The report also claimed that lack of opportunities to engage with technology would put students at a disadvantage in their intellectual pursuits.

Educational institutions are responding to the advances of technology. Digital literacies, referring to skills students need to locate, read, analyze, evaluate, create and interact with digital media content on various electronic devices, are considered necessary competencies for the 21st century learning (Morrelle, 2012). Students receiving an education in the province of Alberta will be expected to demonstrate these technological competencies as required by The Ministerial Order implemented in May of 2013 (Government of Alberta, 2013).

According to the Horizon Report (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, & Haywood, 2011), higher education institutions are changing how programs are delivered. By creating avenues of access to new technologies students are learning in modern ways. Students are utilizing e-books and engaging in multimedia activities to support their learning. E-books are less costly and easier to access than print texts and they provide the reader with more interactive features enabling a more intellectual and tactile experience (Johnson et al., 2011). Technology provides easy access to e-books for the reader. This access, coupled with an interactive experience that e-books provide, is potentially changing how we read and comprehend information (Schugar, Ruetschlin-Smith, & Schugar, 2013).

E-books have been developed and marketed as educational tools for improving academic success for children. Morgan (2013) states that, according to researchers, proficient readers can make academic gains by using multimodal e-books. Currently, there is limited research with respect to e-books as effective learning tools but what research does exist produced finding with mixed results (Ertrem, 2011). Ertrem emphasized that there was a difference in the benefits of using narrative and non-narrative e-books. The narrative e-books led to higher comprehension scores for children. When utilizing e-reading

programs in the classroom, it is important to consider the quality of the programs (Yakota & Teale, 2014). According to Labbo and Kuhn (2000), some CD-ROM talking books contained multimedia features that were not integral to the stories. This created passive viewing by students and did not contribute to story understanding. However, those CD-ROM stories that were considerate talking books supported students' understanding and meaning making of the story.

The explosion of e-books on the market has outpaced the research. As a result, little is known about the impact these multimedia digital picture books have on children's literacy development in the preschool and primary grades (4-8 years) (Yakota & Teale, 2014).

However, game-based learning research indicates that gaming is an effective method of learning for students (Johnson et al., 2011). These findings led to the author's consideration of pairing e-book reading with a gaming type of experience. This reading and gaming combination provided by an e-reading program Raz-Kids may improve reading comprehension.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between daily e-book reading and the reading comprehension scores of students in a grade two classroom. Students had daily scheduled independent reading time during the school day. During independent reading time, some students seemed disinterested in print books and others choose books that were too difficult for their reading level. Therefore, students did not benefit from the reading time that is given for reading practice.

By introducing students to an online e-book reading program, it was believed that students would be able to select from variety of topics at their reading level and practice independent reading. The interactive e-book program Raz -Kids offered features that supported motivation for independent reading such as a variety of levelled e-texts, colourful illustrations, and text narration, interactivity and a reading reward program. As a child read, he or she could choose to have the narrator read the story. During this process, individual words and phrases of the text were highlighted so that a child could follow along.

The Raz-Kids e-reading program contains features that are defined by research as fundamental to supporting reading achievement in students (Klein, n.d.). Reading comprehension is an important pillar of reading achievement. Reading comprehension is developed through a process of skills whereby students learn to decode words through phonemic analysis, learn the meaning of the words through vocabulary development, and construct meaning from the words to comprehend written text.

To understand a text, the reader has to apply metacognitive strategies such as checking for understanding, generating questions to be answered, summarizing and attending to text structure to aid in comprehension (Boulware-Gooden, 2007). Research has shown e-books offer experiences to readers that support internalization of the book's vocabulary and e-books also support the development of word recognition for emergent readers (deJong & Bus, 2002). This internalization of vocabulary supports reading comprehension and reading achievement. Based on previous research, the author chose to study

the relationship between an e-reading program Raz-Kids and comprehension scores in a primary classroom setting.

Literature Review

This literature review will examine reading comprehension and the impact that using technology has on reading comprehension in the primary classroom. According to Constructivism Learning Theory, reading occurs if students are interacting with their environment and use these experiences to construct new meaning. Therefore, reading instruction should take into account the learner and scaffold the learning derived from a familiar context (Ciampa, 2012a).

Complex strategies are used to develop reading comprehension skills. To comprehend text students must decode text, build fluency, acquire vocabulary and problem solve to find meaning for unfamiliar words. In addition, students use affective skills such as connecting the text to background knowledge. This reading process engages the reader.

The use of e-readers enables students to implement the processes of reading. Students can echo read as the story is narrated for them. This feature promotes building fluency building and word recognition skills. It is important to note that reading e-text reading requires additional reading skills so e-text students must have e-reading modeled for them (Lacina & Mathews, 2012).

In separate studies, researchers found that comprehension levels were higher for students who read an electronic version of text as compared to students who read print text (Matthew, 1997; Pearman, 2008). Also, Pearman noted that students who used electronic versions of text were also more engaged during the task as compared to the students who read the print version.

Students need motivation to read. In a study conducted on a group of first grade students, Ciampa (2012b) found that students who previously did not like reading print were motivated to read electronic software books. The use of electronic reading software also reduced off-task behaviors for some children in the study (Ciampa, 2012b). This finding of reduced off-task behaviors during an e-reading activity would be important benefit in a classroom-learning environment.

According to researchers, children who prefer to choose their own e-book show higher levels of enjoyment. This correlation between self-selected e-books and the enjoyment of an e-book is a highly motivating factor for children to read (Pearman, 2008; Jones & Brown, 2011; Ciampa 2012b). Jones & Brown's study of 22 third grade students found that the content of the book and its appealing quality mattered more than the e-book or print format. Further findings in the same study showed that having the ability to choose books does affect reading engagement and ultimately reading comprehension. Gambrell's (1996) study of first, third, and fifth grade students revealed that students who reported they enjoyed the books they read had self-selected them. This further highlights the power of choice and its influence on reading motivation.

It is noted that a strong relationship exists between student engagement and reading achievement (Jones & Brown, 2011). An engaged reader demonstrates a focus on the task and interacts with the text to derive meaning (Larson, 2012). Reading achievement may be represented by teacher-assigned grades, performance assessments of literacy or standardized tests scores (Guthrie, 2000). Hendrickson (2014) suggests that e-books are a way to promote reading in the classroom. According to the findings of a six-week study conducted with 17 grade two students the use of the Raz-Kids reading program improved the reading achievement of students particularly in reading comprehension. The researcher reported that the improvement in reading results were statistically significant (Hendrickson, 2014). Although the data were not part of the study, the researcher mentioned that the students were motivated by the reward sticker system offered for completion of online reading assignments.

In a different study of first grade readers at risk for retention, research findings indicated that the use of internet-based software supported reading improvement (Englert, Zhao, Collings, & Romig, 2005). Students' use of a Tele-Web software program improved their word recognition, and this learning was transferred to a higher reading achievement in a standardized reading test. Englert et al. (2005) attributed the reading improvement to the supportive function of the instant text-to-speech feedback. Also, the researchers reported that students enjoyed working with the program, and they were able to work more independently and efficiently to complete the learning tasks as compared to the paper and print group.

The electronic format of a book seems better equipped than the paper format to focus children's attention on text features. However, in a study of kindergarten students, students with lower levels of emergent reading skills spent more time on illustrations and less time on reading the text (deJong & Bus, 2002). deJong and Bus noted that students with higher levels of emergent literacy did internalize the reading of the electronic story.

Larson (2010) reported findings from a case study of two girls in a Grade 2 classroom. The students were using kindle readers, and the author noted that the girls interacted with the text in meaningful ways. They used the features and tools to annotate text and respond to the author's writing. Through this interaction and connection with the written text, students were deeply engaged in their reading, indicating the use of electronic devices can promote new literacies (Larson, 2010).

This interaction with e-text was also statistically significant in a small study of children (Wright, Fugett, & Caputa, 2013). The researchers found students in the study used resources such as dictionaries and thesauruses for reading support more often when reading e-books than when they read print books. However, the study did not find evidence for a difference in their hypothesis that e-reading improves overall reading comprehension.

Summary

The purpose of introducing educational technologies focuses on improving student engagement and learning and its potential for improving education (Keegwe & Onchwari,

2011; Sankey, Birch, & Gardiner, 2011). Reading skills are essential for student achievement and are correlated with students' academic success. The use of e-books offers students interactive formats that increase opportunities to access a variety of reading materials at their level of reading ability. In this regard, making available many rich opportunities for accessing reading using electronic devices is beneficial, especially for students of low socio-economic status (Labbo, Leu Jr., Kinzer, Teale, Cammack, Kara-Soteriou, & JuliaSanny, 2003).

Electronic readers are valuable in supplementing regular reading programs because of the non-dependence on adults, especially in the home and in kindergarten classrooms (deJong & Bus, 2002). Currently there are mixed results with regard to the benefits of using electronic means to improve students' reading achievement. It is also important to note that more research is required to replicate deJong and Bus' previous finding. In addition, further research is needed to evaluate the effects of the digital environment on literacy development in emergent readers and how the digital environment impacts the acquisition of reading skills (Yokata & Teale, 2014).

Methodology

The following section discusses the methodology used to conduct the study that compared the pretest reading comprehension scores and posttest reading comprehension scores of students after eight weeks of daily reading. Each reading session was 30 minutes in length. This section also includes details about the study's research question and hypothesis, the role of the researcher, the participants, and the setting of the study, rationale, limitations and delimitations, materials, design and procedure, and the instruments used.

Research Questions and Statement of Hypothesis

This study sought to evaluate the effect of daily e-book reading on student reading comprehension. The author hypothesized that using e-books for daily reading would increase reading comprehension scores for grade two students.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were 21 second grade students in a classroom at an academic charter school located in Edmonton, Alberta. The student sample is comprised of 9 males and 12 females ranging in age from 7 to 8 years old. The school enrolment of 363 students is comprised of multiethnic groups, with programming in place for kindergarten to Grade 4 students. Sixteen percent of the student population is English Language Learners.

The academic charter school is a publicly funded school located in a mature neighborhood; thus, few students are residents of the neighborhood. Most of the student popu-

lation resides outside of the school boundaries and are bussed to and from school each day. The school charter adopts a teacher-directed instructional method based on the Madeline Hunter model of instructional practice. The school mandates students to dress in school uniforms and complete homework that is assigned each day. The class size for kindergarten through Grade 4 ranges from 20 to 24 students per classroom.

Rationale

To conduct a study on the effect of a daily e-reading on student reading comprehension, the author used a quantitative research method. The quantitative component of the study included a pretest and posttest assessment of student reading level and comprehension skills using a Benchmark assessment from the e-reading program Raz-Kids.

Limitations and Delimitations

The largest limitation of this study is the small non-randomized sample size obtained through convenience sampling. The study included 21 students in one sample from a Grade 2 class. The author also instructed the student sample. The schedule of the other classes made it difficult to include another group of students in the sample. The results of this study will not be generalizable to other schools unless the school settings match the context of this study.

This study also used benchmark passages provided by the e-reading program Raz-Kids to assess pretest and posttest scores of the sample. This assessment of reading comprehension growth would not be generalizable to other populations and would be a limitation in this study. Another limitation was the short duration of e-program utilization. The study is limited to 30 minutes of daily reading in the classroom for an eight-week period.

Delimitations include the fact that students may lack the motor skills to manipulate the tablet, and this may affect their experience using the e-reading program. The e-book features may distract students from the reading activity, and they may become passive viewers of the text. Although the e-reading program offers a selection of e-books that are levelled to accommodate individual reading levels, the e-books may not hold students' interest. For those with such a limitation, it might have proved difficult to interact with the e-books so that gains in comprehension skills may not show in the results.

Design and Procedure

In this study the reading program was the independent variable with the dependent variable being improved comprehension scores. The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks beginning in September, the start of the school year. This was a Pretest and Posttest design conducted with one group of students. The probability level was set

at $p = .05$ to determine statistical significance. This level provides acceptable statistical significance for educational research.

Prior to the start of the study all the students received tutoring from the author. Students were given instruction on how to use the program and access the virtual robot builder portion of the program. Students were shown how to use the navigation tools to listen to the books in the reading assignments. They were also instructed in how to record their voices and submit these recordings.

During the study, students were asked to read from an on-line e-book they accessed from the Raz-Kids on-line reading program. Each school day students read for 30 minutes in a classroom setting and moved up reading levels as they completed listening to narrative text, finished recording their reading of the same text and answered related comprehension questions. All the students used tablets to access the online e-reading program. The program required them to input a password to access their account. The reading account was set up prior to the start of the study by the author.

Students read books from the e-reading program and answered comprehension questions about each book. Students could choose the order in which they read the books in their reading assignment level. The program also allowed them to access books in the Book Room. These additional books were at the student's reading level or below.

Books and passages in the Raz-Kids program are categorized and assigned reading levels based on word count, word frequency, presence of illustrations, complexity, of the sentence structure and difficulty of vocabulary. The reading levels are ordered from A-Z, with Z being the highest level of difficulty. This Raz-Kids system correlates with the scale used by Fountas and Pinnell to level reading text. The students are rewarded with virtual stickers after reading a book, recording their reading, and completing comprehension questions. The stickers can be used to build a virtual robot or rocket. The game-like activity is motivational and keeps students interested in using the program to earn more rewards. The students are given time after each daily reading activity to spend the virtual stickers and build their virtual robot or rocket.

To assess the initial and final reading level of each student, students were given a benchmark reading assessment provided by the Raz-Kids reading program. In both the pretest and posttest, students were asked to read a passage, retell the details of the passage, and complete a multiple choice comprehension quiz related to the passage. The results of the benchmark assessments for the pretest were used to assign students to an initial reading level. After the eight-weeks, students were given a benchmark assessment to determine a posttest reading level. The author compared performance scores on the pretest and posttest benchmark assessments in order to determine any change in reading scores. Students were given the same instructions prior to the administration of the benchmark tests.

Instruments

A Running Record is an attractive standards-based assessment or benchmark teachers have used for a long time to obtain information about reading behaviors of students in elementary schools (Fawson, Ludlow, Reutzek, Sudweeks, & Smith, 2006). These assessments take a three-prong approach. First students are asked to read an unfamiliar benchmark passage out-loud and the test administrator records errors, omissions, substitutions, mispronunciations and repetitions made by the student during the reading process. The benchmark assessment evaluates the oral fluency of the student. The score is determined by subtracting the number of errors or omissions from the total number of words read and dividing that result by the time spent reading the passage. The oral fluency is recorded as words read per minute or the wcpm. The second assessment requires students to retell what they have read. The last step requires them to answer comprehension questions about the passage.

In a study of ten first graders, researchers found that the running record can be a reliable assessment tool if three passage scores are averaged to obtain a true score in reading ability (Fawson, et al., 2006). Limitations of this measurement tool were mentioned in the study. The researchers proposed the variability in scores in student performance may have been due to the differences in the topics of the passages used in the assessments (Fawson et al., 2006).

To measure reading skills, students read a benchmarks passage from the online e-reading program Raz-Kids and recorded their reading. In addition, students retold the details they recalled about the passage. The oral reading was scored for accuracy by subtracting the errors and the wcpm was calculated by dividing the number of words in the passage by the time of the recording. The Raz-Kids program provided a rubric for scoring the comprehension skills of the retelling portion. The author scored the oral reading of the benchmark passage and the retelling assessment. Afterward, the students completed a multiple choice comprehension quiz about the passage they read. The comprehension quiz was made up of five questions and was electronically scored.

A pretest benchmark assessment was used to assess the initial reading level of each student using cut scores provided by the Raz-Kids reading program (Appendix A). After the eight-week period of the study, students completed a posttest benchmark assessment using a benchmark passage at a higher reading level than they currently were reading at in the Raz-Kids program. The pretest and posttest scores were analyzed using a paired sample T-test to determine if any change in the scores were statistically significant.

The Fountas and Pinnell (2016) developed a scale to level reading text. Text is assigned a reading level based on text features. Ten features identified by the Fountas and Pinnell (2016) are used to match text to the corresponding reading level on the reading scale. These features include genre, print, illustrations, text structure, content, themes, semantics, vocabulary, sentence complexity, and language features.

To complete statistical analysis on the data, the reading level scale from A-Z was converted to numerals, such that the reading level A corresponded to numeral 1 and Read-

ing level Z corresponded to the numeral 26. Books and benchmark passages in the Raz-Kids program are categorized and assigned reading levels based on word count, word frequency, presence of illustrations, complexity, of the sentence structure and difficulty of vocabulary. The reading levels are ordered from A – Z, with Z being the highest level of difficulty. The Raz-Kids system correlates with the scale used by Fountas and Pinell (2016) to level reading text.

Institutional Review Board

The Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct this research on June 19, 2015. The research proposal was presented to Aurora Academic Charter School. The author was granted permission to conduct the study in the author's grade two classroom from the month of September to the month of December in the year 2015. The research maintains student confidentiality and complies with ethical considerations. This research was conducted within the normal bounds of instructional practice; therefore, no legal guardian consent was required for the conduction of the study.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher has an undergraduate degree in science and education. Currently, the author is teaching in a grade two classroom and she has over 20 years teaching experience in the classroom.

Summary

This study examined the reading scores of 21 second grade students to determine if a change occurred in student scores after eight weeks of daily reading using the e-reading program Raz-Kids. Students read daily for 30 minutes in a classroom setting. Students were given a benchmark assessment from the Raz-Kids program to determine reading levels before and after the eight -week period of the reading study. Using a paired sample T-test, the pretest and posttest scores of the sample were compared. The T- test was done to determine if any changes in the scores were statistically significant.

Results

The purpose of the quantitative study was to determine if using a Raz-Kids e-reading program for eight weeks produced any relationship to reading comprehension scores of 21 students. The author hypothesized that using e-books for daily reading would increase reading comprehension scores for grade two students. Students were assessed using benchmark assessments provided by the e-reading program Raz-Kids and placed in a reading level at the beginning of the study. At the end of the eight -week period students were given a benchmark assessment to determine their current reading level. The data were analyzed by comparing the pretest and posttest benchmark scores of the grade two students. After analysis of the pretest and posttest scores, using a paired

sample T-test, it was determined that the difference between the mean scores obtained by the students was statistically significant ($p < .01$). Therefore, the researcher rejects the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores.

Data Analysis

The data in Table 1 shows there is a statistical significance ($p < .01$) between the pretest and posttest scores of students in the study. This significance means that the probability of this result occurring due to random chance is less than one percent. The probability value is notably significant in this educational study, because it is much less than the acceptable probability of $p < .05$. The mean score for the posttest ($M=12.19$) was higher than the mean score for the pretest ($M=10.48$). There was a mean difference of -1.71 between the pretest and posttest scores. The difference in the mean reading scores indicates that the average performance of the sample increased during the study. The standard deviation for the posttest scores ($SD=1.60$) was higher as compared to the standard deviation of the pretest scores ($SD=1.37$). This indicates that there was more variation in the scores obtained by the students after the eight-week study.

Summary

The author hypothesized that using e-books for daily reading would increase reading comprehension scores for grade 2 students. Posttest and pretest benchmark scores were obtained by administering the benchmark passages provided in the Raz-Kids e-reading program. The scores of the 21 students participating in the study were analyzed using a paired sample T-test. The data analysis revealed that the mean difference between the pretest and posttest student scores were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Table 1
Pretest and Posttest Mean and Standard Deviation for Raz-Kids Reading Program

Test iteration	N = 21	
	Mean	SD
Pretest	10.48*	1.37
Posttest	12.19*	1.60

* $p < .01$

Conclusion

The participants in this study consisted of 9 males and 12 females from the same classroom. This was a convenience sample as the author was also the classroom teacher for the students. The eight-week study using the Raz-Kids online reading program resulted in a statistically significant result ($p < .01$) when comparing the pretest and posttest reading scores of grade 2 students. In this study, the significance level for probability was set at $p < .05$, so the results obtained are within the acceptable range of statistical significance. The results showed an improvement in reading comprehension levels for the sample of students. In addition, there was a higher variability between the pretest ($SD=1.37$) and posttest scores ($SD=1.60$). The improved results of the reading comprehension scores might have been influenced by the novelty effect of the reading program. They may also be influenced by extraneous factors such as student home reading during the eight week time period.

Strengths of the Study

The results of the study were statistically significant ($p < .01$). In this particular context, the results indicate that the students benefitted from the Raz-Kids e-reading program. These results are similar to the findings of a six-week study conducted with 17 grade two students. Hendrickson (2014) found the use of the Raz-Kids reading program improved the reading achievement of students particularly in reading comprehension.

The mean for the posttest score ($M=12.19$) was higher when compared to the mean of the pre-test score ($M=10.48$). This indicates that the average performance of the students in reading increased during the study. The posttest scores ($SD=1.60$) varied more than the pretest score ($SD=1.37$) indicating students reading achievement on the benchmark assessments showed more variation after the eight week period.

Also, based on informal observations by the author, the Raz-Kids reward program provided incentives for reading that the students enjoyed throughout the duration of the study. Students were eager to read daily to accumulate stars. In a study of 17 grade 2 students, Hendrickson (2014) made a similar informal observation regarding reward incentives in the Raz-Kids program. Morgan (2013) states that, according to researchers, proficient readers can make academic gains by using multimodal e-books. Students at the author's school are in an academic program and thus are more proficient readers. The Raz-Kids program may be more suited to the students and could account for the results obtained.

Students in this study might have been more engaged because of the features of the electronic text and this increased engagement contributed to the increase in the mean posttest score. Pearman (2008) found that students who used electronic versions of text were more engaged during the task as compared to the students who read the print version. Ertrem's (2011) findings also supported the benefits of using narrative books. In Ertrem's (2011) study, the use of narrative e-books led to higher comprehension scores

for children. In the author's study, 17 students who participated moved up one or more reading levels after the eight -week period.

Delimitations

The most important delimitations were the size and age of the sample and the fact they were taught by a single teacher. The convenience sample consisted of 21 students in grade 2 who were instructed by the author of the study. Due to these contextual choices and a small sample size, the result of this study may not be generalizable or only to schools that match the contextual aspects of this study. In addition, the study cannot control for additional reading activities performed by students during a normal school day and at home during the eight-week period.

Limitations

The study had several limitations. The author instructed the students in the sample and also assessed the students using the benchmark passages. Therefore, it is possible that the author introduced researcher bias in the study during the assessment process. To assess reading achievement and assign students to a reading level, students were required to read benchmark passages provided by Raz-Kids e-reading program. According to researchers, benchmark passages used for reading assessment, present a limitation for this study (Fawson et al., 2006).

Traditionally student's reading achievement was diagnosed using running records. The reliability and validity of using this instrument to measure reading achievement has not been widely researched. Threats to the reliability of benchmark assessments lie in the passage itself. Although reading passages are deemed to be at the same reading level changes in the semantic structure and concepts presented in each passage may vary considerably (Fawson et al., 2006). These differences may make passages in the same reading level more difficult than others. Although the program offered a few different passages for each reading level, all students were given the same passage for a particular reading level.

An additional limitation of this study is the short duration in which this study was conducted. The study was conducted for eight weeks. During this period of time, students were allowed 30 minutes daily to use the Raz-Kids reading program in the classroom. During the eight-week period, two students in the sample missed one 30-minute session each.

Further research in a different school setting would add to the body of research on the effectiveness of e-reading on student reading achievement. Did students in this study benefit from the narrative text or was the novelty effect at play? Could the growth in reading comprehension be influenced by additional reading activities that students engaged in out of school?

In addition, future research using a larger sample and a control group would address some of the limitations found in this study. Research to compare print and e-reading would add to the evidence in this study as well as those found in Ertrem's (2011) study of narrative e-reading books and improved student reading achievement. The results of this study indicate that students, in this sample, benefitted from the daily e-reading program.

Finally

This study sought to evaluate the effect of daily e-book reading on student reading comprehension. According to Constructivism Learning Theory, students learn best if they have opportunities to interact with their learning environment and the learning is scaffolded to support them. If students have choice, it is a motivator for learning. The use of the daily e-reading program Raz-Kids scaffolds the learning by providing interactive levelled books and the different reading levels offer many choices for reading material.

The author hypothesized that using e-books for daily reading would increase reading comprehension scores for grade two students. The results of an eight-week reading study were statistically significant ($p < .01$). The limitations of the novelty effect and extraneous variables such as additional reading activities at home may have influenced the results of the study. These findings would be useful for teachers who would like to implement a silent reading program in their classroom. The students in this study benefitted from the daily use of the Raz-Kids program.

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Appendix A

Running Record	Quick Check Comprehension Quiz	Action
95% +	95% +	Advance Student a Level
95% +	80-94%	Instruct at this Level
95% +	<80%	Lower a Level, Assess Again
90-94%	80-94%	Instruct at this Level
90-94%	<80%	Lower a Level, Assess Again
<90%	N/A	Lower a Level, Assess Again

<http://Raz-Kids.com>

Collaboration: Improving Literacy and Engagement in Junior High Language Arts

Carol Bartel Nickel
Teacher at Aurora Academic Charter School

This mixed methods study investigates differences in student achievement in a grade nine English classroom when comparing Direct Instruction, a Collaborative Learning Model and a Computer Supported Collaborative Learning Model (CSCL). Quantitative data indicated a statistically significant difference in student achievement between Direct Instruction and each of the collaborative learning models. Qualitative data were analyzed into three thematic categories: Engagement, Student Learning, and Efficacy. A student preference for CSCL emerged.

Context

The new tenets of 21st century learning are changing classrooms. Students, already engaged with a wide variety of technologies, challenge educators to innovate in the classroom. Alberta has undergone a shift in education towards creating student centred curricula. Integrating technology within the new policy framework represents the initial shift of this curriculum implementation. “Responding effectively to students’ literacy needs demands innovative solutions, and clear direction and a commitment to collaboration.” (Alberta Education, 2010, p.6) Recent research has emphasized the benefits of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning(CSCL) environments, which support collaborative tasks, and lead to increased levels of engagement. (Stahl, 2012; Stahl, Lao &

Hesse, 2013; Vesisenaho, Valtonen, Kukkonen, Havu-Nuutinen, Hartikainen, & Karkkainen, 2010). Together, these ideas point to the need for innovative change at the classroom level.

Within Alberta, charter schools have been considered programs of choice, “brought in under specific conditions, defining choice according to each charter granted by the province.” (The Association of Alberta Charter Schools, [TAAPCS], 2011) In a shifting provincial paradigm, however, these programs may look for ways to adapt. The context for this study was a charter school that champions Direct Instruction (DI) and a loosely defined “traditional” philosophy. The new ministerial mandate for student-centred learning poses a challenge for this school. The DI model centres on covering content and on individual accountability as measured by students’ progress and behaviour (Koziuff, LaNunziata, Cowardin & Bessellieu, 2001). Within this study, comparing methods of instruction attempts to explore one part of the 21st Century initiative of collaboration and its effect on student achievement. Several factors converge to motivate the current study: a provincial mandate that includes “Engaged Thinker” and promotes literacy; a program of choice; and integrating technology in the classroom.

This study aims to compare three teaching interventions: the DI teaching method, a Student Collaborative Model and a CSCL model. The DI model centers on covering content efficiently through teacher-directed tasks, guided practice and measured achievement results (Koziuff, LaNunziata, Cowardin, & Bessellieu, 2001). In contrast to DI, collaborative learning emphasizes process and conceptual development. The collaborative models share common characteristics: small group discussion to improve conceptual understanding through elaboration, negotiating meaning through integrating various points of view, and co-creating knowledge through controversy and synthesis of information (Van Boxtel, Van der Linden, & Kanselaar, 2000; Blooma, Kurian, Chua, Goh, & Lien, 2013). The CSCL model generally refers to networked environments where students use computers to work collaboratively (Stahl, Lao & Hesse 2013; Vesisenaho, et.al, 2010). CSCL models continue to evolve alongside new research. This study attempted to explore one part of the 21st Century learning—collaboration—and its effect on student achievement and on student engagement within a local and specific context.

Method and Data Collection

This study is limited to an urban setting in Alberta, within a Charter school that has a small junior high of approximately 165 students. The sample for this study was formed from 48 grade nine students; it is a sample of convenience. The ratio of boys to girls is 29:19 or approximately 60% males. Thirty-six of the students are first generation Canadian and twelve students were not born in Canada.

This study used a mixed methods approach. The quantitative research question for this study was:

1. Will there be a difference in student achievement when comparing Direct Instruction, a Computer Supported Collaborative Learning model and a Collaborative Learning model?

Qualitative research questions were:

2. Will Collaborative Learning have an effect on students' perception of their own learning?
3. Will Computer Supported Collaborative Learning encourage critical thinking and problem solving between peers?
4. Will Computer Supported Collaborative Learning affect student interactions?
5. Will the use of laptops foster collaboration in the classroom?

The duration of each unit of study was three weeks. The DI unit used a set of stories, and the two collaborative units used a novel of comparable difficulty to the story set. Interpretive learning tasks for each of the units included comprehension questions, a picture analysis and short personal written responses. In the Collaborative learning models, student discussions generated new questions or topics within specific student groups as part of the collaborative process. For the Collaborative models, students formed triads of mixed gender; these were chosen by students. New triads were established for each model. The CSCL model used the web-based program, *Socratic*, as the computer support. Quantitative data were collected from a set of posttests administered at the end of each unit of study. The first test was a Summative Unit test and the other, a standardized reading test. Summative Unit Tests used the same format and length; test items were analyzed according to a table of specifications using Bloom's taxonomy. Excerpts from released Alberta Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) were used for the standardized tests: these were narrative passages of comparable length, question format and difficulty.

Quantitative data were analyzed applying a Single-Sample Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Qualitative data were collected through student responses to two open-ended questions: What did you like about [intervention]? What did you dislike about [intervention]? One month after the study, students were asked another set of open-ended questions: What were the advantages of [intervention]? What were the disadvantages of [intervention]? Data were collected and analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were categorized according to emergent themes.

Key Findings

Quantitative Results

The data from the two testing instruments remained consistent. The ANOVA for the Unit tests showed a mean difference of 10.75 between DI and a Collaborative Model of Learning ($p < 0.001$). Between DI and a CSCL model ($p < 0.0016$) the data indicate a difference of 7.23. When comparing a Collaborative Learning model and CSCL model, no

statistically significant mean difference 3.518 ($p < 0.137$) appeared. Posttest scores for CSCL and Collaborative Learning were statistically significantly higher ($p < 0.003$) than DI. The second ANOVA for the standardized PAT reading excerpts was consistent with the Unit tests: between DI and a Collaborative Model of Learning ($p < 0.001$) there was a mean difference of 9.95. The data show a difference of 8.10 ($p < 0.008$) between Direct Instruction and a CSCL model. The data show no statistically significant mean difference of 1.85 ($p < 0.543$) between CSCL and a Collaborative Learning model.

1. Quantitative data indicated a statistically significant difference in student achievement between DI and a Collaborative Model of Learning. There was an increase in achievement under the Collaborative Model of Learning.
2. Quantitative data indicated a statistically significant difference between DI and CSCL. There was an increase in student achievement under the CSCL model.
3. Quantitative data did not indicate a statistical difference between a Collaborative Model and CSCL.

These results responded to the first research question demonstrating that the method of instruction did make a difference in student achievement.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative themes brought forward the voices of the learners as they considered and reflected upon the learning process. Regarding DI, students spoke about the efficiency of this method: “The instructions, methods and expectations are very clear and easy to understand,” and, “DI makes the process more clear and simplistic.” The student perspective suggests a desire to find the right answer and focus on learning the right information for the task. While students appreciated the directness of DI, some suggested DI contributed to student distractedness, “it (DI) is as boring as a board.” Students also recognized that DI “doesn’t make use of some of the resources we have available.” With respect to Collaborative Learning model, co-creating emerged as one of the benefits: “We put our minds together and came up with a consensus and a sophisticated answer,” and, “at the end you saw how your point of view was different.” The Collaborative Learning model also helped students reflect on their learning process, and the group triads facilitated “expressing opinion to people you usually don’t work with.”

Support emerged for each of the interventions, but comments revealed a preference for the CSCL model. Students appreciated comparing personal results through the software program, noting “[Socratic] brings in excitement,” and it “allowed for more interpretation of the text.” One student stated, “We all had a good time.” Depth of learning was demonstrated through comments that contrasted perspectives as “useful because you get a collective idea of others’ thoughts enhancing your knowledge.”

In summary, the key findings of this qualitative data were:

1. The DI model was less engaging, but was appreciated for the clarity of instruction.
2. Students were aware of sources outside the classroom (on-line) which provide relevant and timely information or resources.
3. The CSCL model consistently provided positive engagement.
4. The computer support within the CSCL model facilitated discussion and enabled deeper understanding.
5. The Collaborative model which saw student-led discussion, debate, elaboration and reflection, resulting in high levels of student engagement.
6. The depth of understanding and reflective learning were noted in both CSCL and the Collaborative models.
7. For CSCL and Collaborative models, students commented on the benefits of learning from a variety of perspectives within small groups as well as from discussion.

These results are consistent with previous research around collaborative learning models. Some studies have explored positive effects of CSCL and small peer group interactions (Tsui, 2011; Williams, 2009; Vesisenaho et al., 2010). Stahl and Hesse discuss increased levels of student engagement using CSCL (pp. 268 – 269), urging the use of appropriate interventions. Studies also indicate that collaborative models use student-centered learning environments and foster high levels of engagement. (Istance & Kools, 2013; Gomez, Wu, & Passerini, 2010) Research also supports the conclusion that knowledge is co-created through a collaborative process within a learner-supported environment (Saab, Van Joolingen & Van Hout-Wolters, 2012; Friesen, 2009; Blooma et al., 2013). This study supports research around collaborative models.

Concluding Thoughts

Returning to the central questions of this study, the data brought forward some important ideas. From this data, student perception of learning was enriched through both collaborative models. Both collaborative-based interventions facilitated knowledge creation between learners, fostered an interactive, engaging learning environment and encouraged higher-level critical thinking skills. These conclusions are supported in current research that recognizes an urgent need for effective interventions using online platforms (Stahl & Hesse, 2006; Vesisenaho et. al, 2013; Blooma et. al, 2013).

The study has implications within its context. There is a level of comfort – predictability - in using DI pedagogy. DI may be the tried and true pedagogy in this context, but the collaborative learning models, implemented deliberately, encourage higher levels of engagement and also impact student achievement as demonstrated in this study.

Collaboration encourages reflection and critical thinking; it supports deeper learning. The CSCL model supports a process where students engage in thoughtful debate, elaboration and controversy to negotiate meaning. This process defines the difference between DI and collaborative learning. As part of 21st Century learning, collaborative learning models, particularly CSCL models, foster learning and engagement and do make a positive difference in student achievement.

There are implications for other classrooms that may use DI as the default method of instruction. DI provides an efficient method for content-based instruction, but a more effective impact can be noticed with a deliberate pedagogical choice and design. Using CSCL tasks to challenge, extend and enhance traditional ways of thinking and learning can engage the learners more effectively in their learning process. Using technology to support collaboration meets the learners in their natural space. As learners engage through the technology and the collaborative process, learners create a richer knowledge and learn to appreciate diversity.

Collaborative learning poses challenges: setting up that supportive environment demands a re-thinking of the lesson design, one that moves away from prescriptive efficiency and builds on student interest along with an opportunity to explore those interests.

This study showed that digital literacy can be applied through a collaborative learning intervention within the context of a school that is based on a DI model. It showed that different collaborative models will improve student engagement and contribute to improved student achievement. Collaboration invigorates learning, for teachers and for students.

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The Effects of a Community Service Project on Fourth Grade Students at Aurora Academic Charter School

Lorrie Makepeace
Teacher Aurora Academic Charter School

Abstract

In a traditional school that employs direct instruction it is worth exploring the effects of a group community service-learning project. This study sought to use a leadership group approach in undertaking a service-learning project. This project used a mixed method approach of data collection, utilizing quantitative analysis of academic marks as well as qualitative field notes and interviews. This study found that overall there were some benefits in the participation of the project with regards to citizenship, leadership, and engagement, but overall no significant academic benefit for students.

Keywords: service-learning, leadership, citizenship, engagement, academics

Context

In May of 2013, the Alberta Minister of Education signed the Ministerial Order on Student Learning to focus on educational best interests of the student when making decisions about a child's education. This incorporates the three E's of education in the Inspiring Education initiative. The three E's being to ensure that students will graduate as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit. Researching the effects of a community service-learning project on fourth grade students at Aurora Academic Charter School will aid us in fulfilling the requirements of this mandate. While many initiatives

for service learning have come from policy makers and politicians, this has not always been the case. As the pendulum swings, recommendations that service be a part of the school experience has reappeared in cyclical fashion (Conrad and Hedin, 1991).

This study was conducted at the Aurora Academic Charter School in a renewal year, as all charter schools must seek renewal every five years. A requirement came out of this report for our school to demonstrate how we are connecting with the community. Introducing a community service-learning project will help meet this requirement. Grade 4 students are the eldest in our school as I teach in a Kindergarten to grade four school. Aurora Academic Charter School is a teacher-directed traditionally run school. Student peer collaboration is rare and students are more competitive rather than collaborative. A project like this will be a departure from the norm.

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to understand the effects of a community service-learning project on fourth grade students through interviewing, journaling, and observation. Questions included but are not limited to the following: How will a community service project affect fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School? What leadership qualities will be discovered in students who participate? How will this project affect the participants' academics? Will students demonstrate the qualities of the three E's including citizenship and engagement?

Community service learning is defined by Wade as "the integration of school or community-based service activities with academic skills and structured reflection" (Wade, 2007, p. 156). In addition, Ohn and Wade define service learning by stating, "The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1993) defines service-learning as a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences" (Ohn & Wade, 2009, 200).

The effects of a community service project on fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School was studied. Using a mixed methods approach, students were asked for feedback using journals and interviews. They were also observed to attempt to understand the implications of the community service-learning project. These data were used to imply correlation and effects of a community service project.

Related Literature

The following literature review explores prior research on the implications of a community service-learning project on student leadership, academics, student engagement, and citizenship. Community service learning is defined by Wade as the integration of school or community-based service activities with academic skills and structured reflection (Wade, 2007). In addition, Ohn and Wade define service learning by stating, "The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1993) defines service-learning as a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully

organized service experiences” (Ohn & Wade, 2009, p. 200). Service learning has been revealed as an instructional strategy that can help students enhance academic achievement, increase motivation and engagement, and develop citizenship (Wade, 2001). Mann, Dymond, Bonati, and Neeper (2015) add that service-learning has witnessed unprecedented attention across academic disciplines and throughout the North American schools over the past two decades (Billig, 2000; Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Butin, 2003; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000; Saltmarsh, 2011). Findings from Pedersen, Yager & Yager (2012) suggest that student-led leadership roles within the school community have an impact on creating a positive school-wide climate; a positive impact on their own development; and a positive influence on their peers.

Implications on Student Leadership

The student participants in this research study will take on leadership roles. Interviews with participants, journals from the participants, and observations will be used to measure the effects, if any, that the community service project will have on student leaders. Groves (2013) reports findings from a case study on three schools where student leadership was highlighted. In interviewing the students he finds that the language used by students to express their view of what they felt had been the impact for them. Key words include confidence, relationships, tolerance, and teamwork or, in other words, relationships and self-esteem. Thomson (2012) reports similar findings about learning outcomes from student leaders in another context, but notes how little work has been undertaken to assess the learning gains from student voice and leadership. Des Marais, Yang and Farznehkia (2000) assert that service-learning is the most powerful initiative in youth leadership development but that the reason it is not more widely utilized is that it is challenging and teachers must give up some control. Frost (2008) introduces the HCD (Highest Common Denominator) Student Partnership as a key way in which the ‘Leadership for Learning’ team learns from, explores, and extends student leadership and participation within the current educational context. There does appear to be a growing consensus that student participation can enhance the quality of learning through improvements in communication and in the social conditions for learning.

Implications on Academics

Students will be missing instructional time while performing a community service project. Will this affect their academic achievement? Students learn both social problem-solving skills and academic knowledge through service-learning programs (Morris, 2008). However, Ohn and Wade later researched and found that that most service-learning projects focus on merely providing services to help people in need from a charity perspective rather than helping students obtain and apply academic knowledge and develop reflective inquiry skills through certain problem-solving processes (Ohn & Wade, 2009). This study will attempt to discover a correlation between academics and a community service project. It has been suggested that with the current focus on increasingly higher stan-

standardized test performance, schools should consider adopting service-learning methods as a way to enhance the academic performance of their students (Soslau & Yost, 2007).
Implications on Student Engagement

The first of the three E's that have been identified by Alberta Education is to have students become engaged thinkers. Research conducted by Soslau and Yost demonstrated increased student achievement and motivation by eliciting real-world connections between book learning and the everyday lives of students. These data also indicate that students involved in service-learning are more likely to attend class regularly and spend longer time periods on task, which may indicate an increased desire to attend class and learn. Thus it is concluded that when students are able to make real-world connections, commensurate gains are made in their motivation to learn (Soslau & Yost, 2007).

Implications on Citizenship

In May of 2013, the Alberta Minister of Education signed the Ministerial Order on Student Learning to focus on educational best interests of the student when making decisions about a child's education. Much of this literature points to educating the 21st century learner and creating an education whereas students will graduate as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit. Morris states that service-learning projects help students make connections to their community and help them to think about civic participation (Morris, 2008). He goes on to say that the popularity of service-learning among the nation's K-12 educators rests primarily on its ability to promote students' self-esteem and civic responsibility (Wade, 2007). Metz, McLellan, & Youniss (2003) claim that those involved in service-learning keep their original intentions to remain active within their community.

Furco (2013) affirms that more attention needs to be paid to garnering more generalizable findings through the employment of experimental design, valid measures, and more sophisticated analyses (Billig & Furco, 2001; Bringle, 2003).

Strategies

The following section discusses the strategies used to conduct this study, which investigates the effects of a community service project on fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School. Specifically, this section will provide details about the research question and hypothesis, the role of the researcher, the participants and the setting, rationale, limitations and delimitations, materials, design and procedure, and the instruments used.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The student participants in this research study will take on leadership roles. They will collectively decide on a community service project. Interviews with participants, journals from the participants, and observations will be used to measure the effects, if any, that

the community service-learning project will have on student leaders. The question this study seeks to answer is what are the effects of a community service-learning project on fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School? More specifically, what are the implications with regards to student leadership, academics, student engagement, and Citizenship? It is predicted that, there will be benefits to each of these facets of education.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study are fourth grade students attending the Aurora Academic Charter School. Aurora Academic Charter School has recently been split from a K-9 school to an elementary K-4 school and a 5-9 middle school. However, both of these schools remain housed in the same building. The K-4 elementary school has 388 students.

Similar to all charter schools in Alberta, Aurora is publicly funded with the absence of tuition fees. The clientele is largely immigrant families who are looking for traditional education. Students wear uniforms and sit in desks right from kindergarten. A majority of the students are bussed from many parts of the city or are driven to school.

All grade four students were given an application form as a writing assignment in class. These applications were examined by the homeroom teachers as well as myself. Students were chosen from the quality of their responses as well as history and knowledge of the students from the teachers. The students who were chosen included six male and six female students. The academic standing of the students was not taken into consideration.

Rationale

To conduct this study on the effects of a community service-learning project, a mixed method approach was chosen. Data was recorded measuring the students engagement, leadership, and citizenship attitudes. However, as part of this study is measuring attitudes, a survey may not be the most accurate measure. Thus, I observed and took field notes from my vantage point as the facilitator to note any behavior patterns, effects, and changes as the community service-learning project was performed. Students were also asked to write in a journal and common threads were pulled out. Part of this involved reflection as researcher and teacher. Though this design could not control a number of factors that threaten the validity of this study, this study provided a baseline to determine the effects of a community service-learning project on fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School.

Limitations and Delimitations

Because this study involved students I already work with, convenience sampling was

inherently built into this study. This was only tested on a sample of fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School. No randomization or differing of samples were involved. This sample size may limit its generalizability. Furthermore, the fact that this project was tested in a K-4 charter school limits its generalizability to other school settings. Its applicability to higher or lower grades is questionable as well. Observation and assessment of the data were done by one researcher alone, who was involved as the facilitator, and thus this lack of triangulation may similarly limit the certainty of observations and qualitative data. There are a number of other factors that went into the academic progress of the students and therefore the quantitative data of academics does not only represent the results of the participation in the project.

Outcomes and Findings

The data collection period lasted a total of four months. Billig (2011) states that service-learning is typically comprised of six components: investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration. These are the steps that students went through in constructing a history or legacy wall of our school in its 20th year of operation. Students were asked to apply to be involved in the project just after the first report card marks were collected. This made it easy for academic data collection between the first and second term report card marks. All grade four students were presented with basic details about a service-learning community project that they would initiate. All students were asked to fill out an application form as part of a writing assignment. If students actually wanted to be a part of the project they were to put a star at the top of the page. The researcher discussed with the homeroom teachers, which students would work on the project. Academic standing was not taken into account. Quite the opposite for one student who was chosen in hopes that his engagement in this project would actually create an engagement in school itself. The student struggled with organization and getting homework completed and returned to school. He was only part of the project for two weeks and was not able to continue due to the fact that he was getting more and more behind in his schoolwork. He was not part of the data collected. Students were chosen because of the answers they gave on the application form. Any type of creative answer was looked upon favourably. Also, homeroom teachers looked at who might work well together in a group.

Once the groups were chosen, the larger group got together to meet and talk about what the project would entail. Students were given time to research on the internet what legacy or history walls looked like which is what the community service-learning project became about. From the second meeting on, students met in smaller groups according to their homeroom classes. Students were given a notebook to jot down ideas as they researched. Students then had a few classes to research and brainstorm ideas in smaller groups. The researcher noticed an individual approach at the beginning. Students wanted to get the answer right and didn't want anyone to copy them. By the end they were sharing their ideas and brainstorming off of each others ideas. As each idea developed, plans were put in to place to execute them. Students decided to put in the announce-

ments trivia about the school and its past 20 years. Then one group decided to cut out big letters AURORA and paste pictures to the letters for display. A collage was also made for the cabinet that was being used for the display. One group decided to make posters of the past and present leaders of the school as well as the current board of directors. There were not enough pictures to be found of all the past board members. An interview was conducted by the students of a long time employee who was familiar with the history of the school. The students thought of the questions. Students assembled the display adding uniforms of past and present. A photo of the final project is added in the appendix.

To jot down qualitative data, the researcher used a notebook and pen. Notes were taken after the students went back to class as an attempt to avoid observer effect. Students were also given notebooks to journal their experiences. These journals were read and analyzed by the researcher. Interviews of the students used to measure students' opinions as to how they perceived the effects of the project with regard to citizenship and student engagement were done at the end of the project. Academics were examined by reviewing the first and second report card marks in English as they missed one English class per week and therefore it was decided that this would be the most indicative of any effects.

Community service-learning projects effect student academics, engagement, citizenship, and leadership abilities. Through the data collected from qualitative and quantitative measures such as observations and student journal writing, the implications have been studied and recorded.

Key Learnings

To investigate the impact of a service-learning project on grade 4 students at the Aurora Academic Charter School, this study implemented a mixed-method study. The project was started after the cut off for term 1 marks and ended at the completion of the second term. The quantitative data used was from the students' English term 1 and term 2 marks. Students missed one class of English per week to be involved in this project, which is why I chose to use the English marks. The marks were recorded for the entire group of students as well as broken down between the classes. Looking at the entire group, the data did not show a significant difference between term 1 and term 2. Breaking down the classes, the first two groups did not show a significant difference between the terms but the difference between term 1 and 2 for the third class was significant.

Concurrently, I took field notes after each meeting with the students to monitor student behavior with regards to leadership, engagement, and citizenship.

Quantitative Data

Students met approximately once per week, usually missing an English class. The marks for English were therefore analyzed from the first term to the second term to attempt to

identify any benefit or disadvantage to being taken out of class to work on this project. Table 1 shows all of the students' term 1 and term 2 English marks. The mean average of the term 1 marks was 78.083% and the average of the term 2 marks was 79.5%. The mean difference was -1.417. The difference between term 1 and term 2 was not significant.

Table 1

Term 1 (Pretest) and Term 2 (Posttest) Mean and Standard Deviation for all students English marks

Test Iteration	All Students	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Term 1 (Pretest)	78.083	6.898
Term 2 (Posttest)	79.5	9.412

Note. Test source. Aurora Academic Charter School Report Card

p=.193

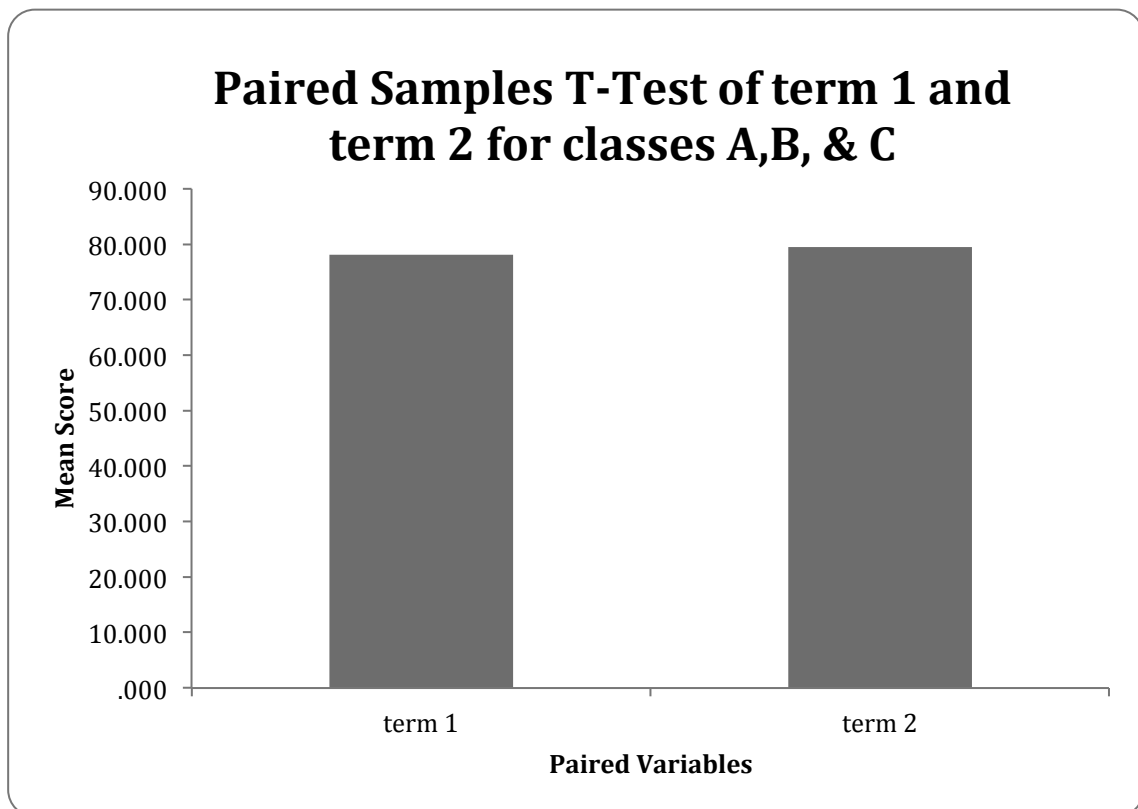


Table 2 shows the data from just the students in class A. The students in class A had an average of 84.333% in term 1 for English. In term 2 the average for English was 86%. This results in a mean difference of -1.667 with a p value of .370. The difference between term 1 and term 2 was not significant for class A.

Term 1 (Pretest) and Term 2 (Posttest) Mean and Standard Deviation for students English marks in Class A

Class A		
N=3		
Test Iteration	Mean	Standard Deviation
Term 1 (Pretest)	84.333	6.110
Term 2 (Posttest)	86	7.550

Note. Test source. Aurora Academic Charter School Report Card

p=.370

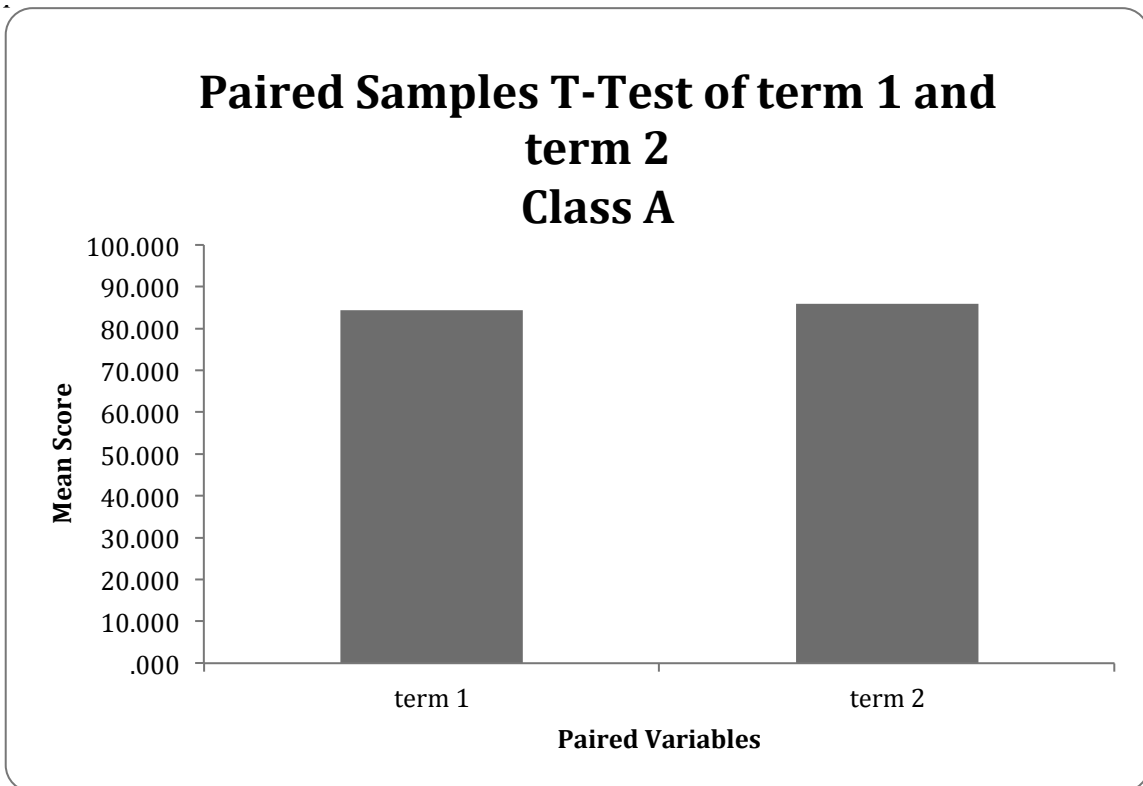


Table 3 shows the data from just the students in class B. The students in class B had an average of 72.4% in term 1 for English. In term 2 the average for English was 70.4%. This results in a mean difference of -2 with a p value of .154. The difference between term 1 and term 2 was not significant for class B.

Table 3

Term 1 (Pretest) and Term 2 (Posttest) Mean and Standard Deviation for students English marks in Class B

Test Iteration	Class B	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Term 1 (Pretest)	72.4	5.273
Term 2 (Posttest)	70.4	6.348

Note. Test source. Aurora Academic Charter School Report Card

p=.154

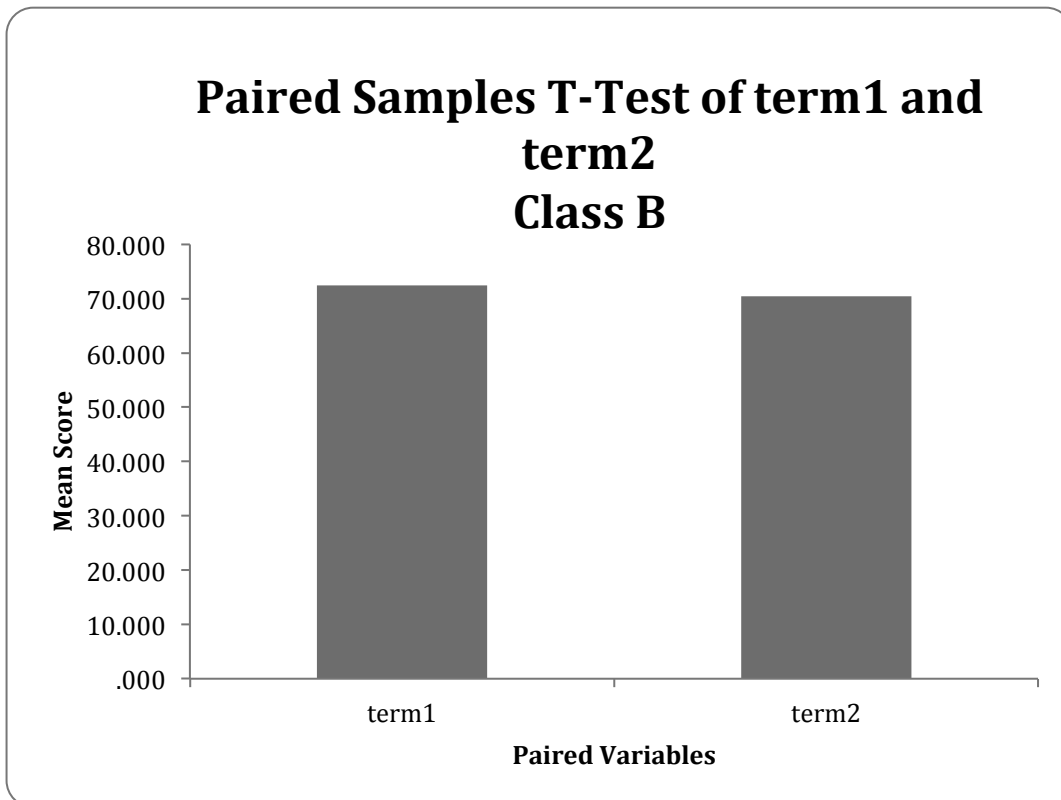


Table 4 shows the data from just the students in class C. The students in class C had an average of 80.5% in term 1 for English. In term 2 the average for English was 86%. This results in a mean difference of -5.5 with a p value of 0.000. The difference between term 1 and term 2 was significant for class C.

Table 4

Term 1 (Pretest) and Term 2 (Posttest) Mean and Standard Deviation for students English marks in Class C

Class C		
N=4		
Test Iteration	Mean	Standard Deviation
Term 1 (Pretest)	80.5	5.260
Term 2 (Posttest)	86	5.099

Note. Test source. Aurora Academic Charter School Report Card

=p<.01

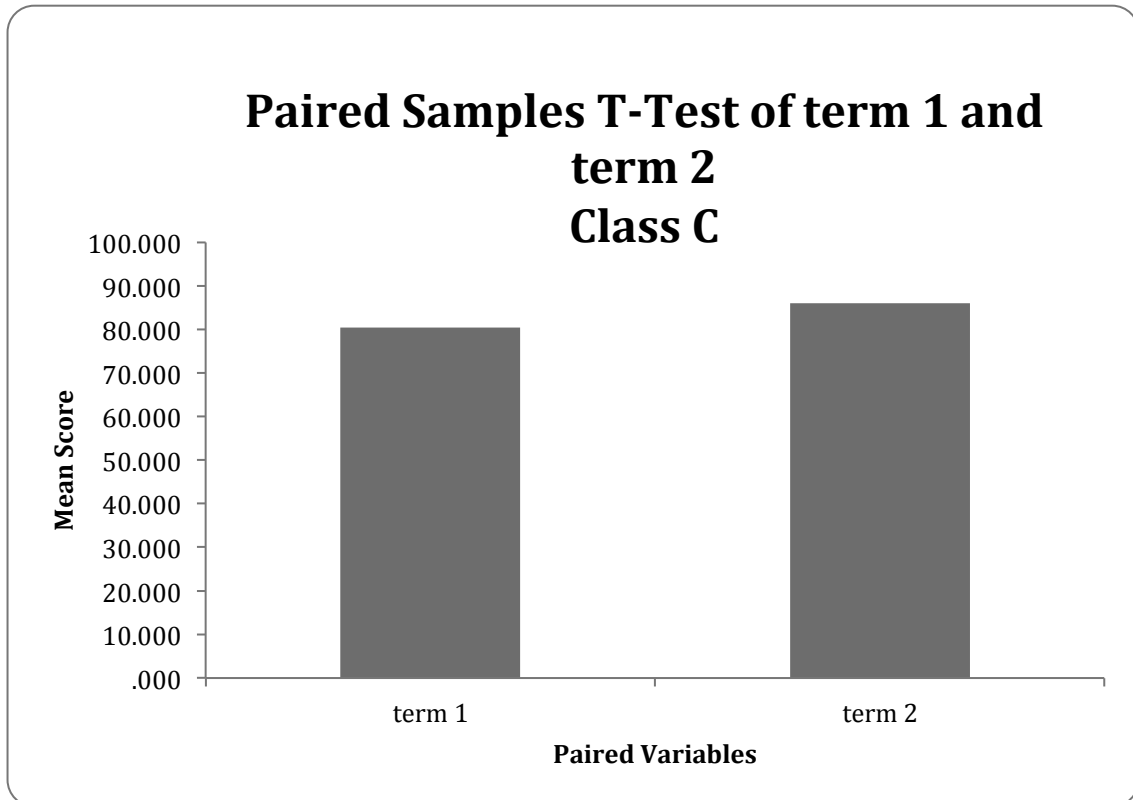


Table 5 shows that the class averages of all students between term 1 and term 2 was exactly the same.

Table 5

Test Iteration	Class Averages of All Classes A,B,&C N=12	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Term 1 (Pretest)	76.5	1.732
Term 2 (Posttest)	76.5	1.291

Note. Test source. Aurora Academic Charter School Report Card

p=1.00

Comparing the data of all three classes presents an interesting observation. There is only one group that showed a significant difference. There are many factors that may have gone in to the marks that were reported.

Qualitative Data

During the duration of the project, I took field notes from my vantage point as teacher and researcher. I took notes after the groups met so that students did not notice me jotting down notes. In the beginning it was interesting to see the students wanting to find the right answer. The students are used to a more competitive rather than collaborative approach and students were looking for an answer as opposed to just brainstorming ideas. As the project went on it was interesting to see students work more collaboratively and feed ideas off each other. Different students initiated different parts of the project bringing forth leadership qualities. Some students had difficulty without the structure that they were used to. Students were excited to come to work on the project and would ask me whenever they saw me in the halls when the next time they could come. Students were engaged in the project and showed a keen interest in coming to work on it. Students were asked if they felt that working on this project made them more interested (engaged) in coming to school. All students gave the indication that they already enjoyed school. Three students said that they felt that the days they came to work on the project made them even happier to come to school.

Students were asked at the end of the project if they would work on a similar project in the future. All students agreed that they enjoyed working on the project and would participate again in the future. Students were asked if they felt that working on this project put them in a leadership role. Again, all students agreed that they were leaders. Students

used the words self-esteem and confidence when asked what leadership skills they felt they had acquired due to the involvement in the project. Students were also asked if they felt that this project created a better sense of community within the school. All students agreed that this project helped them understand the history of the school and any volunteers or visitors that came in the school.

Although the quantitative data examining the academic results of the students were largely insignificant, it was interesting to see that one class out of the three did have a significant difference between the term 1 and term 2 marks. Further research should be done to see if a service-learning project of this kind would yield greater effects.

Class A was a class that has undergone some non-traditional teaching methodologies so it was not surprising to me that the academics weren't affected greatly. Class B is a very traditional class and I was quite sure that the marks and the effect might be greater in this class. This was not the case, as the data proved to be insignificant. Also, these students expressed some concern that they had to miss class and catch up on other work. Similarly, class A also spoke about not wanting to miss class. Class C was the class that did have the significant difference. This class has two teachers who teach quite differently. It is interesting and surprising to me that this is the class that showed to have the significant difference. However, this could be attributed to many other factors in the class and the students involve. More research needs to be done in this area.

The introduction of the service-learning community project was well received by all the grade 4 students. All students were enthusiastic about participating in the project. During the first few meetings, students were looking for direction because Aurora is a teacher-directed school. It took them a few meetings before they came to understand that they were in the driver's seat of this project and that it could go wherever they wanted it to. At first, students just seemed to want to find the correct answer and were competitive instead of collaborative. It took some time, but with guidance, the students engaged in peer collaboration and came up with ideas to move forward.

One student who started the project was chosen due to his lack of engagement in school. The goal was to have him become more engaged. Unfortunately, the teacher found that his work was still not getting done and pulled him early from the group. One other student left the school shortly after the project started. The other students were engaged in the project and showed leadership characteristics through leading the morning announcements. Students were always asking when they were going to have another meeting which indicated engagement in the project.

Students expressed the feelings of creating a school community and increasing good citizenship in our school as a result of this project. Students felt that the display itself increased a sense of community and citizenship with the school and any visitor that might see it.

This study used students in my classes, and thus there was inherent convenience sampling. It featured just 12 fourth grade students, and thus it may not be generalizable to other grade levels or even other fourth graders at Aurora. Furthermore, the setting was a

very particular one; this group of students were from three different classes. As a result, it may not be generalizable to other classroom settings. For example, if students were all from the same class and this was done as a class project the results may have been significantly different.

Furthermore, only one researcher observed the students and notes were taken after the meetings. There was no triangulation. Therefore, with only one observer, it is highly possible some behavior was missed, and not all the important qualitative data were recorded.

As for the quantitative data with regards to the academics, many other factors may have come into play. The first term is often review that could have made a difference in the marks from one term to the next. Also, the students' personal experiences and home life could have affected their marks. Additional projects with larger groups and varied sample sizes are needed to broaden the generalizability of this study.

Despite several limitations, this study is a good start in delving into service-learning community projects at the Aurora Academic Charter School. Metz, McLellan, and Youniss (2003) claim that those involved in service-learning keep their original intentions to remain active within their community. The students involved in this study have indicated their intentions to remain active within their community.

What's Next

The effects of a service-learning project on fourth grade students at the Aurora Academic Charter School were beneficial with regards to citizenship, student engagement, and leadership. Ponder, Veldt, and Lewis-Ferrell (2011) talk about 21st century skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration as only being developed through consistent and meaningful practice over time. It may take more time to address 21st century learning goals and connect learning to real-life experiences at the Aurora Academic Charter School. The effects of the service-learning project on Academics were inconclusive. More research is needed to determine any effects a community service-learning project may have on academics.

This study examined the effects of a community service-learning project on grade four students at the Aurora Academic Charter School. This was one project in the course of a year within a system that employs teacher directed learning. There is a need for more research in this area to determine benefits and/or disadvantages to students when being part of a community service-learning project. This project showed that there were some benefits to the students with regards to engagement, citizenship, and leadership. Academic standing benefits and/or disadvantages were not clear from this study.

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Appendix 1

Photo of the Legacy-History Wall at the Aurora Academic Charter School



Engaging Students' Difficulties in Story Composition and Organization

Janiffer Song

Teacher Aurora Academic Charter School

Abstract

Although the original goal of this study was to compare the effectiveness a storyboard planning method versus a less structured, student-derived story plan following a writer's workshop style of instruction, the plan changed to instruct all students using the storyboard planning method. This paper is now a qualitative study of the impact of storyboarding on grade 4 student writing looking at planning and writing samples pre- and post-instruction from four students.

Context

Although Aurora Academic Charter School consistently demonstrates strong academic achievement as measured by provincial standards (Provincial Achievement Tests, Student Learning Assessments) and external examinations (Canadian Test of Basic Skills), we have noticed a growing number of students struggling with English as evidenced by declining English language arts PAT scores. Aurora School, based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, is a self-governing, non-profit public school that provides free, quality elementary education, but operates independently of the Edmonton Public School Board. Alberta Education granted our charter in 1996 and our mission is to provide an orderly and structured environment, with properly sequenced teacher-directed instruction and

strong home/school partnerships, where average children can excel in an academically oriented program. However, teachers are struggling to continue to meet the writing needs of our students through our current writing program.

At the height of cooperative and student-directed learning in mainstream public schools, Aurora provided an alternative for students who benefitted from more explicit instruction. Starting with a student population of 280, we have grown to over 700 students and, in 2014, separated into two separate schools to accommodate our continued growth. Aurora Elementary covers kindergarten to grade 4, and Aurora Middle School covers grade 5 to 9. Our demographic reports show that 76% of our children are from immigrant families, 23.8% of whom are identified as English Language Learners (ELL), and that 32 languages other than English are spoken at home.

Researchers August and Hakuta (as cited in Varghese, 2004, para.12) state that one of the practices that supports “optimal [school] conditions” for ELL students is explicit instruction, however, our elementary teachers struggle to meet the increasing needs in our classroom and have identified concerns in language arts performance from weak reading comprehension, limited vocabulary and background knowledge, and poor writing skills. To address these concerns, teachers have been attending more professional development sessions on reading and writing instruction and working independently and collaboratively to develop and implement language arts instruction that better serves our students’ current needs.

Aims and Objectives

Census data from 2012 to 2014 shows that Edmonton proper has experienced explosive growth with an increase of over 60,000 people, a rise of almost 8%, driven mainly by international immigration. With a corresponding increase of ELL students at Aurora School, teachers struggled with a growing disparity in the abilities of students as writers. My specific concern was how I might effectively address the issue of increasing student difficulties in story composition and organization in a teacher-directed setting.

An opportunity to explore this question arose when a recent charter school evaluation of Aurora School recommended implementing an action research program to meet our needs to become more innovative in the area of educational research. My concerns regarding creative writing led me to explore different options currently trending in creative writing for primary students.

My initial findings suggested two major options: explicit instruction using pre-packaged teaching programs such as Big Writing or Barbara Mariconda’s Empowering Writers series (Ings, 2009), or a more student-centred writing workshop method (Conroy, Marchand, & Webster, 2009). However, Taylor’s (2000) description outlining the shift in Nancie Atwell’s writing workshop methodology, from a writing process where students self-direct all aspects of writing to a more teacher-directed style of whole group instruction that allows for direct intervention through the use of mini-lessons, suggested that these differences no longer existed to as great an extent as it did before.

Closer examination found that the main difference between pre-packaged programs and the writing workshop lay in the initial story generation stage. Most writing programs provide a structured story outline, often with story prompts, to help teachers guide students through the plot-making process (Ings, 2009). Whereas, Graves (1985), considered to be the originator of the current writing workshop model, recommended that children be allowed “to compose in idiosyncratic ways” (p.38) on a self-selected topic.

Although my writing instruction combined the structure of a graphic organizer to prepare the story outline with the conferencing and establishment of a community of learners as recommended by the writers' workshop (Graves, 1985), I wondered if grade 4 students at Aurora School would benefit from the freedom to produce their own story framework. Thus, to determine the impact on Aurora students' stories when allowed greater freedom in the writing process, I provided identical creative writing lessons to two grade 4 classes with the sole difference being that one class was directed to use a storyboard to plot their story and the other class could choose how they developed their ideas.

Literature Review

In the field of creative writing research, I have found little research that directly compares the effect sizes of explicit instruction in story outlining versus less structured instruction following the writing workshop method. Much current literature on primary schools focuses more on the overarching factors that contribute to a stronger creative writing program and the challenges facing its implementation. One theme echoed in the findings of action research projects in the U.K. (Ings, 2009) and in the United States (Conroy et al., 2009) was the need for a whole school approach to writing. Unified writing programs allow a common language to enable students to build on prior learning; delivery of more consistent approaches to instruction and assessment; and teacher “support and frameworks in and out of the classroom where new teaching and learning strategies can be developed” (Ings, 2009, p. 58). A school-wide focus on writing would also ensure that “both the structural and core features in creating a supportive context for teachers” (Kaiser, 2014, p. 220) are in place.

Teacher supports, referenced by Kaiser (2014) in her study of urban teachers implementing writer's workshop, highlight the importance of greater teacher collaboration and increased professional development targeting writing instruction. Teachers need to “[develop their] own practice as writers” (Ings, 2009, p. 60) to become more effective instructors

Research continues to confirm that a key component in teaching effective writing includes explicit instructional methods to specifically address student needs (Adams, Power, Reed, Reiss, & Romaniak, 1996; Cihak & Castle, 2011; Lienemann, Graham, Leader-Janssen, & Reid, 2006). As noted before, Taylor (2000) acknowledges that Nancie Atwell, a leader in writing workshops, also included direct instruction, over the former use of only student-directed learning, as part of fundamental shift her approach to writing.

Along with explicit instruction, student collaboration, in the form of peer editing, is touted as an essential cornerstone of any successful writing program (Vass, Littleton, Miell, & Jones, 2008; Adams et al., 1996). Adams et al. (1996) found that peer editing removed the insecurities associated with evaluating one's own work and allowed students to "[find] the strengths in the works of others and (express) their praise in an honest and sincere manner" (p.48). This finding supported Graves's (1985) idea that the writing classroom provided an "external structure" of a community of learners that can support each other's work and "(produces) a confident, internal thinking framework within which children learn what they know and develop their own initiative" (p.42).

Although there are volumes on best practices in writing instruction, the greatest challenge for teachers in implementing the strategies identified by researchers is the demand on curricular time to properly implement a good program (Adams et al., 1996; Graves, 1985; Conroy et al., 2009). Adams et al. (1996) stated that "the amount of time devoted to writing workshop affected time spent on other areas of the curriculum [and it] was difficult to maintain a balance of curricula needs" (p. 46).

Thus, a shift to direct instruction is understandable in that benefits are two-fold: teachers are able to specifically target areas of work and to better control the time spent on writing as students do not require extra time to flounder through what they need to do next. Therefore, could directing the story composition through a storyboard provide benefits similar to a writing workshop while better balancing curricular time?

Action Research Methods

Two grade four classes with 22 students each participated in this project. Class 1 was my class, and class 2 was taught by another grade 4 teacher. Arrangements were made with the Class 2 part-time grade 4 teacher to swap part of our teaching assignments. Our school assigns only two periods for creative writing in grade 4, so I also became responsible for teaching two periods of spelling in exchange for the other grade 4 teacher taking on four periods of social studies with my class. This switch allowed for extra writing time during weeks we did not teach spelling and if I could cover the spelling words quickly. Due to the other teacher's schedule, creative writing was taught in double blocks to Class 2 on Mondays and Tuesdays.

For the instructional planning, I worked with our school librarian, Kathy Holubitsky, to create a series of mini-lessons to direct student learning. Kathy is an Edmonton-area author as well as a former creative writing instructor for high school students whose teaching methodology used writing workshops. Using her lessons as a template, I modified lessons on character development, creating conflict, setting and plot development, elaborative details, and dialogue for a grade 4 context. The lessons were planned for September 24, 2015, until November 6, 2015.

Pre- and post-writing samples were taken at the beginning and end of the study period, respectively, to measure the impact of this study. Kathy and I were to independently assess the writing samples using a collaboratively-created rubric looking at idea gen-

eration, organization, and language coherence. An additional external assessor was the Polar Expressions Short Story contest, a national writing contest that judges over 400 grade four entries each year and publishes the top 33-40%. Publication of the top stories, as judged by Kathy and me, from Classes 1 and 2 by this contest would provide validity to our rubric and data. To meet the writing contest deadline, as well as provide grades for term 1 report cards, the projected timeline for this action research was three months.

The first few weeks went according to plan with both Classes 1 and 2; however, things took a drastic turn for the worse for Class 1 when we reached the story-planning phase. Class 1 was designated as the writing workshop class and had to create a written story outline: Class 2 was the storyboard class and used this graphic organizer to produce an initial pictorial outline.

I was confident that Class 1, whose initial pre-writing assignments demonstrated stronger average writing skills than Class 2, would be successful in planning a story even without the aid of pictures. However, instead of anticipated story outlines that had events connected in a fairly logical sequence that needed some teacher intervention to provide clarification, students produced what I thought were a mass of confused outlines. The poorest outlines had serious flaws, ranging from no events occurring to no words even being put down on paper. Even with teacher assistance to develop the ideas and connect events, students struggled to come up with events and understand how to transfer the words of this written outline into a story form.

Looking for another solution, I introduced the storyboard structure to Class 1 as well, explaining that each of the eight frames had a specific purpose. Frame 1 had to show the character and setting exactly prior to the beginning of the problem. Frame 2 was to show the problem occurring. Frames 3-5 were to depict the different attempts of the protagonist in trying to solve the problem. Frame 6 was where the main character solved the problem. Frame 7 was to show the audience what happened after the solution, the real story ending. Frame 8 was to have the protagonist reflect on the adventure. Using these pictures, the writing task could then be broken into manageable chunks as students were asked to write their stories one frame at a time. Conferencing helped students identify problems with organization and flow and the drawings helped draw out more elaborate details.

The necessity of shifting my instructional style for Class 1, from a writer's workshop to a more direct teaching style approach using a storyboard to outline the plot, forced me to abandon the original method of quantitative data collection: a comparison of the average rubric scores on student pre- and post-writing to determine the impact of two different instructional styles. However, this unexpected turn of events provided an opportunity to examine student writing from a more qualitative perspective. Thus, my action research focus changed based upon my initial teaching experiences. I decided that a focus upon a small number (four) of students' work might provide insight my original plan would not.

Using a case study of four students, I will discuss the benefits of storyboarding for grade 4 students with language difficulties. This type of case study is an illustrative case study,

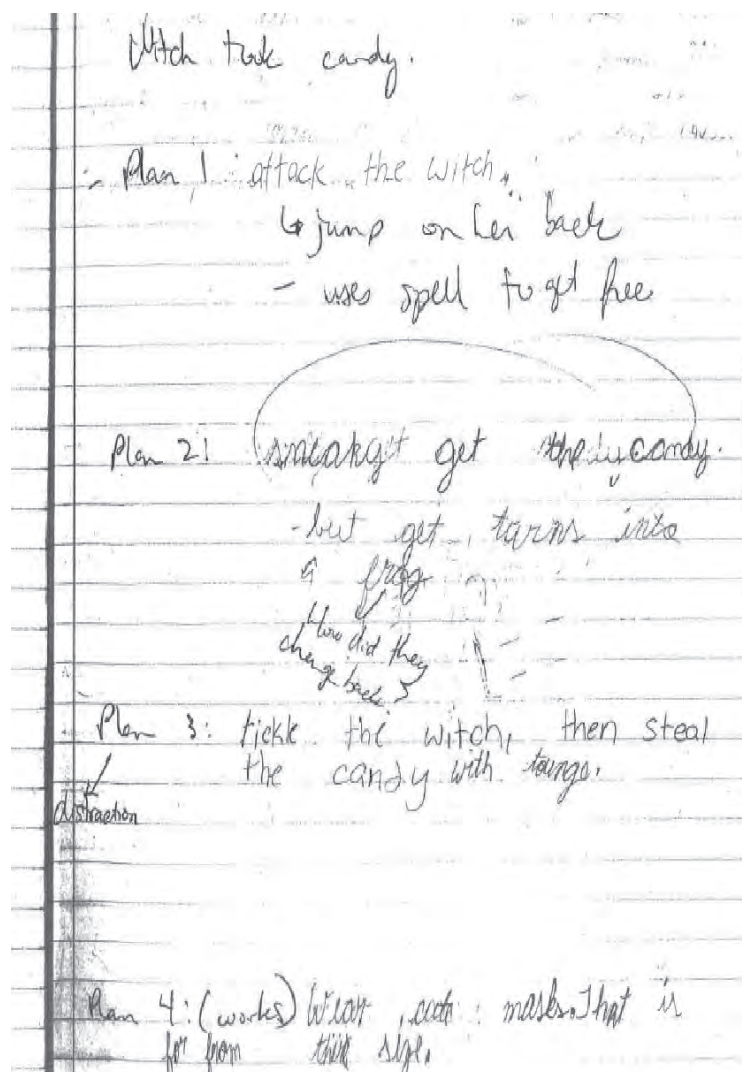
defined by Colorado State University as a “descriptive [study that] typically utilizes one or two instances of an event to show what a situation is like. Illustrative case studies serve primarily to make the unfamiliar familiar and to give readers a common language about the topic in question.” In the case of creative writing at Aurora School, I will explore the journey of four students who started the year using a simple story outline, transitioned to a storyboard, and the resulting changes in their writing.

Data

With the writing workshop group (group one), the initial introduction to writing went smoothly until the story-planning phase. After a discussion on story structure, students were given free rein to develop a plot outline, but they struggled to write down details of the stories they wished to write. I will present and explain student 1’s work throughout the process of switching from the writing workshop format to a storyboard approach to writing as exemplifying the general trend in my class.

Student 1: Initial Story Outline

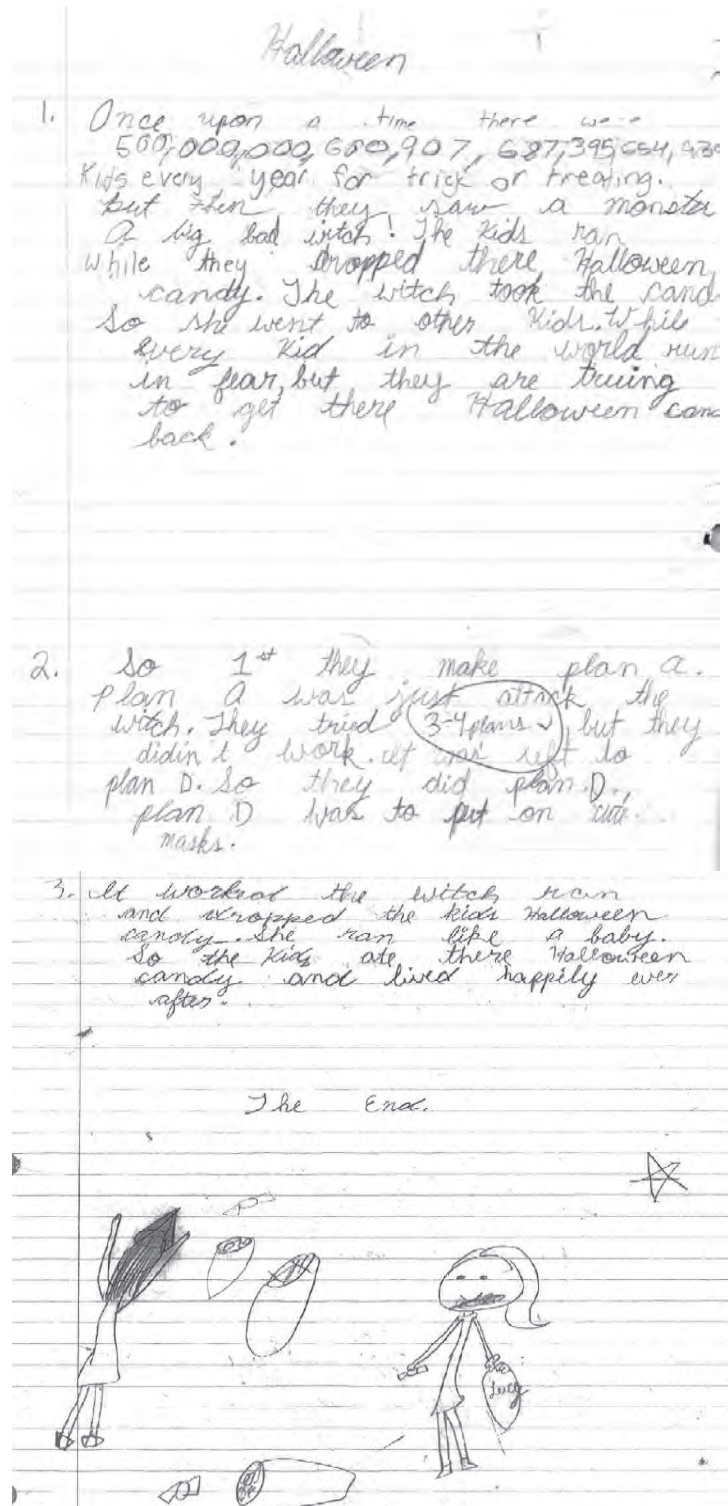
As shown at the right, Student 1’s outline has a general grasp of the need for several attempts at solving the problem, but she only identified the problem for the reader through conferencing with me. The written outline was sparser on details than hoped for as the pre-writing and other writing activities showed that student 1 was capable of more, however, she was able to provide more details orally when conferencing. Encouraged by the extra level of details in discussion, I gave student 1 permission to start writing out her story.



Student 1: First Story Writing

Halloween

1. Once upon a time there were 500,000,000,660,907,687,395,654,934 kids every year for trick or treating. But then they saw a monster. A big bad witch! The kids ran while they dropped there Halloween candy. The witch took the candy. So she went to other kids. While every kid in the world run in fear, but they are trying to get there Halloween candy back.
2. So 1st they make plan A. Plan A was just attack the witch. They tried 3-4 plans but they didn't work. It was left to plan D. So they did plan D. Plan D was to put on cute masks.
3. It worked. The witch ran and dropped the kids Halloween candy. She ran like a baby. So the kids ate there Halloween candy and lived happily ever after.



Student 1's initial writing attempt stayed true to her original plan, but she failed to elaborate on any of the details laid out in her outline.

Student 1: Storyboard

At this point, I decided to end the study comparing the impact on story writing when using a storyboard for planning versus planning without using a storyboard. I brought out the storyboard and explained to the students how each frame of the storyboard references a specific part of the plot and assigned a few frames at a time for homework. The results are dramatic.

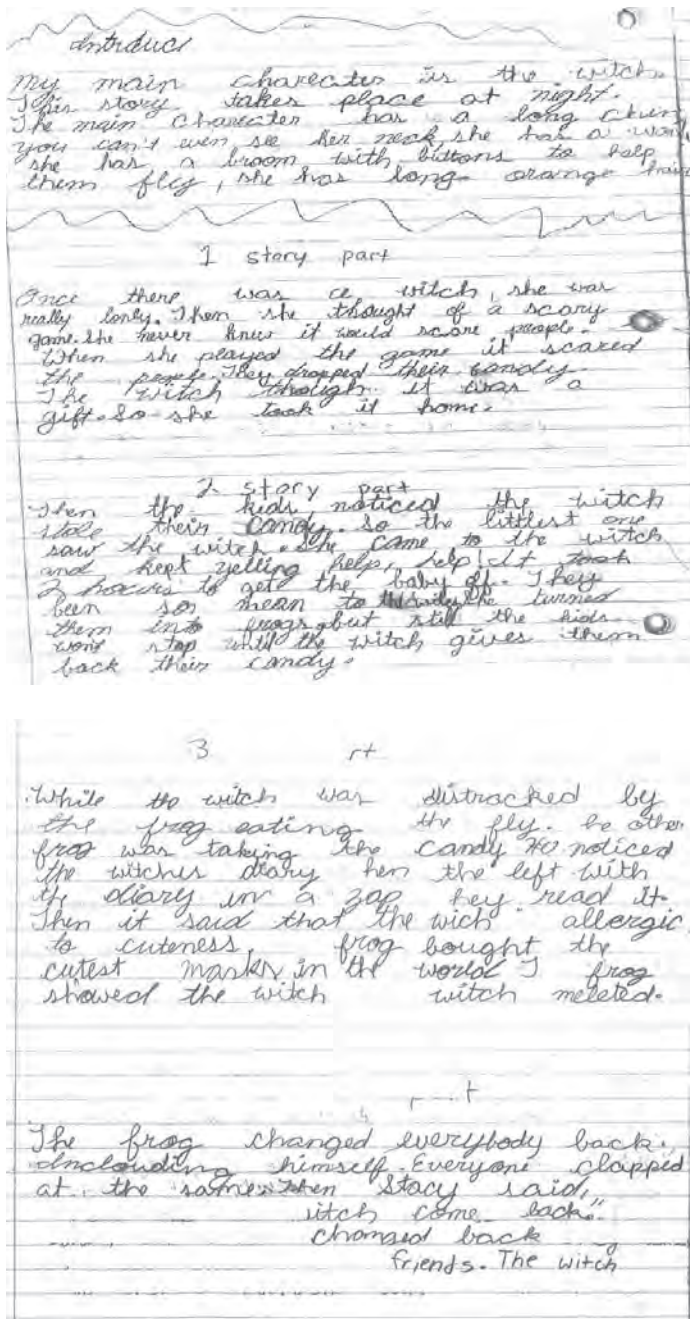


Student 1 demonstrated a clear understanding of a story in a coherent pictorial layout of her plot. Her pictures showed a richness of setting and character details that were not evident in either her original outline or initial story. The situations presented are cute, funny, and engaging.

Student 1: Second Story Writing

This new planning tool provided a better story framework for student 1

Using this new planning tool, student 1 was able to more effectively use each frame as a guide for her writing, providing more details of the story action.



1 story part

Once there was a witch, she was really lonely. Then she thought of a scary game. She never knew it would scare people. When she played the game it scared the people. They dropped their candy. The witch thought it was a gift. So she took it home.

2 story part

Then the kids noticed the witch stole their candy. So the littlest one saw the witch. She came to the witch and kept yelling help, help! It took 2 hours to get the baby off. They been so mean to the witch she turned them into frogs, but still the kids won't stop until the witch gives them back their candy.

3 story part

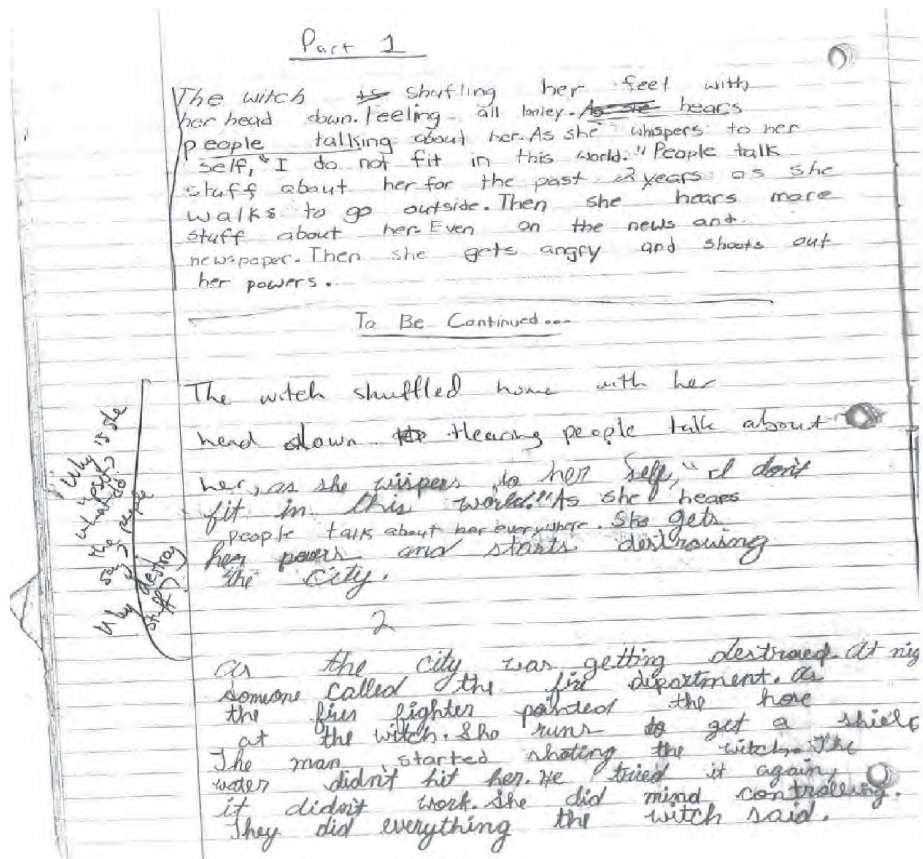
While the witch was distracted by the frog eating the fly the other frog was taking the candy. He noticed the witch's diary. Then he left with the diary in a zap. They read it. Then it said that the witch is allergic to cuteness. The frog bought the cutest masks in the world. The frog showed the witch. The witch melted.

4 story part

The frog changed everybody back including himself. Everyone clapped at the same. Then Stacy said, "What if the witch comes back." Then the witch changed back. They asked if they wanted to be friends. The witch said yes. So everyone was friends!

Student 1: Second Story Revision

This stronger understanding of how a story is planned and developed allowed student 1 to revise her work focusing on character development using elaborative detail to show what her character feels.



Part 1

The witch shuffling her feet with her head down. Feeling all lonely. As she hears people talking about her. As she whispers to herself, "I do not fit in this world." People talk stuff about her for the past 2 years as she walks to go outside. Then she hears more stuff about her. Even on the news and newspaper. Then she gets angry and shoots out her powers.

Students 2-4 Examples

Students 2-4 all demonstrate similar weaknesses and progress in their writing development.

Student 2: Initial Story Outline

~~a thief is stealing shops.~~

Happy lost her dog Fluffy.

1. Happy called Fluffy, but Fluffy didn't come.
2. Happy looked in the doghouse but he still was not there.
3. Happy remembered she put a tracking device in Fluffy's collar but that didn't work.
4. Happy found a dog wizard and used it to get happy back.

1.

Student 2: First Story Writing

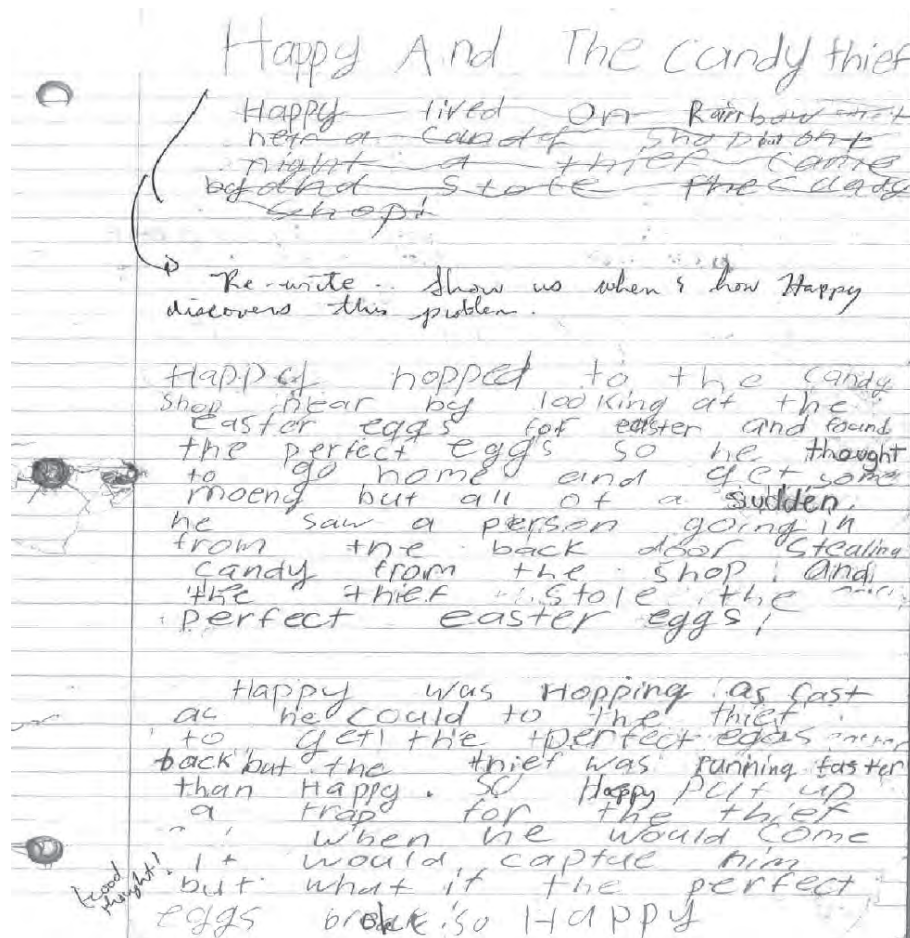
Start here → Happy lived in a town called
Rainbow town and on closed street.
Happy saw a thief out of
the candy shop across the
street. stealing candy
As it tried to stop him.
but the thief was too fast for
Happy. He tried to call
the police but his phone
was dead. Happy had to
do something but he ~~didn't~~
know what to do.

Happy
tried to think of
something but he just
didn't know what to do.
So he went inside
the house the next
morning Happy almost had
forgot about it so
by the time it was
6:00 pm it was time for
dinner and during dinner
I saw the thief again
and he was not stealing
candy, instead he was
stealing toys, so after
dinner when the thief
went out Happy captured
him but he escaped.
Happy said, "I've had it with that thief."
So Happy set up a trap and
he was waiting for the
next day for dinner for
the thief to go into
his trap and was captured
and the thief was sent to
jail happily ever after.

Student 2: Storyboard

<p>1. Characters/Setting Happy Candy shop</p> 	<p>2. Problem a thief is stealing Candy.</p> 	<p>3. Attempt 1 The thief was to fast for the trap.</p> 	<p>4. Attempt 2 Happy put a net, so the thief will be trapped.</p> 
<p>5. Attempt 3 Happy got the fake Easter eggs and foiled the thief and caught him with a net.</p> 	<p>6. Solution/Climax Happy is taking the thief and the thief wants to be the Easter bunny.</p> 	<p>7. Conclusion So what is the end?</p> 	<p>8. Thoughts/Feelings I know I will be the Easter bunny.</p>  <p>Name: Class:</p>

Student 2: Second Story Writing



Student 2: Finished Writing Product

Puff Puff! The sound of the Easter machine squirting paint everywhere! Happy came hopping to shut it off. Happy looking at the super special eggs, were bright red, sparkling yellow with pink Easter magic floating out, made by the original bunny. Their power is making the Easter eggs magical. Happy was walking to the bathroom.

Suddenly, Happy heard a noise from the back door. IT WAS A THIEF! He took the special Easter eggs. Happy hopped as fast as he could. The thief was faster than Happy.

Happy caught up and dug a hole. The hole was too shallow and the robber jumped out. Happy saw a bolder in front of the thief. The thief just went around the bolder.

Happy found a soccer ball kicked it at the thief but, he missed. NO wonder he's so bad at soccer.

Student 3: Initial Story Outline

~~The magician is trying his best to make it on the same stage as the other magicians every time.~~

Mr. Magician comes on stage and with magic gets himself disappeared

Attempt 1:

The assistant of the magician was backstage getting ready for the show. He had no idea of what was going on. 1 person in the audience said he was a learner he tried with his wand but it didn't work like it is the magician's trick.

Attempt 2:

There was another person the audience called and no answer most of the audience called but no answer.

Attempt 3:

Most likely we could only call the professional onstage magician. His tricks were really working but at the last second the magical sprinkles fell and the magic started to fail.

Solution:

The assistant came out of backstage to support him but when he entered he heard people yelling bring the magician out of the magic box.

Student 3: Second Outline

magician is ~~lost~~ has disappeared
in the bottom of the stage.

Attempt 1:

The magician had landed in
a unusual spot, not where you
usually land in the trapdoor.
He suddenly found a pile of
rocks which had a spark of
sunlight not a bulb light!
He tried pushing the rocks with
all his force that his face
turned red. No use!

Attempt 2:

He suddenly came up with a
brilliant idea. He took the small
rocks in the front and pushed
with his magic wand like a
crowbar but soon enough his
magic wand broke.

Attempt 3:

Mr. Magician looked around for
any stage props but no good luck.
Mr. Magician said to himself
that I can try climbing. He
went up a few rocks and
came down with an horrifying
face and eyes damp as a ocean.

Solution:

Mr. Magician saw another door.
As he opened it cautiously he
saw a crowd of people. It's him but
was trying out the wrong stuff.

Student 3: Third Outline

Attempt 1: The assistant comes out of backstage and sees the audience with wide open eyes. He tells the audience to cool down. He tries the least powerful trick just in case. The magician is too much but no good luck.

Attempt 2:
Mr. Howl, the assistant does it with 2 professional magic wands but did the least powerful magic trick. But soon enough not even a thing moved.

Attempt 3:
Mr. Howl tried again! Trying not to give up! This time he took 1 wand and the most powerful trick but guess what? The results were totally different! Way too less magic.

Solution:
He surely had to smarten up with this trick! He used 3 magic wands and did the most powerful trick and the too much magic helped so much! Caloon the magic box started open!

Student 3: Storyboard

1. Character/Setting



2. Problem



3. Attempt 1



4. Attempt 2



5. Attempt 3



6. Solution/Climax



7. Conclusion



8. Thoughts/Feelings



Name:
Class:

Student 3: Story Writing Based on Storyboard

All of his fans screamed in awe!
 As Mr. Magician entered the stage, even
 louder roars appeared him!

"In seconds I will disappear!" ^{Curtains down!} Mr. Magician
 said.

~~Curtains down~~ he cried. Mr. Magician quickly
 slid into the trap door.

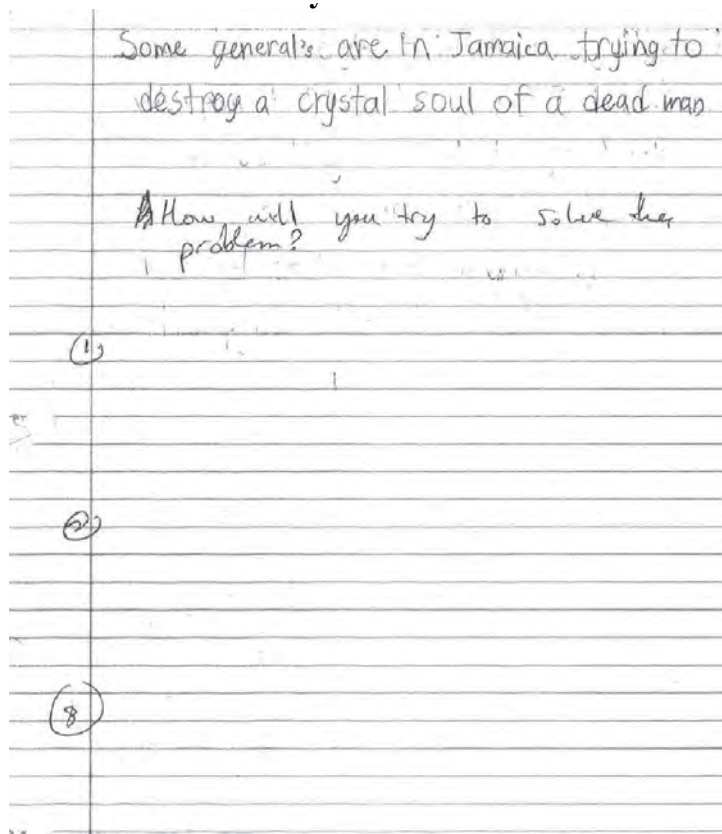
He ^{landed} slumped down with a thump because
 of a bump on the landing mattress
 and fell into a tipped over
 laundry ^{cart} basket and soon went the
 cart. Baam! Mr. Magician hit his onto
 the wall and ^{fell straight out of the cart.} got a very miserable
 headache. He twirled and twirled until he
 hit his head onto, not a wall but to
 a emergency sliding pole! Not as bad hurt
 but just as good, he got a brilliant
 idea. He jumped up with excitement and
 started.

Student 3: Finished Writing Product

Mr. Magician was looking magnificent in his golden tie and with perfectly folded pants he got greeted onstage. The audience was going crazy, all the audience loved him and his tricks.

“We will start with trick of disappearing! Curtains down please!” Mr. Magician quickly pushed down on the trap door. He reached down normally but when he landed, he landed with a big thump and in he rolled into a laundry cart and forward it flew! *THUMP!* The magician bumped into the wall and the cart rolled one way and Mr. Magician rolled the other way! He rolled for a long amount of time until he rolled into an electricity room. The door went shut all because of the AIR CONDITIONING!

Student 4: Initial Story Outline



Student 4: No First Writing Sample

Student 4: Storyboard



Student 4: Second Story Writing

Package - 0. when is your plan, what does it want

S.W.A.T. Chicago Police

"How are you doing today Sargent T.O.Y.?" said Toy Boy as he glanced outside their office window.

"I had a great day as usual," said Sargent T.O.Y. as he slurped hard on his Tim Horton's cup of tea.

"AHHH!!!" screamed a civilian as her brand new Chevrolet Camaro had been sinisterly ~~smashed~~ *sliced* into gigantic shreds.

"Sound the alarm!" thundered Toy Boy as he smashed the button as hard as an anvil!

!!!REDALERT!!! ... !!!REDALERT!!!

!!!GHOST ATTACK!!! !!!GHOST ATTACK!!!

Striked Sargent T.O.Y. "But what will we use?" stammered Chief Quimbi as he scratched his head with a questionable face.

Student 4: Finished Writing Product

"How are you today Sargent T.O.Y.?" said ToyBoy as he glanced outside their office window.

"I had a great day as usual," said Sargent T.O.Y.

"AHHHHH!" screamed a citizen as her brand new Chevrolet Camaro had been sliced into shreds by a ghost from the land "Garfield." These ghosts were sent to destroy CHICAGO because they are jealous of Chicago's beauty. The ghost's city is dirty and smelly.

"Sound the alarm" thundered ToyBoy as he smashed the red button.

"GHOST ATTACK!!! GHOST ATTACK!!!" Stroked Sargent T.O.Y. Later, Sargent T.O.Y. and ToyBoy were bickering on what to use as a weapon.

Then ToyBoy had an idea. "SARGENT!!! SARGENT!!!" exclaimed Toy boy enthusiastically. "How about we use Bayt Oban the dog!"

Outcomes/Findings

This data showed that the group one Aurora Academic Charter School students benefitted from the change in the original project design from a freer writers' workshop story outline process to a more structured storyboard outline. Work with the storyboards helped students develop a clearer understanding that story events must show actions. For example, student 1 learned that saying the characters enacted plans A-C did not help engage readers, because they do not know what happened. By drawing pictures for the plans she had visualized mentally, student 1 was able to transfer what was in her head into words for her reader. Student 2 stopped using time markers, such as having dinner, in place of action, while student 3 learned that descriptive language creating a great setting also does not take the place of an active event toward story resolution. The storyboard helped student 4 overcome his mental block when faced with a blank piece of paper. Thus, the storyboard provided a tangible approach to the "show, don't tell" mantra for these students.

Having a fully fleshed out plot, students were then able to elaborate more on setting and action details, and they could now visualize these concrete actions in their minds. The improvement in writing quality, as a result of better organization and added descriptive elements, is especially evident in the writings of students 1 and 2 when comparing their first and final story writing attempts.

Key Learnings

Although the project successfully improved student writing, it failed to meet its original aim of comparing the effect size of different instructions approaches to writing. One main issue was that more time was needed mastering the writer's workshop approach before attempting to compare the two different instructional styles. As a teacher, this finding leaves me with questions: could a valid comparison of different instructional approaches be done if the two writing approaches were to be taught by the same teacher? Because teachers constantly make accommodations for their students depending upon needs, would it be difficult to not be biased toward a particular approach?

Another future question would be to determine if certain groups of students benefit more from certain writing instructional approaches. Although the storyboard was highly effective in supporting the group one Aurora students, it is difficult to determine the factors that made these students receptive to this type of strategy. Could it be that:

- pictorial representation helps overcome the language gap for students who struggle with English?
- the storyboard clearly elucidates the story structure for those who have little exposure to literature, i.e. non-readers?
- children are so used to watching stories versus reading them that a storyboard is a more natural fit?
- group 1 of Aurora students are more artistically inclined?

- students who are taught under a direct instruction model of teaching prefer more structured approaches to writing?
- students were confused about the expectations for the writers' workshop approach?
- given more time with the writers' workshop approach, students would experience greater success in story writing than with the storyboard approach?

What's Next?

Many areas of research are yet to be done; however, this project showed that storyboarding is a good starting place for writing instruction at our school. Different potential lines of inquiry include:

- the advantages/disadvantages of a storyboard approach for stronger writers vs. weaker writers;
- the advantages/disadvantages of a writer's workshop approach for stronger writers vs. weaker writers;
- the learning styles that would most benefit from a storyboard versus a writer's workshop approach; and,
- the impact of picture-word connections on vocabulary acquisition and transference into writing.

Our school brought in Kathy Jessup, an Edmonton area storyteller and writer, to be our Writer-in-Residence for two weeks to work with both students and staff on the storyboard approach. With more staff using this approach in different grades, this also presents an opportunity to study the impact of storyboarding on student writing across grades, as well as to track students through the grades to see if a student's willingness/effectiveness in working with a storyboard changes as they age.

While this project reinforced my opinion that storyboarding is a highly-effective writing tool for students, it also made me realize the value in learning more about the writer's workshop process. I will continue to study the two different approaches to try and best serve all my writers in the future.

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Creating Opportunities for the Growth of Student Success

Vanessa Tran and Amanda Joblinski
Aurora Academic Charter School

Keywords: student success, parent - teacher - student communication, stress management, time management, study skills, exam preparation

Abstract

The question being investigated is: “How and what supports can be provided by the school to assist middle school students increase success at Aurora Academic Charter Middle School?” Qualitative and quantitative data collected from seven different informational evenings indicated all information sessions were helpful to Aurora families. Information provided at the sessions involved how students could utilize technology to become more successful (time management, online review and resources provided), as well as bringing awareness to parents about internet safety and boundaries online. Feedback was overall positive with some suggestions for improvement in future sessions. Currently, an online survey is being conducted to gather information about interest in future sessions and possible different methods of delivery that may include online tutorials or videos to share and make the information more accessible to a wider audience of Aurora families.

Context

Aurora Academic Charter School is divided into an elementary and a middle school. The Middle School is made up of three classes each of grade five, six, and seven and two classes each of grade eight and nine. The school is growing by one additional class per year. Students who attend the Middle School come from a large capture area that encompasses the entire city of Edmonton and the surrounding area. Most students are bussed to the school. During the 2015-16 school year, there were 299 students attending from grades five through nine. Of the 299 students attending in 2015-16, 39 students have been identified as English Language Learners (ELL). Aurora's philosophy that it "is the best choice for traditional public education in Alberta" with the mission to "provide an orderly and structured environment, with properly sequenced teacher-directed instruction and strong home/school partnerships, where average children can excel in an academically oriented program" drive the direction of our classroom teachers. As a publically funded school, Aurora follows the Alberta Education's program of studies and includes an embellishment program for multiple subjects in all grades.

Aims and Objectives of our Study

In reflecting over the last five years, we had noticed a change in the day-to-day vocabulary of parents and students in relation to student's schoolwork and experiences. As a staff, conversations in the hall revolved around how students were identifying that stress was holding them back from completing work, doing well on exams, and managing their time. It became evident that the 'tool box' students were using to navigate their day-to-day schooling was missing key elements or had some of the tools that they needed but students did not feel empowered to use them. The same observations were made during parent meetings and at parent-teacher interviews. Parents were identifying stress as a roadblock to student success and cited issues such as not knowing how to prepare for exams in different subject areas or Provincial Achievement Tests as a concern for both the student and the parents.

Our aim was to create opportunities for both parents and students to find success and to not only build skills but to empower them to use the skills they have to improve and work towards their personal best. Around this time, a colleague (Jennifer O'Connor) suggested an information session centered around the grade 6 Provincial Achievement Tests to inform parents about the test format, schedule, and tips for preparation. This was the impetus for the action research project to address creating opportunities to build student success. We also wanted to create a resource for neophyte and veteran teachers to access to assist their students in areas that would help them increase their achievement and wellbeing in a school context.

Through these opportunities, we hoped to strengthen the relationship between parents, teachers, and students towards a common goal – developing lifelong skills for personal success. Our experiences suggest that we continue to offer and improve the current support and information sessions as well as finding ways to make the information more available to our families through technology such as online videos.

Literature Review

Students' math anxiety and achievement are influenced by parent's anxiety levels (Maloney, Rameriz, Gunderson, Levine & Beilock, 2015). Parental involvement is an important factor for student achievement especially at Aurora where we work with a strong home-school partnership. Maloney et al. (2015) found a negative relationship with low math achievement when high math anxiety parents frequently help their children with math homework. Thus, there is a need to create structured activities to allow parents to positively interact with their children in an effort to change their math anxiety level while helping their children. Parental involvement continues to be an important factor for student achievement and these suggestions to create a positive environment and improve the assistance a child receives at home may be one of many tools for children to get the needed support to effectively lower their anxiety level and succeed in school.

Students respond differently to stress and stressors in their environment. Omizo, Omizo and Suzuki (1988) developed a stress scale to quantitatively measure stress levels and qualitative data for different symptoms of stressors and then categorized into four classifications: psychological, physiological, behavioral, and emotional indicators. The results of this study clearly indicate that the effects of stress management and intervention strategies are worth being researched among different school age groups to help identify methods of stress management and the need for interventions for middle school students.

Self-efficacy is an important factor as observed by Usher (2009), where students who had a history of successful performances continued to have higher self-efficacy, while students who required to put more effort into math had lower self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is developed over time and small negative experiences may hinder a student's achievement. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers and parents provide adequate positive support to students throughout their learning to help them become better learners and increase their self-efficacy perceptions. Because most teachers are able to accurately estimate a student's ability than the student's parents, it is an important to continue to work with a strong home-school partnership as teachers and other adults in influential positions need to be aware of explicit and implicit messages sent to students and work with the student at their current abilities to further strengthen those skills and develop life-long learning strategies.

Tests and examinations continue to play an important role in measuring student achievement and school effectiveness and as a result, students are increasingly identifying themselves with test anxiety. Von der Embse, Barterian, and Segool (2013) literature review for studies from 2000 to 2010 of different test-anxiety interventions found that students with high test-anxiety often perform poorly on tests and multiple different test-anxiety interventions with elementary and secondary school students were reviewed. Important advances in understanding test-anxiety and effective intervention strategies to treat it continue to be developed for use in schools to improve student overall achievement. As each school identifies with different populations and student needs, schools must create their own strategies to assist their students in their success.

Research Methods

Creating a starting point came from considering the areas that teachers were identifying as areas of concern for students and parents. School surveys had indicated that some families felt the homework load was too high and anxiety around government exams was also a common theme at parent meetings. Conversations at subject and division specific staff meetings centered around skills that students needed to be more successful including time management, study skills, dealing with anxiety and stress related to exams and major assignments, organization, and improving communication between the tripartite of parents, students, and teachers.

This project came about informally in 2014-15 prior to becoming a more formal action research project in 2015-16. Initially, the Grade 6 PAT Preparation Evening (first run in 2014) as suggested by Jennifer O'Connor was run and led to the creation of a Grade 5 and 6 Orientation evening in the fall of 2014. From there, it began to develop as a series of evening information events with supported classroom resources. At the beginning of our action research course the project emerged as relevant and was chosen to continue to support student learning and success.

A looping process of reflection occurred as we spanned a two-year period. We were able to run a number of the offered information sessions; and, at the conclusion of each session, informal and formal feedback was received through email, face-to-face commentary, and exit surveys. This data collection allowed for tweaking and improvements prior to running the session in a concurrent year. The feedback that led to these changes came from both parents and teachers. A mixed methods approach provided both quantitative and qualitative information from surveys that could be analyzed and used for further development as informing the researchers about what support materials would be beneficial in the classroom for teachers and students to use.

Survey data was collected through exit surveys at the conclusion of the Grade 6 PAT Information Evening, the Grade 9 PAT and High School Preparation Information Evening, the Stress Management and Study Skills Parent and Student Session, Science Fair Help Night and the Cyber Bullying Session. Information was obtained from the annual Aurora Academic Charter School survey as well as a concluding summary survey of Middle School families in the spring of 2016. This mixed method approach allowed the analysis of data and the use of qualitative feedback to guide future developments in formalizing a student success series of information sessions.

Research Data

Grade 5 and 6 Parent Orientation Evening

The purpose of the orientation evening was to introduce and welcome Grade 5 and 6 families into middle school and ease them into the transition and help them acclimatize. During the orientation evening offered prior to the start of the school year, there was a brief presentation for parents and students to welcome them and provide information

about what to expect in Grade 5 and 6, from school supplies to homework, lockers and teachers. From the 22 surveys received, the qualitative data collected for the questions were compared and categorized into character concerns and academic concerns.

Things parents wanted to share with teachers to know about their child included personality traits, hobbies, and general interest. Only one parent did not respond. Altogether, 14 character related responses and 10 academic related responses were gathered. Student concerns about the start of the year for grade 5 and 6 were mostly academic concerns, with 12 academic related and only 2 character related concerns. Nine students indicated they had no concerns. On the contrary, parental concerns for the start of the year for grade 5 and 6 were mostly character concerns, with 8 academic related and only 2 academic related concerns. Eleven parents indicated they had no concerns.

Additional information parent provided included 6 character concerns and 1 academic concern, with 15 parents indicating no additional concerns. Categorizing the descriptors and phrases from the surveys suggests that parents tend to have more character-related concerns including students having low confidence and high expectations, whereas students voiced academic related concerns, focussing on exams, homework and not academically ready for particular subjects.

Informal feedback included a request for grade 4 students to tour the middle school in June and perhaps pair up with a grade 5 buddy to learn how to use a combination lock and some tips about preparing and how to be successful in grade 5.

Cyber World

Presented by the Saffron Centre, the information evening covered topics including internet safety and boundaries online, cyber-bullying, common websites and apps, how youth use the Internet and technology to define themselves, how to communicate with youth about internet safety and parental controls. Eleven responses were received from parents in Grade 5 (4 families), 6 (1 family), 7 (7 families) and 9 (3 families).

All 11 families indicated that the provided information was helpful and learned new information. Many responses involved learning more about parental controls and new websites and apps available and targeting youths. From the 11 families, 9 indicated they monitor their children's online activity and 2 did not. Families provided positive feedback and indicated they were interested in more related information.

Grade 9 PAT and High School Information Evening

Students in grade 9 were frequently posing questions and requesting information about high school registration, which prompted the organization of the Grade 9 Provincial Achievement Test and High School Information Evening in early February. 21 families submitted an RSVP with a total of 50 attendees and 10 families requested the information afterwards because they could not attend.

From the 20 parent responses and 16 student responses, parents and students both found the high school related information most helpful and parents found the information related to provincial achievement tests and post-secondary considerations more helpful than students. The qualitative comments were tabulated and parents and students responses were compared. Although 15 parents indicated the provincial achievement test information was helpful, most of the qualitative comments suggested information related to high school courses and academic challenge programs most helpful. Fifteen of the 16 students indicated high school courses were most helpful and was reflected in their comments that they found the information provided helped answer their questions about courses in high school and the registration process.

Additional information requested by parents included a request to meet with teachers to discuss their child's high school considerations. Students requested more information related to scholarships and a more step-by-step process for high school registration such as where to find the forms, submit the applications and how to apply. A general comment that was provided was to host the information evening earlier in the year to provide families more notice to plan to attend open houses and research different schools and programs.

Grade 6 PAT Information Evening

To educate parents about the provincial achievement tests written by grade 6 students and provide suggestions for them to assist their child to prepare for the test, 25 families attended the information evening and 17 surveys were received. The majority of parents felt the evening was helpful in all areas including types of questions (13 responses), review materials (17 responses), subject requirements for the test (13 responses) and general information (15 responses). Only 8 found the question and answer period helpful.

Parents indicated information about the study guide, *The Key*, was helpful in preparing their children for the provincial achievement tests. They appreciated information on how to help their children prepare including different strategies and which materials to use to review.

Information parents were interested in were how different schools weigh the provincial exams as Aurora gives it a weighting of 25% of a student's year grade in the four core subjects: English Language Arts, mathematics, science and social studies. They also requested information about previous results and what we can learn from those experiences.

Supplementary review was suggested by parents to be helpful to prepare for the exams, specifically opportunities to conduct practice exams, increasing student exposure to the writing structure of questions on the exam to becoming more comfortable, more review materials and other specific subject review clubs. Reducing stress in students was also an area that parents wanted more related information.

Whole School Survey

An annual school survey is distributed to parents in the spring of the school year to collect feedback on various aspects of the school. The questions that prompted this research project included whether results increased or decreased. In addition, specific parent and student surveys are being conducted currently to gather feedback about the helpfulness of the information sessions offered to Aurora Middle School families. These results will provide direction for Aurora Middle School regarding which sessions to offer in the future, the method of delivery and modifications and improvements to the sessions to assist in the increase of student success at Aurora.

Research Outcomes and Findings

In general, our research found that students and parents offer different feedback from each information session. We came to believe that we must consider our method of delivery (families are from a widespread area) and facilitate a different tone of communication with families and students. In short, the need to create more accessible learning commons was frequently mentioned in survey by students and parents. Our research also suggested that we had room to implement these learnings into current curriculum (to develop health lessons to share with staff) and we came to believe that learning opportunities would evolve as school needs changes. Regardless of the attendance numbers, the material covered were seen a valuable to different persons in different ways. We also need 'Quick sheets' to share with parents.

As we look to the future, we believe we must continue the looping process to develop a series of information sessions/opportunities to share with families year after year. We also need to improve materials available to teachers to support classroom learning and teaching and consider other methods of delivery. We plan to create a system where teachers can share resources – perhaps in homeroom when there are first-day expectations (eliminating similar issues for teachers by sharing 'quick sheets'). We also are planning a Grade 4 school tour of Middle School in June and pairing students up with a Grade 5 buddy to help with “regular” needs such as teaching how to use combination locks.

Appendices: Supporting documents

Appendix One: Grade 5 and 6 Parent Night Survey

1. Who is your child and what do they prefer to be called?
2. What are two things you would like us to know about your child?
3. What (if anything) is a concern for your child about starting grade 5 or grade 6?
4. What (if anything) is a concern for you about your child starting grade 5 or grade 6?
5. What is the best way to contact you during the day? Please provide the number or email address that you prefer we use.

6. What email is best to send school and homeroom information?
7. Is there anything else we need to know?

Appendix Two: Cyber World Survey

1. What grade is your child in?
2. Were you able to take away some helpful information from the presentation?
 - a. If yes, could you share what you have learned?
 - b. If no, what questions did you have that were not answered?
3. Do you monitor your child(ren)'s online activity?
4. Additional comments:

Appendix Three: Grade 9 PAT and High School Info Night Survey

1. Please check one of the following, I am a parent or student.
2. Which topic(s) did you find most helpful? Please check all that apply.
 - a. Grade 9 Provincial Tests
 - b. High School Courses
 - c. High School Academic Challenge Programs
 - d. High School Open House and Registration
 - e. Post-Secondary Registration Considerations
3. What information did you find most helpful?
4. What additional questions do you have that was not answered?
5. Additional comments:

Appendix Four: Grade 6 PAT Night Survey

1. Which topic(s) did you find most helpful? Please check all that apply.
 - a. What types of questions are on the exams
 - b. What materials to use as a review
 - c. Each specific subject's requirements for the exam
 - d. Information about the PAT in general
 - e. Question and answer period
2. What information did you find most helpful?
3. What additional questions do you have that was not answered?
4. What other information would be helpful in preparing for Grade 6 PATs?

Appendix Five: Whole School Survey (Parent and Student version)

1. What grade(s) is/are your child(ren) in?
2. Please rate each of the following information evenings (very helpful, somewhat helpful, not helpful, did not attend)
 - a. Time Management and Study Skills - Dr. Michele Moscicki (April 23, 2015)
 - b. Grade 5/6 Orientation Evening (June 30, 2015, or previously offered dates)
 - c. CyberWorld - Presented by Saffron Centre (September 24, 2015)
 - d. The Bully Project - Concrete Theatre (In School Presentation)
 - e. Science Fair Help Evening (December 4, 2015, or previously offered dates)
 - f. Grade 9 PAT and High School Information Evening (February 11, 2016)
 - g. Grade 6 PAT Information Evening (March 10, 2016, or previously offered dates)

3. What impact do you feel the information offered had on your child(ren)'s personal success in school? (On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being a lot of change)
4. Which of the following information sessions would you like to see offered in the future?
 - a. Time Management and Study Skills - Dr. Michele Moscicki
 - b. Grade 5/6 Orientation Evening
 - c. CyberWorld - Presented by Saffron Centre
 - d. The Bully Project - Concrete Theatre (In School Presentation)
 - e. Science Fair Help Evening
 - f. Grade 9 PAT and High School Information Evening
 - g. Grade 6 PAT Information Evening
5. What is your preferred method of delivery for the information sessions?
 - a. Evening presentations at the school
 - b. Video information sessions made available through the school website
 - c. Hard copy information sent home with students
 - d. Information stations set up and available during parent-teacher interview evenings
 - e. Other:
6. Did you feel these information sessions have improved communication between Aurora families (parents and students) and the school (teachers, administration, office)?
7. What future information evenings do you feel would benefit Aurora families?
8. What additional resources would you like offered to our families to support student success?

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Beginning an Action Research Project: Stories of Success in Re-engaging Disengaged Students

Noreen Quinney
Teacher Boyle Street Charter School

Context

Boyle Street Education Centre's (BSEC) mission is to 'inspire and support the educational success and social development of youth who have previously experienced interruptions in their formal learning" (Boyle Street Educational Centre's Mission statement, p. 1, 2015-2020). However, when this research began, BSEC's mission was to 'engage high risk youth.' Our mission has changed; and, so too has this action research project.

BSEC is a public charter school, founded in 1996, where teachers aspire to create safe learning environments for youth between the ages of 14-19. The registration count ranges from 125-150 students who predominantly self-identify as First Nations, Metis, or Inuit. Unfortunately, not all registered students' show up each day. The youth who attend BSEC are transient and often deal with life issues such as homelessness, addictions, legal matters, or instability. For a majority of these students, these issues take precedence over education.

A student's life issues often infiltrate into the classroom setting at BSEC. A typical classroom setting for a student or teacher at BSEC may have only one student and one teacher, or five to fifteen students and one teacher. Despite the student/teacher ratio, teachers aspire to engage students by either sitting next to the student and teaching a concept one-on-one, preparing materials for the student, searching for innovative ways

to engage the student, or adapting materials to the learning needs of the student. The goal is to engage and motivate students to learn.

At BSEC, engaging a student could mean going to a drop-in class like Yoga, Meditation, Girls/Boys Talking Circles, Music, Fashion Studies, Cosmetology, Art, and Physical Education, not to mention Animal Assisted Therapy. However, it is at the discretion of the teacher to allow the student to take part in the drop-in class. 'Discretion' means that the teacher is aware of the issues a student is going through and also student accountability in course completion. So, participating in a drop-in class might help alleviate life stresses a student may have.

Our core classrooms are not set up in conventional ways with rows of desks and a teacher standing at the front of the class. Instead, classrooms are set up with tables or chairs arranged informally, individual computer stations, bookshelves, lounging chairs, carousals, and a few filing cabinets that house the materials used to teach. This teaching environment is used to "inspire and support" the educational needs of our students.

Once each month, teachers who participate on the Knowledge and Employability Professional Learning Committee (PLC) meet to devise plans for students who have been identified as 'difficult to engage.' This planning led to the conceiving and developing cross-curricular projects aimed to engage students as part of the action research project I wish to engage.

Aims and Objectives of this Research Study

My biggest challenge as a teacher at BSEC is re-engaging disengaged students. Over my career in the school, I have worked with numerous students; however, one of the most memorable is Elsie (not her real name) – a 19-year-old who was extremely challenging to teach. Because it was her last year at BSEC, teachers collaborated, developed, and implemented a cross-curricular project specifically designed for her. I was Elsie's English teacher, and I found that the reading materials for the program she was enrolled in were too difficult. Elsie's reading materials were modified to accommodate her levels and help her gain confidence. Although she wanted to learn to read, she did not want a teacher sitting next to her.

Our responsibility at BSEC is to ensure Elsie left with a set of skills that would help enable her to be a contributing member to her community. Staff members met and devised a plan we believed might help her: this plan was called a "cross-curricular project." Teachers worked together to ensure each component met the criteria mandated by Alberta Education.

The assignments were written out in a simple format. Elsie, with limited teacher guidance, was able to follow instructions, use technology, and present visual images, thus fulfilling part of the English component of her program. Unfortunately, Elsie's life issues interfered and prevented her from completing this project in the Math and Foods components. Despite the incompleteness of this project, she had become engaged in class and

diligently worked on her assignments. Elsie used her computer skills to design a menu and an invitation. She was eager and was able to complete six of eight assignments, which was a remarkable feat for this young lady.

Her success made me wonder: what about this cross-curricular project engaged Elsie? And, it made us all wonder: if we could discover a key to engagement for Elsie, could we create similar cross-curricular projects that would engage other students? As a school staff, we knew creating such cross-curricular projects would mean teachers needed to invest by collaborating, developing, and implementing these projects for each identified student.

If a cross-curricular project worked for Elsie, what other possible cross-curricular projects might BSEC develop to engage students? We thought of a number of possible projects: these included maintaining a building, cleaning a building, repairing clothes, and washing hair. Each could be developed and implemented as possible projects. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and limited data to properly determine whether or not these projects might engage students, the aims and objectives for this action research took a different direction.

Fortunately, with the guidance and input from Dr. Jim Parsons and my Action Research Cohort group, my research plan changed as time progressed. I only had stories about engaging the youth that I teach. Perhaps, such stories from Boyle Street teachers about the techniques and skills they used to ‘inspire and support’ students in their learning journey might benefit other teachers. Perhaps the successful practices from one school might inform teachers from other schools.

Thus, I changed my mind and, after several months working on cross-curricular projects as the basis of my action research project, I decided to collect, analyze, and consider success stories of teachers’ work motivating students. I want to see what might emerge. However, such stories of success are not our end goal; we really hope to gain insight into the kinds of projects that motivate our students. And, in the near future, we still hope to compile a library of these cross-curricular projects that might be used as a possible next step for engaging our youth at BSEC. However, we want these projects to be informed by the stories of successful motivation we gather as a school staff. Once this library is implemented, qualitative and quantitative data can then be gathered. But, this would be stage two of this Action Research Project.

Related Literature

High-risk youth require many supports if they are to attain and achieve any level of success, especially when it comes to their education. It should be noted that there is a difference between ‘at-risk’ and ‘high-risk’ youth. According to Smyth (2013), an at-risk youth is potentially heading down a troubled path and, unfortunately, a ‘high-risk youth’ is already there. At BSEC, staff members strive to “inspire and support” our youth who have had their educational journeys interrupted by difficult life circumstances. We intervene by accommodating, individualizing, adapting, building relationships, and connecting to the

youth who attend BSEC. Over the years, we have been part of many stories of how staff members successfully incorporate tactics to engage BSEC students in their learning.

We already utilize a number of steps we believe can help us positively intervene. For example, every student who registers is required to do an intake. In this interview, qualified staff members ask a series of questions about school performance, living situation, Children's Services involvement, legal matters, drug and alcohol addictions, suicidal ideations, sexual activity, or gang affiliations. However, over the past few years, the intake process has become more refined to now include medication for mental health issues. Although some questions are personal in nature, students have the option of not answering. This information determines the steps to be taken to ensure the student's educational journey at BSEC is successful.

The intervention process begins with a referral for a psycho-educational assessment. The recommendations outlined in the referral help teachers put in place an individualized learning plan for identified students. Teachers then implement the recommendations to accommodate, individualize, and adapt the learning environment for these identified students.

These accommodations may include a referral for psychological counselling because a student suffers from anxiety or depression and has difficulty focusing on school. Students who struggle with addictions are given an opportunity to access the Alberta Health Services (AHS) addictions counsellor. If a student has legal issues, a referral to the school's youth worker is offered. Sometimes facing all these issues can be a roadblock for students to actively engage in their learning. BSEC staff members take steps to accommodate students' mental health issues so they have the mindsets to focus on learning. For several years, BSEC has coordinated many support services for students facing difficult life circumstances.

Our work can be frustrating. Just when a teacher thinks all the coordinated student services supports are in place and a student should now be able to focus on his/her learning, it seems like crisis after crisis occurs. How will teachers engage these students to successfully complete any course assignments? Throughout the literature relating to teaching youth who are difficult to engage, individualizing and adapting the academic program is recommended. Implementing project-based instruction, ensuring subject matter is relevant and interesting, adapting to the way a student learns (Belhumeur, Closs, & Kaun, 2005), delivering an education according to the needs of the student (Grossen, 2004), developing a relationship, and making a connection are some effective ways to engage high-risk or disengaged students.

Action Research Methods

At the outset of this Action Research Project, my plan was to research why cross-curricular projects engaged high-risk youth. However, only a few cross-curricular projects were even partially developed. Developing these projects would require extensive time, energy, and collaboration among the teachers playing key roles in the various aspects of

a project. For example, a cross-curricular project in the hospitality industry would involve the English, Math, and Foods programs. Furthermore, other components of projects needed to be explored. Unfortunately, time constraints and manpower issues rendered the hospitality industry project only partially developed. So, my student Elsie, who had eagerly worked on her assignments for English, could not move forward in this project both because other components were not fully developed; but, also, her life circumstances often interfered with the completion of this project.

I had to rethink how I started my action research project. My goal had not changed, but I came to believe I was too ambitious in what I thought I could do at the beginning. It seemed impossible to gather data because so few BSEC students were enrolled in cross-curricular projects that engaged their learning journeys. As well, I had many questions about whether cross-curricular projects really engaged high-risk youth. My two main questions were: “What criteria for students would benefit and be successfully engaged in a cross-curricular project?” and “What other cross-curricular projects might be developed that would suit the individual needs of students who attend BSEC?” Answering these questions required the collaboration of teachers who had a vested interest in the students they taught and required insight into potential students’ interests and capabilities.

As outlined by Mavis Averill (2013) in working with different students, students at BSEC need to be coached through processes. As teachers at BSEC, we look for students’ capabilities and potential. We then build on their assets. Plans are made to benefit students’ needs. Discovering if cross-curricular projects engaged students would require extensive development of projects that fulfilled the Alberta Education Program of Studies and would take years to gather research data given the nature of our school and the students we teach. Gathering such data and developing cross-curricular projects would require time and manpower.

After receiving guidance and consulting action research coaches, I decided to reverse the order and work to compile stories from teachers that might highlight what motivated our students as a more plausible route for this research project. If I could better understand our students’ motivation, I might help us all create cross-curricular projects that would, indeed, engage our students. The information I gather with my action research project will hopefully assist other teachers who have a compassion ‘to inspire and support the educational success and social development of youth ...who have previously experienced interruptions in their formal learning’ (Boyle Street Charter School’s motto).

My goal is now to gather stories from school staff members about times when they believed they had seen our students motivated and to analyze these stories to gain insight into why and how we might work to motivate our students further.

Elsie’s Story

As noted, although Elsie was a challenge to engage in moving forward in her learning journey, our work with her was successful. What is Elsie’s story? According to Elsie’s

school records, Elsie first attended BSEC for the 2011-2012 school year. She returned the following year and stated in her 2012-2013 intake that she attended more than seven schools. The intake reported that Elsie attempted suicide, struggled with drug/alcohol addictions, and was charged with assault as a juvenile. Using these criteria, the staff member who did her intake made an immediate referral for a psychological/educational assessment. The results of this assessment assisted in developing an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) for Elsie.

An IPP (BSEC 2011-2012) was created to ensure Elsie's educational needs were being met. The detailed information in her IPP indicated that Elsie had prior medical conditions that impacted her learning and that she had experienced the severe trauma of family violence. These factors impacted her learning. Elsie was tested and completed a psychological/educational assessment. One of the final diagnoses stated that she met the criteria for Severe Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

Given the nature of BSEC, teachers and staff members did their utmost to create a learning environment to diffuse Elsie's oppositional defiance. For example, an incident occurred when the school counsellor was guiding Elsie in completing an application for financial assistance. She had computer access and immediately was on Facebook and listening to music on YouTube. Elsie ignored the counsellor's numerous requests to log off Facebook and work on her application. She was then directed back to her class; instead, Elsie went to the principal's office stating, "He helps me." BSEC staff assisted Elsie and diffused her defiance by accommodating and helping her complete her funding application. With help, she successfully completed this application.

Although there were no explicit details of Elsie's traumatic history of family violence documented, she did exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety. Her depression was often exhibited in her facial expressions: she seemed sad. Elsie's anxiety was that she did not want to eat lunch in the common area because she felt uncomfortable eating with other students. Over time, Elsie learned how to deal with her depression and anxiety because she was offered wrap-around services that assisted her in daily living.

Elsie was a challenge because she came into Fashion Studies and English like she knew everything. She refused guidance and instruction. Thankfully, Elsie approached the Vice Principal stating that she had difficulty reading the material for English. Her program was then modified and individualized, which eventually led to developing a cross-curricular project designed to engage Elsie. Surprisingly, Elsie engaged and completed her assignments. She received minimal guidance and was able to complete 6 of 8 tasks. Despite unforeseen obstacles, Elsie was engaged in her English assignments and seemed eager to complete them.

After Elsie had the courage to inform the Vice Principal of her struggle to read the material, I modified her program to engage her in reading comprehension. Although Elsie was successful completing most of the assignments, she continued to be distracted by many things going on in her life. The staff identified Elsie as a student who possibly would benefit from a cross-curricular program. Invested teachers collaborated to compile and create a project that would engage Elsie. She was given assignments that were

written in a simple format. Elsie was also given oral directions from her teachers. She became more eager and engaged in performing and completing her task. Elsie was also given verbal praise from her teacher when she completed her assignment. This process definitely impacted her learning.

English materials were compiled according to the resources outlined in the Knowledge and Employability studio for English 10-4. Elsie was given the assignments, but she could not complete them. I then recreated other assignments for Elsie that I believed would engage her and move her forward in her learning. She was assigned comprehensive practice reading assignments. One difficulty with working through these assignments was that Elsie did not like to have a teacher sitting next to her giving instruction. Despite such obstacles, Elsie was engaged in her English assignments and seemed eager to move forward on her learning journey. Elsie was the first student that BSEC developed and created a cross-curricular project for. I was her teacher for Fashion Studies and English. She was enrolled in English 10-4.

The story of Elsie's success could be a case in point. During my action research, I wish to document and study similar stories. I am only now beginning this study and hope to complete it during this school year. The beginning of my engagement with action research left me with a number of questions. For example, what might I do as a teacher to help my needy students become more excited and interested in learning? How do I help them focus on their learning? One next step in my action research will be to engage more teachers in this conversation so I might collect and consider what their stories might mean if we are to motivate our students more successfully.

Specifically, I will ask teachers to tell me a story of a time when they felt successful. I will also ask teachers to identify strategies and techniques they used that effectively engaged their students. Possibly, a brief background history of students might help determine where students' difficulties to engage might stem from. Such information may raise ethical issues with regard to research, but getting a sense of the student's life circumstances and learning needs play an important role in how the teacher can successfully engage the student/students. Stories can provide information for teachers who might potentially work with high-risk youth and could help provide a set of useful skills and techniques that effectively engage students who are either faced with difficult life circumstances or diagnosed learning disabilities.

If our students are to learn, teachers at BSEC must find different ways to engage students who are often distracted, unfocused, defiant, traumatized, anxious, depressed - the list seems endless. However, as part of their work, each teacher takes time to evaluate what the student's learning needs are and then puts in place a plan that hopefully works for that student. By gathering stories that focus on the evidence of student success, I'm hoping to find how teachers at BSEC successfully engage students who are otherwise difficult to engage. Such stories, I believe, will provide valuable information about the techniques teachers use at a school such as BSEC.

How do teachers ensure each student is on task and focused on learning? Getting a sense of the teaching techniques and skills teachers implement to engage challenging

students will also be helpful to this research. My experience suggests that many things come into play when engaging challenging students: these include the teacher's personality and the student's personality, the teacher's expectations, and the student's needs. All these are based on a teacher's ability to fulfill the mandate of the Alberta curriculum.

After I gather stories from teachers, I will compile and correlate these stories to highlight the specific skills and techniques teachers use to successfully engage 'at risk-youth' and to inspire and support their learning. Many aspects are part of the whole process of successfully engaging students at BSEC. Relationships, connections, trust, accountability, and responsibility are some aspects that help our students at BSEC successfully engage in their learning journey.

For example, I'm the English 10-2 teacher. I had a student who could not sit still and focus on the assigned task. This student would saunter into class late, sit at the computer, and pretend to work. He was easily distracted and couldn't complete any assignments. I was at my wits end: all the student did was come to class and sit at the computer. I can't recall how it all started, but one day I approached this young man and asked him what he was going to work on today.

This young guy sat back in his chair and looked out the window. He started to talk about the flagpole just right outside the window. I was surprised that his speech was so poetic and creative. My assignment to him was to write exactly what he had just shared with me about the flagpole. This young man sat and wrote about his thoughts. All I could think of was "WOW, there you are writing about your thoughts about this flagpole that sits on our school property. These are your words and you are sitting and writing. You sat and wrote your thoughts and were engaged in writing for at least twenty minutes. I commend you for that."

My question to teachers will be: "Tell me a story where you felt you believe you were successful engaging or teaching a difficult student. As you write that story, try to focus on the skills and techniques you used to gain success. What strategies and techniques must a teacher at BSEC use to engage disengaged students?" To collect these stories, I have begun to build a teacher questionnaire. This questionnaire is included below, and I trust it will help further the goal of my action research project. I look forward to getting started.

Teacher/Staff Questionnaire

The following questions are being considered for a teacher questionnaire.

1. We all have a story about a student who was so difficult to engage in his/her learning journey. Could you please share a story about how you successfully engaged that one or two, maybe even three students in his/her learning?
2. What technique/techniques did you use that successfully engaged this student?
3. What skill/skills did you use as a teacher that successfully engaged this student?

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