Developing a Collaborative, Intellectually Engaged Team to Support Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence that a collaborative, intellectually engaged team could have on reading comprehension instruction. The research methodology was design-based research, which supported the researchers in answering the research question. The study focused on developing a team within a single school who worked together to both develop as professionals and to support the development of other professionals in the school. Data were collected through audio recordings of meetings, written reflections, questionnaires, and emails. The research touched on numerous themes including: a holistic view of reading comprehension, the necessity of time, the importance of autonomy, research as professional development, and collaboration through peer tutoring.
Introduction

Schools are busy places with a variety of students, staff members, goals, objectives, plans, hopes, and dreams. Our aim in this research study was to focus on three important elements of education and to tie them together in a way that supported instruction and, ultimately, student learning. More specifically, our goal was to create a collaborative team with members who were intellectually engaged with a collective goal of supporting reading comprehension instruction. We recognized literacy is a core curricular element for students and aimed to make a difference by supporting teachers. Throughout the research, our team focused on supporting each other and committed to engaging in the research process with the goal of helping teachers help students.
Literature Review

This study was informed by research in three areas including collaboration, intellectual engagement, and reading comprehension instruction. The section on collaboration was integral as it gave direction for the research team to work with each other and with teachers whom we were trying to support in the school. The section on intellectual engagement was critical as it provided a background for the personal development of the research team and guided our support of reading instruction. The section on reading comprehension instruction provided us with the background and areas on which to focus as we worked as a group and with teachers.

Collaboration

Research in the area of collaboration was an integral building block for this project. As the title of the project suggests, building a collaborative team that was capable of supporting a group of teachers was at the heart of the work. Fullan (2011) used the theme of collaboration within the context of change and for the work of improvement. He noted five essential elements of a collaborative culture:

1. Focus: Set a small number of core goals.
2. Form a guiding coalition.
3. Aim for collective capacity building.
4. Work on individual capacity building.
5. Reap the benefits of collaborative competition. (p. 91)

These elements describe collaboration as a necessary component of growth and development, especially in the context of change.

Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker (2008) highlighted the important influence of collaboration to support student learning within the context of professional learning communities (PLCs). They stated, “If shared purpose, vision, collective commitments, and goals constitute the foundation of a PLC, then the collaborative team is the fundamental building block of the organization” (p. 15). This perspective supports the idea that a collective team is an important part of supporting growth within a school.
Collaboration and teamwork are often used together in professional settings. Lencioni (2002) noted five functions of a team that are essential for collaboration:

1. They trust one another.
2. They engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas.
3. They commit to decisions and plans of action.
4. They hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans.
5. They focus on the achievement of collective results. (pp. 189-190)

These functions rely on healthy interactions on a personal level with high levels of trust and accountability within the group. The team must be able to count on one another to speak honestly, to work together, and to complete tasks efficiently and on time.

The idea of collaborating is a theme common to many areas within education. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2011) explained the importance of collaboration in the area of student services, stating that it requires:

- professional development and training in collaborative processes for all team members;
- new systems and structures that support improved service delivery models;
- clarity of purpose, roles, and accountability;
- commitment and shared expectations;
- communication networks that support open, trusting, and respectful dialogue; and
- leadership committed to building and fostering a collaborative culture. (p. 6)

Literature in the area of student services lends itself very well to the concept of working in teams as collaboration is often essential in the field. The model of working together used in many student services settings definitely informs the work of a team aiming to support reading comprehension instruction.

There are a variety of ways in which educators, specifically educators within student services, collaborate with other professionals. Friend & Cook (2013) mentioned co-teaching, consultation, mentoring, and coaching while stating that in order to collaborate effectively, the following concepts are necessary:

- Collaboration is voluntary.
- Collaboration requires parity among participants.
- Collaboration is based on mutual goals.
- Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making.
- Individuals who collaborate share resources.
- Individuals who collaborate share accountability for outcomes. (pp. 6-9)
Intellectual Engagement

This research was informed by literature in the field of engagement and, more specifically, intellectual engagement. Research in the area gained momentum through studies focusing on student engagement (Willms, 2003; Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009) and the goal of practitioners seeking strategies to motivate students. More recently, research has been carried out that considers the engagement of teachers (Freiler et al., 2012) and the role of the school principal in supporting teacher engagement (Hildebrand, 2013).

Models of engagement have varied dimensions depending on their focus on the student, the teacher, or the leader. The concept of intellectual engagement remains a constant throughout the models. When referring to students, intellectual engagement involves, “enjoyment, interest, and motivation” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 11) and includes a commitment on behalf of the student. When referring to teachers, intellectual engagement involves “a serious emotional and cognitive investment during the act of teaching, and in the process of being an expert learner in developing critical and innovative pedagogical skills and practice” (Canadian Education Association, personal communication, 2011).

Intellectual engagement is also connected with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of flow which is a state that is described as an optimal experience wherein one is so deeply focused and enjoying a task that time seems not to pass. The state of flow is explained with a matrix model wherein skills and challenges correlate. The higher the challenge an individual faces with the requisite skills to meet it, the more likely he or she will enter the state of flow.

Intellectual engagement is also connected to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking’s (2000) emphasis on deep understanding as an integral element in the learning equation. Intellectual engagement is not attained through surface-level surveys of facts and figures, but rather through a deep and intentional focus on processes, variables, and relationships. Deep understanding for teaching professionals is experienced in varied ways and achieved through processes particular to an individual.

The construct of intellectual engagement is not to be understood as an entirely mental state or process. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (n.d.) emphasized interconnectivity when explaining cognitive functioning: “Continual exchanges make it impossible to separate the physiological, emotional and cognitive components of a particular behaviour” (p. 25). In reference to intellectual engagement, the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and actions is highlighted. The social experience an individual has in a school in regard to a project or process may have as much influence on their intellectual engagement as any other influence.

This research served as a guide for the team members who were all attempting to be intellectually engaged professionals in the research process. Thoughts related to the concepts of personal interest, motivation, deep understanding, enjoyment, emotions, and flow directed our work and guided our decision-making. This literature grounded our pursuit of supporting reading comprehension instruction.
Reading Comprehension Instruction

The key focus of this research was to influence reading comprehension instruction. There is a vast body of research focusing not only on reading comprehension, but also instruction in the area of literacy. Our team used a wide array of research to direct the process of supporting teachers. The focus included comprehension as well as the other pieces that support its development.

There are a number of programs or tools that aim to explicitly teach reading comprehension to students. Reading Power is a reading comprehension program that focuses readers’ attention on their thinking while they read (Gear, 2006). The idea is to teach children about their thinking brain when they are reading. When students learn the five reading powers outlined – including to connect, to question, to visualize, to infer and to transform – they will be actively involved in their own learning which is believed to significantly improve reading comprehension. This program can be used in schools to create a familiar language with students from grade to grade. It is important to have the Reading Power program shared collectively among a staff of teachers to support consistency in the school.

Reading fluency was one of the components that led to improved reading comprehension. Reading fluency refers to the ability of readers to read the words in text effortlessly and efficiently with meaningful expression that enhances the meaning of the text (Rasinski, 2010). Fluency is a critical component of reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009) but has often been neglected over the years (Allington, 1983). Research in reading fluency led our team to build our knowledge of reading fluency because the research has supported fluency as a gateway to comprehension (Rasinski, 2010). Improving reading fluency may not be comprehension itself, but readers do have to have some level of fluency to understand what is being read. While many readers can decode words and text accurately, they may not be fluent in their word recognition and then take too much mental energy to figure out pronunciation and word meaning, which is energy the reader needs to comprehend the full meaning of the text (Rasinski, 2010).

Reading exercises that are considered best practice to improve reading fluency, based on Rasinski’s (2010) work, are read-alouds, assisted readings, repeated readings, performance readings, timed readings, but most importantly, looking at how oral reading activities could be integrated meaningfully into the classroom’s language arts lessons.

Fountas & Pinnell (2009) explained that with regard to reading comprehension, “Our goal is to help them think actively while reading: making predictions, inferring and connecting, synthesizing new information and analyzing the texts that they read” (p. 397). Supporting reading comprehension involves a broad focus on literacy including vocabulary work, talking, reading, writing, phonics, thinking, experiences at home, exploration, and emotion. As such, an effective literacy program must take into account the varied background and skills that support effective understanding of text.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education English Language Arts 2 curriculum (2010) also highlighted some key components of effective language instruction:
An Effective English Language Arts Program:
- provides meaningful contexts that address “big ideas” and questions for deeper understanding
- focuses on grade-specific outcomes to achieve the K-12 aim and goals of the program
- focuses on language and helps students understand how it works
- teaches students through powerful cognitive and communication strategies
- includes a range of texts (oral, print, and other media)
- encourages student inquiry, social responsibility, and self-reflection. (p. 8)

These components of language instruction coincide well with the focus of our research on a broad conception of literacy instruction.

The literature review is created in a way that is purposeful and intended to mirror the research strategy that was implemented. The initial focus of the team was on creating an effective team capable of collaborating with a focus. The next step was to engage intellectually through a process with a topic. Finally, the team used practices discussed in the literature in regard to reading comprehension instruction to support teachers in the school.
Methodology

The purpose of this research study was to create a team that could influence reading comprehension instruction. The research question was: How does a collaborative, intellectually engaged team support instruction in the area of reading comprehension? Design-based research was the methodology because it enabled the researchers to collaborate, yet carry out the work attached to their specific roles within the school (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). The methodology was team-based and called for individuals to bring their personal experiences to the team. Design-based research was also chosen because of its focus on innovation (Bereiter, 2002), connecting research to practice (Amiel & Reeves, 2008), the use of interventions to bring about growth (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), and the flexibility that the iterative nature offered the researchers (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Within the context of design-based research, individual action research projects were carried out by the researchers that focused on how the researchers could support teachers in their specified roles. The action research was filled with what Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2009) referred to as “action, reflection and critique” (p. 3). Each action research project was interrelated and part of the larger group’s goals.

The research was carried out in iterative phases. These phases were initiated by a team meeting and often included a review of the process and progress, refocusing, discussion of challenges and frustrations, and an action plan that connected with Bereiter’s (2002) characteristics of design-based research. The meetings were an opportunity for the team to connect, to discuss, and to repurpose their actions and efforts. With the fast pace of a school year, regular meetings were integral to moving the research process forward. The meetings also tended to instigate new interventions aimed at supporting teachers in various ways.

The research team members, who were also the participants in the design-based research, included five educators from the same school. The school was located in a community of approximately 5,000 people in northern Saskatchewan. The school had a population of approximately 300 students with a staff of approximately 20 teachers and 15 support staff. The grade configuration of the school was prekindergarten to Grade 4. The researchers had varied roles within the school including: classroom teacher, student services teacher, school-based instructional facilitator and classroom teacher, vice-principal, and principal.

To obtain permission to carry out research in the setting, one researcher scheduled a meeting with the Director of Education who approved the process and parameters of the research. Another meeting was scheduled with the Superintendent of the school to outline
the process and to discuss concerns. All staff members of the school were informed about the research at multiple meetings and were also invited to offer any support or insight if they wished. Team meetings were always held at the school.

Data were collected in this research in four ways including audio recordings of meetings, written reflections, questionnaires, and emails. Audio recordings enabled the team to recognize themes emerging from conversations with each other at team meetings. These thoughts did not come from a direct question or focused reflection, but rather were a reaction to the actions and events in the school. The team meetings were also an opportunity for the researchers to share what was happening in their personal contexts and to recognize variances or similarities with the other researchers. Written reflections were a key piece of data in the research and were either completed through email, on Microsoft Word, or hand-written. The reflections gave researchers the opportunity to work through their own thoughts and to reflect upon emergent themes. It was important for researchers to use the reflections as a way of understanding what was happening in their contexts. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) completed by the researchers provided the opportunity to reflect specifically on critical themes that emerged. It was co-constructed by the researchers and directed in a way to get specific answers and thoughts on key topics. The questionnaire was used toward the end of the research process. Emails were also used throughout the process to share ideas, to communicate meeting agendas, to discuss themes, and to ask questions. Emails were an important way for the researchers to stay in touch throughout the process.

As the researchers completed reflections, questionnaires, and emails, these communications were printed and submitted to one researcher who was tasked with data storage. Data that were submitted were collected and stored in a secure location. The iterative nature of design-based research required the data to be reviewed throughout the process as it informed the next steps. This is consistent with Barab and Squire’s (2004) recognition that design-based researchers act as both designers and researchers in the process. As such, each team meeting included a review of reflections and, more generally, conversation surrounding past events. Meetings involved talking about emergent themes and building upon the development of the themes. When all of the data were collected, they were coded which further highlighted the emergent themes and the direction of the iterations throughout the process. Coding involved multiple readings of the data by multiple researchers. Through the process of coding, numerous themes and subthemes emerged.
The Makeup of the Team

Our research team was formed as the individual members of the team indicated their interest in developing professionally in the area of literacy by conducting a research project. As the team came together, the members happened to have varied roles within the school. The team was made up of a vice-principal, a Grade 4 classroom teacher, a student services support teacher, a principal, and a school-based instructional facilitator. As we advanced through the research process, we found the team, as well as our varied roles within the school, contributed to our being able to have influence and bring about positive change. Because we had members with different roles, we were able to have a grander perspective of what was happening in the school and how our actions might impact the school. It was integral for us to have these multiple roles make up the research team. The perspectives allowed us to consider how our actions would influence the various roles immediately and in different contexts.

The student services perspective allowed us to consider reading comprehension instruction in a way that would reach all students. Student services teachers can have flexibility in their schedules which can allow them to reach struggling students in varied ways. This research project served as an opportunity for us to be creative in the way we used our student services time. Student services teachers are also key members of collaborative teams who work closely with teachers to plan for students both in and out of the classroom. Having a student services teacher on our team allowed us to focus closely on teacher collaboration with an emphasis on reading comprehension instruction.

Our school-based instructional facilitator was able to emphasize the importance of supporting teachers and finding ways to meet their needs. Our goal within the research was to support teachers and this goal coincided directly with the goal of the school-based instructional facilitator. This position involves a flexible schedule with time to collaborate. This position was also a critical liaison between teachers of various grades, the administration team, our school division learning coaches, and our student services team.

The school administrators were also able to consider resources that could support the process including personnel and financial supports. The school timetable often dictates much of what is possible in a school, and the goal was to have a timetable that enabled collaboration and support for teachers. The school administrative team also attempted to support teachers by helping them get access to literacy resources that would assist them with students. The goal was to practice creative budgeting so that teachers’ needs would be met. The goal of the school administrators was also to create autonomy for teachers within
which they could work. As a whole, each team member highlighted a certain perspective which helped us to have a broad perspective of reading comprehension instruction.

Another strength of having a team with diverse roles was that we had influence in different areas. Having a larger group meant we were able to have more conversations, collaborate in varied ways, and support a broader group of people. The influence of one or two people with this project would have been limited, but our more diverse team allowed us to have a greater impact on the school. Our team was able to build greater momentum because we seemed to have a critical mass of researchers within the school.

Our research methodology also allowed our team to work in both collective and individual spaces. Each researcher had a project that was individual with a personal focus related to his or her role within the school. Our team also had a collective focus as we planned collective professional development days, talked about necessary resources, considered the use of our team members, and evaluated our progress toward our goals. At times, the collective and individuals goals were united, while at other times they were quite different. Our research team felt as though we were able to individually explore our own action research while being part of a larger team.

As our team reflected upon our research process, we regularly identified collaboration as the key to our influence. Our team focused on reading comprehension, but we would be excited to see what could be done with other areas of focus. Having a team allowed us to share ideas, build our personal motivation, think critically, and connect with more people in the school. As mentioned, the team would be interested in applying the collaborative model used in this project to new areas.
Individual Projects

Cheryl’s Experience

My role as school-based instructional facilitator is to support teachers as they develop best practices and to offer in-school professional development as needed. This is a new position within our school and our division, and the McDowell Foundation grant helped provide the financial supports needed to explore the possibilities of this role. Our goal was to create a model that supported teachers who are seeking to improve their reading instruction within their classrooms. Teachers were encouraged to approach me or our administrators if they were interested in getting some time to collaborate on various domains of teaching. The two areas that were serviced the most were in the areas of assessment and planning effective language arts units.

Assessment support. One area of support was to provide professional development for our teachers new to implementing the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments. I was one of a few teachers who attended a division inservice on how to administer the assessment and then brought back what I learned to our teachers. Teachers were given time to walk through the process of administering the assessment. Teachers who still were not confident in using the tool could observe me doing it or asked me to watch them. This was a supportive way to approach a situation where teachers were being asked to use a particular assessment. What I noticed was that there was a need for a fairly high degree of support; much apprehension existed about the process throughout the first round of Fountas and Pinnell assessments, less the second round, and minimal the third round. Perhaps offering the necessary time and providing necessary support when learning something new eased the transition of making this reading assessment a common best practice.

Co-planning. Our team believed the key to teaching comprehension is to do a great job of it in the classroom. Focused teaching was one of the goals that supported this concept. As Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) stated, “when a learner makes connections and learning takes place, it is because of focused teaching” (p. 34). Much of the way we supported teachers with their instruction of reading comprehension happened behind the scenes, in the area of planning for instruction. Our goal was to support teachers through the process of creating an effective English language arts program by coaching and collaborating with teachers through the unit planning process so that comprehension was a part of everyday teaching. To do so, our key resource was the Saskatchewan English Language
Arts 2 curriculum, which presented Fullan et al.’s (2006) outline of an effective language arts program and all of the components including:

- A detailed map of what is expected that students will know and be able to do, clearly stated in outcomes and associated indicators
- A set of powerful and aligned assessment and evaluation tools tied to the outcomes
- A detailed knowledge of how to best teach to these learning outcomes in the classroom, including explicit teaching strategies and methods and classroom routines. (as cited in Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 6)

Teachers were encouraged to approach me or administration to access support for co-planning an English language arts unit. Release time was given to the teachers – usually several half-days funded by the McDowell Foundation research grant.

I came prepared with various backwards by design templates for the teacher to choose from and the Saskatchewan English language arts (ELA) curriculum. Teachers carefully selected the topic and outcomes they wanted to focus on based on the needs of their students. The planning was done using an Understanding by Design framework. We looked at the outcomes and aligned our assessments and learning plan with them.

In some cases, we spent a considerable amount of time walking through the curriculum. We had many new teachers and teachers new to the province who were unfamiliar with the layout of the Saskatchewan ELA curriculum. This was a guided exploration through the curriculum document. Teachers asked questions specific to literacy. They were comfortable asking questions as the relationship with me had been built on trust and was non-evaluative. For teachers to reach a deeper understanding of the curriculum, they needed to feel free to ask questions and be supported by a trusting colleague with knowledge of the curriculum. As stated by Rogers and Farson (2006), effective communication can only take place in a non-threatening environment: “The climate must foster equality and freedom, trust and understanding, acceptance and warmth. In this climate and in this climate only does the individual feel safe enough to incorporate new experiences and new values into his concept of himself” (as cited in Marzano & Simms, 2013, p. 9).

Without the guidance of someone familiar with the layout of the curriculum, it may be difficult for teachers beginning to plan with it as critical elements of an effective language arts program (planning using meaningful; contextual units; cues and conventions; and before, during, and after strategies) are separated from the outcomes and indicators section. Some teachers needed clarification on exactly how many units and what types of units they were required to teach. This information is also separated from the outcomes and indicators. Often, access to this kind of curricular professional development is limited to who, where, and when inservices are being offered, so being able to provide the professional development right at our school, as needed by the teachers, was a powerful beginning to providing quality instruction for our students.

Because our goal was to improve the instruction of literacy within the classroom, we were considerate to include the five pillars of literacy instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency instruction, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension instruction) within the learning plans, again, so that quality instruction happened each and every day within the classroom.
No specific program was initiated, enforced, or encouraged. We looked at the selected outcomes and indicators, cues and conventions, and before, during, and after strategies for reading comprehension and chose what we felt were the best possible instructional strategies and assessments for the teacher to use with his or her students.

**Inquiry projects.** We had the opportunity to participate in professional development with the Galileo Educational Network which supports teachers as we teach literacy skills through inquiry and the integration of technology. As a school, we were given professional development from the Galileo Education Network and worked with a consultant as we created outlines of learning plans. Teams were then given more time, funded by the McDowell Foundation research grant, to further collaborate with colleagues on the development and implementation of their projects. My role of instructional facilitator allowed me the good fortune of being a part of each inquiry team. One team did a project connecting social studies and ELA outcomes by videotaping an oral storytelling of a family tradition. Another team explored the reading and writing of fairy tales through the creation of a digital story. One team also connected social studies and ELA outcomes by creating postcards and brochures that showcased our province. Throughout each project, students were engaged in literacy development through learning experiences that were authentic and meaningful. The quality of instruction and the success of these projects inspired me to further pursue my own professional development in the area of inquiry and technology through graduate studies.

**Professional learning communities.** Part of my role is to work with PLC groups regarding curricular targets. I was able to work with most of the grade-alike PLC groups. This helped develop relationships and provided a venue and time for teachers to talk and to ask for support when needed. Often, it is difficult to catch teachers to have conversations about instruction, support, and resources. Because our PLC time is already structured within our day, it allowed for frequent opportunities for teachers to support each other, to collaborate, and to ask for support. This enabled me to act as a liaison between teachers of various grades, the administration team, our school division learning coaches, and our student services team.

**Books and breakfast.** Through an indirect result of our research, we expanded our endeavour of improving literacy development beyond the walls of the school by inviting parents, caregivers, and students to the school on a Saturday morning to enjoy literacy activities and a pancake breakfast. With the focus of improving literacy being front and centre in my mind throughout the research, I proposed the idea to my principal and, without hesitation, he agreed to support the idea as I began the process of bringing a committee together to provide our students and their families with an enjoyable opportunity to encourage literacy activities at home. Knowing I had the support of an engaged, collaborative, and approachable team of colleagues and administrators behind me enabled the initiation of the project. This was a good example of how good ideas are only good ideas unless people help make them happen. The morning was well-attended and well-received by our student body and their families.

**What I will take from this experience.** I have grown professionally from the opportunity to work closely with so many talented professionals within our school. I have experienced the value of creating an intellectually engaged team with a shared purpose of improving student achievement. Although the dynamics of our group will undoubtedly change, I hope to see an extension of our research group next year.
Andrea’s Experience

When our McDowell project began last fall, my teaching assignment was a Grade 4 classroom teacher. My role for this research project was to teach reading comprehension strategies to my students as well as work with other Grade 4 teachers in our PLC group. Our PLC was collectively focused on improving literacy which was aligned with our school and school division goals. However, at the end of January, my teaching assignment changed to a student support services teacher, so my teaching assignment changed to support many teachers and educational assistants in our building.

**Influencing an intern teacher.** As a classroom teacher in the fall of 2013, I was lucky enough to work with an intern teacher from the University of Saskatchewan for four months. The intern and I were able to focus intensively on reading comprehension with our Grade 4 students daily. I decided to focus on reading fluency as Rasinski (2010) believed if students practice reading more smoothly and fluidly, they will better comprehend what they are reading. I decided to use a resource called Reading Fluency Cards, a product created by a company called Learning Resources. These cards contain repeated readings that focus on reading fluency: accuracy, rate, and prosody. The set of cards is comprised of 30 leveled fiction and non-fiction stories to build fluency. Each story card includes the number of words at the end of every row. We would keep track of the number of words read in one minute by each student. The students were then asked a number of comprehension questions based on the story and unfamiliar vocabulary would be reviewed. Either the teacher or intern first asked the student do some physical exercises to get the oxygen flowing and blood pumping, which I believed helped the students read better and think more clearly. We then read and reviewed the bolded vocabulary in the text the student was about to read. The classroom was comprised of 22 Grade 4 students who were reading at a wide range of reading levels. We used both Grade 3 and Grade 4 Reading Fluency Cards. Our belief was that we had to expose these Grade 4 students to vocabulary and topics at their age level of interest. We hoped this would help engage students in their reading. One reflection I had about this intensive reading intervention was:

> Any student will do well when there is consistent one-on-one daily; reading, phonemic awareness, rhyming, etc. . . . as long as they have intensive instruction one-on-one they will thrive.

Our conclusion to the many hours we spent working with these 22 students was every student gained confidence in their own abilities as they became familiar with the process and with the teacher working with them. My intern teacher commented to me that when she began her internship, she had an assumption that Grade 4s know how to read. She has now changed her thinking and has realized there is a need to explicitly teach reading strategies to students at every grade level.

**Inquiry project.** Another project my intern and I were able to work collaboratively on was an inquiry project about Saskatchewan. This project came about through the Galileo Educational Network and our work with a mentor during two professional development days in our school. The Grade 4 students worked on creating postcards about Saskatchewan. Each student chose a city or town in Saskatchewan to research. The students had to write one paragraph about a city or town of their choice and find a picture to go with their writing.
Their final project was a digital postcard they were able to print out and keep as well as present to the class. The students were engaged in this project from the very beginning because it was relevant and timely for them. They wanted to learn about technology and they were excited and proud of their final postcards.

**Other opportunities.** For the rest of the school year, I was able to work with many different students from kindergarten to Grade 4 on literacy. I worked with some small groups on early reading readiness as well as one-on-one with Grade 2 students on early reading intervention. Our team helped plan and carry out Books & Breakfast, which was a wonderful school and community literacy initiative. I was also able to attend a reading conference in Saskatoon that expanded my thinking about reading and literacy, and gave me more tools and resources to consider. Another co-researcher and I were able to observe at a school in Saskatoon that uses a program called Roadways to Reading, which focuses on intensive reading instruction for struggling readers.

**Daryl’s Experience**

As the Vice-Principal of Jubilee Community School, I saw I had a few roles to play to help improve literacy practices within our school. One was to serve as a coach and to help facilitate growth with our teachers. I followed the GROW model of coaching which is a simple framework for structuring coaching sessions. GROW stands for Goals, Current Reality, Options and Will, which are each steps to help move through a process of identifying one’s goals, realizing one’s current position, and then looking at ways to achieve those identified goals. The coaching opportunities were intended to be non-threatening and driven by the teachers’ own particular goals at the time. Based on the identified goals and the options discussed to achieve those goals, I could further support that teacher’s pursuit by setting up times for the teacher to meet with our school’s instructional facilitator, to observe other teachers, and to be involved in school-based PD opportunities. One example of this was inviting two beginning teachers to a conference call that we scheduled with author Dr. Timothy Rasinski from Kent State University to further discuss the impact reading fluency can play to improve reading comprehension. The conversation was enlightening but also affirmed some of the things that were already occurring in our classrooms. The conversation we had with Dr. Rasinski also helped bring some changes into the classroom. For example, the Fluency Development Lesson (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012) was incorporated into the current language arts unit.

Another role I played was being part of the intervention team working with our Grade 3 students. The focus we took in helping our struggling Grade 3 students was to improve their reading fluency. This focus originated when I was a classroom teacher and read and researched the impact reading fluency has in improving comprehension. I believed this was an easy, time efficient, easily tracked way of working with kids to improve their reading. We made the connection with Dr. Rasinski because of our interest in improving literacy through reading fluency.
As I reflect on the area of engagement, for myself, I was professionally engaged in learning more about how to improve students’ reading fluency to ultimately improve their comprehension. I read many of Dr. Rasinski’s articles and books on fluency as well as other sources that articulated the importance that fluency plays in improving students’ reading. I took this passion and interest and communicated that with our Grade 3 and 4 teachers from within our PLC discussions by sharing related professional articles and role modeling practices that can be carried out in our classrooms. From my own teacher engagement, I felt I brought about a positive change with other teachers and their own classroom practices.

**Davin’s Experience**

My role within this research was to work to create conditions in the school that helped our team support teachers. Our research team was made up of a group of people with tremendous knowledge and experience in the area of literacy. There were three main areas of focus that I had in terms of working to create these conditions.

My first consideration was to help to set the direction in terms of emphasizing the importance and supporting our collective commitment to focusing on literacy in the school. Focusing on literacy in an elementary school is a natural step in most instances, and we wanted to make sure we had a narrow focus within the area of literacy. There were a number of steps that were taken in order to support literacy at the school.

One step that was taken was to focus our Response to Intervention (RTI) program on literacy alone, giving us the opportunity to put all of our time and energy into it. There were also three individuals in the school who had literacy time built right into their timetable. This time was part of the intervention program and allowed the teachers to work with students in group and one-on-one settings. Another step we took was to focus our in-school professional development on literacy. We used our professional development days to consider literacy through the use of inquiry and technology, and also to discuss and explore literacy through the process of an Ed Camp. Our research project also helped to highlight the importance of literacy in the school by making sure the topic was always in the conversation. The energy from the project allowed us to maintain a continual focus on reading comprehension in a more focused way than we otherwise would have been able to do.

Providing resources was another step I took with the goal of supporting reading comprehension instruction. My goal was to create an environment of “yes” with regard to giving teachers access to the resources they wanted. Our project funding helped a great deal in regard to the resource of time, allowing teachers to partner or work with a mentor. The funding also covered some literature that supported teachers. We also used school funds to buy teachers the books they were looking for and the student resources that aided their teaching. Teachers were encouraged to ask for the things they wanted as often as possible. School funds were also used and directed toward literacy in a number of areas. Our professional development money was used in part to partner with an external provider to support teachers in the area of literacy, inquiry, and technology. Our school community council used funding to renovate the library, creating a welcoming atmosphere where students would feel comfortable reading. We also used library and textbook funding to support teachers and students with literacy. This year a specific portion of the school budget was directed toward our school goal.
Another step was to work to support teacher autonomy in the area of reading comprehension instruction. Our school had a clear goal of working together to help students learn to read, and teachers were encouraged to meet this goal in various ways. We chose not to use a single program, but rather encouraged teachers to recognize their teaching preferences and to understand their choices deeply. The focus on autonomy was rooted in a core belief of our research team that there are many ways to teach students to read, and we can help teachers most by supporting them in areas with which they are comfortable and familiar.

Michelle’s Experience

When we began this project, I was not sure where I wanted to go with the project. As a student support services teacher, I worked with many students at many grade levels. I was also taking courses toward my certificate in special education. It was through these courses that I began to learn more about peer tutoring. When this research project came along, I was currently working on a peer tutoring assignment with a focus in math and began to see the possibilities of how it could be used toward literacy.

The initial setup was by far the most difficult as I did not have a classroom. I had to seek out two classroom teachers who were willing to let me take about six students each every day for about 10 sessions. It was difficult to propose to the teachers as I was unsure of exactly what this was going to look like and if it was even going to work. I found Grade 1 students who would be the tutees and Grade 4 students who would be the tutors.

The first session we did was based on a need the teacher saw for these students, which was in math with number identification up to 20. I came up with five activities the tutors could lead every day. These activities included flashcard number identification (to track daily progress), creating a number out of playdough, what comes before/after, a game of guess the number, and ordering the numbers. In later peer tutoring groups, these activities became literacy-based with word flashcards, creating sentences with specific words, guess-the-word games, and other literacy-based activities.

I created a sheet where I explained the activities and had a chart so the number flashcards could be tracked every day. This sheet was glued to the front of an envelope where we kept all the supplies the students would need for the tutoring session. Each tutoring pair had their own envelope.

I began by training the tutors on what they were going to do and how they would teach the Grade 1 students. I demonstrated using one of the Grade 4s as a tutee. In the second session, I let the tutors practice with each other. I was available the whole time to give them feedback and suggestions. Each session lasted about 20 minutes. In the third session, we brought in the Grade 1s. I paired the students up and let them begin tutoring.

One important thing I found was to make sure I was available (not hovering) to offer suggestions and to lend a hand when needed. The second was to have a quick debriefing session with the tutors at the end. We would send the Grade 1s back to their classroom and meet for five minutes to discuss the struggles and accomplishments the tutors had that day. I was quite impressed by the quality of the discussions. These Grade 4 students were taking ownership, truly wanted to improve, and were very proud of what they were doing. The Grade 1 students were excited to come and work with their big buddies every day.
We did see improvement over the 10 sessions. It was a very rewarding experience for everyone involved. In the middle of this group, I began creating another group for literacy with a focus on the first 50 sight words.

The teachers who were involved in the first sessions saw the effectiveness of this strategy and were willing and excited to try it again. Therefore, they encouraged other teachers to try it. This is a teaching strategy that I found to have positive and effective results across various subject areas and grades.
Collective Project Themes

As this research included individual action research that was part of a collective project, there were a number of key themes that presented themselves in the data. These themes had a considerable impact on the process and individuals within it and often directed the work. These themes emerged from individual reflection and became part of group discourse.

A Holistic View of Reading Comprehension

From the outset of the research, our team was very uncomfortable with a narrow focus on reading comprehension. We were reluctant to prescribe to one program or process designed to support reading comprehension. We also did not want to subject teachers and students to this narrow view, asking them to try a single intervention to produce results. In reality, our team often aimed to support literacy as a whole with improved comprehension and comprehension instruction as an end goal of that process. As such, there were a number of actions that we took to support a holistic view of reading comprehension.

One event chaired by our school-based instructional facilitator was called Books and Breakfast. A team of staff members at the school planned the event aimed at promoting the importance of simply reading at home with children. The event included a pancake breakfast, storytelling, sing-alongs, making bookmarks, and many other literacy activities. Many families were able to attend and there was a very encouraging atmosphere in the school with excitement about books. A core belief of our research team and the planning committee was that teachers can support reading comprehension by simply helping students enjoy reading.

Another task our team set out to accomplish was to renovate the school library to make it more welcoming and exciting for students. Our school community council was involved in the project as well as our library staff. We redesigned the space, bought furniture, and changed some of the library procedures. The renovation created a space that seemed to attract both students and staff to the library. The library was often the hub of the school, and it was not uncommon to see teams collaborating and students reading throughout the day. Our goal was to support reading comprehension by creating a literacy space where students and staff wanted to be.

Our school staff was also lucky enough to be able to partner with the Galileo Educational Network this year as they supported us with professional development aimed at
developing literacy skills in students through inquiry teaching. Technology was also an important element in the teaching and learning. Our school was partnered with a mentor who presented and co-planned with teachers over the period of a couple of days. The teachers carried out the inquiry units with their grade-alike teams over a period of time. The projects required teachers to collaborate closely and work with students on exciting projects. Whole classes spent a great deal of time writing fairy tales, creating digital stories, making postcards, exploring space, and telling stories. The partnership with the Galileo Educational Network had a significant impact on teachers and students in our school.

The Necessity of Time

One common theme that kept coming up in our meetings together and in our reflections was the necessity of time. Our research team had to be very creative in finding time to meet together. The reality of working in an elementary school and trying to find uninterrupted time to collaborate on our McDowell Foundation project was sometimes a challenge. We were able to meet at lunch, but found many interruptions. Through our McDowell Foundation grant, we were able to meet during school hours by having release time.

With the many great after-school responsibilities of teachers, both home-and work-related, the expectation to make more time for professional development was a challenge. Our goal was to provide time for teachers to collaborate during the school day by using the grant for release time. Teachers were more engaged and willing to collaborate when given time to do so than when trying to collaborate outside of regular school hours.

The Importance of Autonomy

Pink (2009) proposed we all have an innate drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. He argued that once our personal drives are liberated, we achieve more and live richer, more engaged lives. He wrote that organizations can focus on three things to help their employees become more engaged and driven: create settings that focus on our need to direct our own lives (autonomy), to learn and create new things (mastery), and to do better by ourselves and our world (purpose). All three of Pink’s big ideas speak to our own work within our school, but the notion of building autonomy speaks strongly to us. We, too, also have felt in order for teachers to make positive changes to their own practices, to effectively collaborate, and to grow as professionals, teachers need to have genuine autonomy over their work. Within our project, we met that goal in several ways. Teachers were coached and supported on areas of their own interests and goals such as, for example, strengthening one’s own planning within a themed unit or incorporating fluency practices into reading lessons. We worked hard so those supports, such as working with our school’s instructional facilitator or observing a colleague, were not perceived as being forced but rather as an invitation or another opportunity to grow professionally. Within our project, we were also able to provide time for teachers to enhance their literacy practices in a way that was entirely autonomous, based on their own interests and goals. This would be similar to what Pink refers to as FedEx Days in his book. Some of these personal growth opportunities that occurred were working with our school division’s learning coach to develop rubrics and assessments, incorporating treaty education into reading lessons, and focusing on certain elements of the curriculum that coincided with teachers’ personal passions. We found the focus of supporting teachers in making autonomous decisions
about their own practices is essential to build the engagement necessary to improve classroom instruction.

**Research as Professional Development**

Our team approached this research project with the understanding that the project would be an opportunity for each of us to spend some time focusing on literacy. Our goal was to support teachers and yet we believed that our research team would likely be the people who developed the most. Throughout the process, our team experienced collaborative conversations, a focus on literacy, and a purposeful goal. The research process connected us with literature and allowed us to reflect deeply. As we carried out the project, we realized this was definitely the case. There were a number of aspects of the research process that were wonderful professional development opportunities for each of us.

Perhaps the best form of professional development that came from the research was the team and the team meetings. The research gave us the opportunity to meet and to discuss our beliefs and our actions. We had the support of the team, and the research guaranteed our continual focus on the topic. We were also able to learn from each other, which is something we never seem to have enough time to do in education.

Professional reflection was also a big part of this project and served as a development tool for each of us. Our team worked to write reflections to track our thoughts and actions. We shared our reflections with each other at each meeting and throughout the course of the research. The reflections directed our iterative actions and tied the process together. It was helpful that the reflections were formalized as it gave us more of an incentive to carry them out.

The writing process was also an area in which our team was able to grow and develop that came from the research. Writing the proposal, reflections, and the final report gave our team an opportunity to write purposefully. Writing a paper collectively was also a new experience for us as we were able to have conversations about writing and work our collective ideas into one thought. Writing is a great way to make sense of thought, and our team progressed tremendously as we worked through the writing process together. As a whole, the process of action research was a wonderful professional development opportunity for our research team.

**Collaboration Through Peer Tutoring**

Having students teach other students was a very effective way for teachers and students to work together. Teachers in the area of student services have the challenge of continuously collaborating with other professionals on a daily basis. During this research, one purpose was to figure out an effective way to use student services time in order to benefit the most students possible.

In order to achieve this, it was necessary to find a teacher who was willing to work collaboratively. Once that teacher was found, it was necessary to come up with a common goal in the area of reading comprehension. The goal was to improve reading comprehension while improving the students’ skills in the area of fluency by working on sight word recognition.
Once the goal was established, the next step was to find a way in which student support services could assist the teacher in reaching this goal. Through research, the method of peer tutoring was discovered.

According to Bender (2012), peer tutoring provides tutoring support and co-operative support for instructional content. Bender explained class-wide peer tutoring (CWPT), where all students are paired and all students are involved as the tutor and tutee. The other method is cross-grade peers, where selected students from a higher grade are paired with students in a lower grade to allow more of an instructional time than the CWPT.

The collaborating teacher and the student services teacher decided the most effective way to reach the common goal would be through the cross-grade peers method. This meant another teacher willing to collaborate would need to be found. This teacher was found simply by explaining what our goal was and asking for someone to become involved.

Time was a big factor as all three teachers needed to find a time in the day when students could be pulled from both classrooms without the students missing instruction that would make them fall farther behind. Since RTI had been implemented in our school, the students were able to leave the room during this time to work with their peer tutors.

We found this to be a very effective method in allowing students the opportunity for basic review and practice time. The teachers were able to track the progress of the students through meetings with the student support teacher who ran the peer tutoring sessions, as well as through the checklists. Helping students connect with students also helped our team of teachers connect with teachers.
Implications for Research and Practice

Research

This research has a number of implications for future research. This research was conducted in one school, in one school division, with a single group of researchers. Although it would be impossible to replicate the exact conditions of this project, it would be valuable to have another research team carry out a similar project in another setting.

The focus of this research was on building an intellectually engaged, collaborative team with the goal of supporting reading comprehension instruction. The research team would welcome the opportunity to carry out a similar research process, including intellectual engagement and collaboration, with a different goal. The team would like to investigate the possibility of the process in application to mathematics, student support services, science, or even physical activity for students.

This research also highlighted the importance of research that is carried out by teachers within the context of their work within schools. The process of design-based research, including individual action research projects, was a valuable process for both the research team and the school. Research support and funding opportunities for teachers working in schools would be immensely valuable in the future.

Practice

This research also has a number of implications for practice in schools. This research did not find a single method for effectively teaching reading comprehension. Rather, we found a broad, holistic approach was necessary and welcomed by teachers. Teachers need to have the opportunity and autonomy to explore their practice and to develop best practices in their classrooms that are research-based, personally tested, and supported by both colleagues and administration.

This research recognized the importance of intellectual engagement as a foundational piece of effective teaching and personal professional development for teachers. Our team used the research process as an engagement tool that catalyzed our personal growth.
Teachers in other settings may benefit from the opportunity to gain awareness and understanding in regard to models and dimensions of intellectual engagement.

This research also emphasized the importance of collaboration and teamwork when working toward a goal within a school. As such, it may be helpful for teachers and school leaders to consider collaborative strategies in their settings and to work to build purposeful teams within schools. Key elements of effective teams, such as working toward a common goal, knowing your team, and having clear and continual communication, are essential in order for school teams to be truly collaborative.
References


Appendix: Researchers’ Questionnaire

1. How was I intellectually engaged throughout the process?
2. How did the team support each other?
3. What were some of the challenges I faced?
4. In what ways did I support other teachers?
5. What classroom practices were improved throughout the process?
6. How did I grow through the process?
7. What were the key themes that came to mind throughout the process?
8. What processes were put in place that supported comprehension?
9. How did your specific role contribute to the team?
10. How did this project act as a safety net for teachers?
11. How did teachers explore their passions and demonstrate autonomy?