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# Instructional Leaders Supporting Implementation of Effective Literacy Instruction

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# Defining the Research and the Makeup of the Northwest School Division Reading Team

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In this research, teachers and administrators were invited to engage in collaborative research alongside the Northwest School Division Reading Team. Each team member worked through their own journey alongside the collaborative reading team and with colleagues including teachers and administrators. The NWSD Reading Team was formed in 2014 and is comprised of passionate and skilled literacy leaders. As a team, we were excited to embark on a research project to support the reading initiative that came to fruition with the development of the Hoshin Kanri leading to the Education Sector Strategic Plan of the Northwest School Division. Our team is made up of two learning coaches, two administrators (both principals at elementary schools), one school-based instructional facilitator/literacy teacher and one Co-ordinator of Student Support Services. Representation of the team members are from the northern, southern and central areas of the Northwest School Division that ranges from Lashburn and Maidstone in the south, to St. Walburg and Turtleford in the central and Meadow Lake in the north.

# Background and Literature Review

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We, as the Northwest School Division Literacy Team, explored teacher professional development reflecting the ideals of “assessment for learning” for teachers (specifically grades 1 to 3) including division-wide professional development and more meaningful professional development, so as to influence current practice in the area of reading instruction. How can a literacy team support implementation of effective literacy instruction? The NWSD has a highly qualified literacy team established; however, our schools across the division have diverse needs and are geographically spread out. We wanted to make a difference in supporting teachers with effective literacy instruction from grades 1 to 3. This narrative inquiry explores stories of in-service collaborative professional development attending to reflections and tensions that lead to new and practical knowledge of literacy instructional strategies. These stories helped bring an understanding of how a division literacy team, administrators and teachers endeavour to construct curriculum together with their students and other teachers and gain knowledge through shared experiences and stories of practice in safe learning communities. In our role as instructional leaders, we have the foundational belief that teachers and administrators are professionals who will engage in reflection so as to examine practice and make instructional decisions and changes to benefit the students whom they are teaching. “Much of the pleasure of professional growth comes from reflecting on what you’re learning” (Knight, 2011). Job-embedded professional development has been substantiated in the literature as being an effective method to impact student learning when it is authentic. “Emerging professional development models have the potential, not just to promote teachers’ use of effective instructional procedures, but to support them to reflect on and revise teaching practices so as to construct new conceptual knowledge” (Butler, Novak Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2001).

We know from research studies that reading is an essential skill and more specifically that “grade 3 reading is a future indicator of success” (Hoshin Kanri – *2014-2020 Outcome Plan: At Grade Level in Reading, Writing and Math*). Across the province, school divisions have established literacy teams; however, how will these teams impact reading results? The purpose of this study looks at the most effective methods to impact teacher and administrator knowledge of research-based literacy strategies and instructional practice, thereby impacting (grades 1 to 3) student learning in the area of reading. We want to make an impact with teachers of early readers, as “most troubled readers in the primary

grades continue to need more expert and more intensive reading instruction than schools routinely offer” (Pressley & Allington, 2015).

Recent inquiry into school culture emphasizes the importance of attending closely to the experiences of children and teachers. This work illuminates those experiences and helps teachers, coaches, professional development planners, administrators, and policy makers to understand the tensions shaped for teachers as professional development experiences designed by others bump against their own stories of professional development, stories of curriculum reform and their own personal practical knowledge of education in the area of reading instruction. As a division literacy team we wanted to impact student and teacher learning as well as teachers’ views of their own personal knowledge of reading instruction and professional growth. We also found that it was important to work with school administrators to support their own growth as literacy leaders in their schools and build capacity.

Literacy has always been and continues to be important in the Northwest School Division.

**Northwest School Division Journey in Supporting Effective Literacy Instruction (2010 to Present):**

<b>Time Frames</b>	<b>What was done to support literacy in the Northwest School Division?</b>
2010-2012	Northwest School Division ELA Curriculum Renewal workshops (grades 1-5)
2010-2013	Continuous Improvement Framework/School Learning Improvement Plans – Literacy (Reading/Writing) an area to focus on for the division and in schools
2011	Five Learning Coaches hired to support teachers
2011-2013	Northwest School Division implements division-wide reading screens for grades 1-9 twice per year (fall/spring)
2013	Education Sector Strategic Plan arises from Hoshin Kanri
2013	Reading Assessment, Instruction and Intervention Strategies Hoshin Team is Established Duane Hauk (Director of Education – NWSD) is the secondary owner of the outcome for <i>At grade level or above in reading, writing, and math</i>
April 2014	Northwest School Division Reading Team is established
June 2014	First official Fountas and Pinnell Benchmarking Assessments are done and data collected for all NWSD grades 1-3 students
July 2014	Jennifer Dorval attends <i>What every school leader needs to know about good literacy teaching and effective literacy coaching</i> in Cambridge, MA led by Irene Fountas and Cindy Downend
September/November 2014	Jennifer Dorval facilitated two reading strategies workshops with all school-based instructional facilitators in the NWSD
October 2014	NWSD Reading Team attended the Summit Conference in Calgary. The team decided to apply for a McDowell Foundation research grant as they drove home.

November 2014	<p>First SaskReads provincial meeting in Saskatoon to unveil SaskReads draft and website.</p> <p>Dawn Paylor and Jennifer Dorval led a Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark assessment workshop for NWSD teachers.</p> <p>Jennifer Dorval presented to PreK and K teachers on Janet Mort's Joyful Literacy Interventions.</p>
January 2015	Jennifer Dorval met with the NWSD Sr. Admin Team to discuss SaskReads deployment plans
January 2015-June 2015	NWSD schools/teachers create five webinars to support the SaskReads document and deployment
March 2015	<p>Second SaskReads provincial meeting in Saskatoon</p> <p>Jennifer Dorval presented on behalf of the NWSD the deployment plan that was created by the Sr. Admin team and the NWSD Reading Team</p>
June 2015	Dawn Paylor represents the NWSD reading team and administrators on the SaskReads Provincial Admin Reading Team
June 2015	Jennifer Dorval presents to the NWSD Administrators a preview of SaskReads and the deployment plan for the 2015-16 school year
July 2015	NWSD Reading Team receives a McDowell Foundation research grant for \$19,975 for <i>Instructional Leaders Supporting Implementation of Effective Literacy Strategies</i>
August 2015	Dr. Stirling McDowell Action Research officially begins for the NWSD Reading Team
August 2015	<p>Jennifer Dorval facilitates a gr. 1-3 summer reading PD workshop during the summer break to 24 teachers.</p> <p>Jennifer Dorval distributes SaskReads books and webinars for staff meeting PD to all schools at the first admin meeting.</p>
September 2015	Professional development put on by some of the NWSD Reading Team with all Administrators at the Admin Retreat on <i>Building a school culture of literacy</i>
October 2015	<p>Professional Development put on by Cheryl Treptow, Anita Dolan, Kristin Becotte and Jennifer Dorval to Grade 1, 2, and 3 teachers on 3 separate days on SaskReads and connecting F&amp;P, SaskReads and the Saskatchewan ELA curriculum.</p> <p>The reading team and other NWSD administrators, teachers and a superintendent attend the Reading Summit Conference</p>
December 2015	<p>Provincial Admin Reading Team for supporting Admin with SaskReads meeting in Saskatoon.</p> <p>Jennifer Dorval, Susan Plant, Dawn Paylor, Duane Hauk (Director) and Aaron Oakes(Superintendent) facilitate a follow-up to administrators on building a culture of literacy.</p>
February 2016	Jennifer Dorval, Duane Hauk, Aaron Oakes present on the Compelling why of teaching reading at an admin meeting and have administrators review their school data and learning improvement plans to move beyond conversations into action.
April 2016 and May 2016	<p>Provincial Admin Reading team meeting in Saskatoon.</p> <p>NWSD Reading Team, Director, Superintendent and Learning Coaches come together for strategic planning to move beyond conversations to action plans.</p>

# Methodology

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This research used narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In conversations (personally and with social media and other data collected) and in working alongside teachers across the NWSD, this study provided insight into how social media, job-embedded professional learning, webinars, professional development workshops and article exploration encourages teachers to shift their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1986) by using research-based literacy strategies. This shift implies a different way of presenting content to students and creates a space for professional development that encourage teachers, both beginning and experienced, to move beyond a role of transmitting knowledge (teacher holding the knowledge) to methods that invite students into the exchange/conversation about how they come to know and understand the curriculum content and their own role in curriculum making (teacher and student co-constructing the knowledge). We recognize that literacy is a core curricular element for students and aim to make a difference by supporting teachers.

Each NWSD Reading Team member worked closely with teachers and/or administrators who were willing and agreed to be co-research participants in their schools. The division reading team instructional leader selected from the school(s) that they work in, and explored job embedded professional learning practices together. Pseudonyms are used for the co-research participants so as to allow for confidentiality and maintenance of ethical guidelines. The narrative inquiry space provided narrative accounts of the participants' experiences that are documented in each of our stories. Analysis and interpretation resulted in comparisons and contrasts across narrative accounts and school sites.

Our focus was to seek a better understanding to effectively supporting grades 1 to 3 teachers in using effective literacy strategies so that students grow as readers. Our actions and goals in this research "are connected to our beliefs and current knowledge and are the fabric of our daily teaching, leading and successful interactions with students and colleagues" (Routman, 2014). What worked and what else is needed? This study explores the mentorship of grades 1 to 3 teachers and administrators in the journey of creating effective literacy practice. Our team used a wide array of research to direct the process of supporting teachers and administrators. The focus included comprehension as well as the other components that support the development of reading. Supporting effective literacy instruction 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 backgrounds 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.

Participants had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of workshops, in-service professional development and professional collaboration in their school division and to build capacity for effective literacy instruction in their classrooms and schools. “Although much has been written about leadership and learning as well as literacy and learning, little has been written about the crucial interconnection between literacy and leadership for ensuring that all students become effective readers and writers. That partnership is at the heart of successful school wide literacy...” (Routman 2014). We, as the NWSD Reading Team and literacy instructional leaders, work at embedding a culture of literacy and thoughtful professional learning opportunities for NWSD administrators and teachers so as to create school cultures of literacy discussions, leadership and classroom applications of effective literacy instruction to increase student achievement in reading.

## **Anita's Story**

(School-Based Instructional Facilitator and Literacy Teacher in St. Walburg)

As I begin to write up my findings for this research report, I think back to being asked to join the Northwest School Division Reading Team in the spring of 2014. At the time I had been enjoying my position as School-Based Instructional Facilitator for St. Walburg School over the past three years and had been teaching for 20 years in various elementary positions. I was excited by the idea of meeting with others who share my passion for teaching reading; however, I was somewhat skeptical as to what I could bring to the table and what kind of difference a small group of people could make in a large division with a wide variety of needs, students and teachers. As our team met during the 2014-15 school year, we worked to study our reading data and to find ways to make our division reading goal a reality in our schools. Along the way we brainstormed, experimented, encouraged and shared with each other. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work alongside this group of teachers, administrators, superintendents and learning coaches.

### **The Question**

Some members of our group had been involved in McDowell Foundation research previously and felt it might be a way for the NWSD Reading Team to more fully look into which of our ideas for helping teachers in the area of reading were making, or could make, the biggest difference. Our big question became "How can a division literacy team effectively support the implementation of research-based literacy instruction in grades 1 to 3 classrooms?"

### **My Role in the School**

As the School-Based Instructional Facilitator at St. Walburg School, I work with all of the teachers from prekindergarten to Grade 12 in a variety of ways. For this project I chose two primary teachers to meet with on a regular basis over the 2015-16 school year. This is the story of our journey (i.e., meetings) and what I learned about myself as a leader and teachers as learners.

### **The Teachers**

Our Grade 1 teacher, Neville, and our Grade 2 teacher, Victoria, are both excellent educators who bring different strengths and perspectives to the classroom. Neville is an innovative teacher who believes in research-based teaching methods. Victoria is a structured teacher with a gentle yet firm approach to moving each student forward towards their full potential. They were both eager to meet and had many questions. I was just hoping I would be able to answer at least some of them and live up to their expectations!

### **Building Capacity**

I set up meetings with each teacher for one morning or afternoon every other month. For each of the meetings, I prepared an agenda for our time together, though I quickly learned that it was important to be flexible with this agenda and to meet each teacher where they were at as well as to be respectful of how they taught and why. Of utmost concern for all of

us was that the students were significantly below grade level in reading skills; therefore, we spent a great deal of time working on how best to reach these students. We reviewed our own understandings of essential literacy skills and designed ways to intervene. We looked at best practices surrounding small group guided reading strategies and put several target students into Leveled Literacy Intervention groups. At our second meeting, each teacher took a different approach in responding to those still having difficulty and, after speaking with our student services support teacher and learning coach, we placed a group of Grade 2 students in the roadways program. We also developed and designed our own blitz for a group of Grade 1 students.

### **Looking at the Data/Evidence**

We are very proud of our literacy wall at St. Walburg School! We began each of our meetings by looking at the results of our Fountas and Pinnell benchmark testing. The literacy wall was a concrete picture of each class and always gave us a moment of pause in celebrating all of those who had already met our year-end reading goal or even surpassed it! It also let us think of tangible goals such as how to ensure a student moves at least one level before the next testing time. The physical act of moving (or not moving) each student's card along the levels and always keeping in mind the target was incredibly powerful for all of us.

### **Developing Literacy Leaders and Empowering Literacy Learners**

Neville and Victoria were already literacy leaders when our project started! They have excellent ideas and a definite passion for what they do. They care about each of their students and know their academic strengths and weaknesses. After identifying the needs in his classroom, Neville decided he would like to incorporate literacy into all subject areas. His (amazing) thought was to take four subject areas and turn them into "I Wonder" workstations. It was a big undertaking but within weeks of the idea, Neville had this up and running in his classroom. Victoria was working with one of the most diverse groups in our school. One group of students displayed reading skills two to three years beyond their grade level while another group of students could not yet read at all. Together we discussed (and tried) several strategies, groupings and programs. Victoria was a positive presence in the face of a true challenge and remained confident that all students would make reading progress.

I was in awe of the dedication of these two teachers. "Mentors also learn from their protégés – developing new insights into their own and others' teaching, new relationships, and a renewal of enthusiasm and commitment to their craft and career" (Hargreaves & Fullan). Their students are both so lucky! Neville and Victoria have such different teaching styles that it was important to respect each of their strengths and needs. This meant that time to build trust and get to know each other as part of the research process was essential. "For deep change to occur and for transformational learning, the system must have open communication ... Leaders must trust their teams to speak the truth, and teams must trust their leaders to lead with integrity" (Hirsh & Killion, 2009). The agenda for each meeting, though made by me, was the result of what they felt they needed to move forward professionally in the area of teaching literacy.

## **Big Ideas and Successes**

Our reading team has worked diligently on training NWSD teachers to use the Saskatchewan Reads document. We believe whole-heartedly in the importance of each section: Curriculum Connections, Learning and Classroom Environment, Big Ideas of Reading, Assessment and Evaluation, Instructional Approaches and Evaluation and Intervention. While we were dedicated to having all teachers look at all of these sections, I found that when working with individual teachers, it was necessary to find out which parts would most benefit them individually. Just as we would meet each student where they are currently at on their learning journey, we could do the same for teachers. Neville and Victoria both had very strong knowledge of the English Language Arts curriculum; therefore, they did not need help in this area at all. Neville is a teacher with a wonderful understanding of the big picture in relation to the teaching of reading and wanted to work on how to translate his observations of students to assessment. Victoria had a clear vision of assessment and wanted to work on becoming more balanced in her instructional approaches to reading. One-size learning definitely does not fit all! Thus, my emphasis on personalized professional development began. I did not have all of the answers for Neville and Victoria but I could recommend conferences, webinars and books as well as bring in experts to our get-togethers. The most important factor became having the time to listen to each of these teachers. Here are Victoria's words from an exit slip asking to describe the benefits of our meeting that day: "I would give it a 10/10 because it is so hard to find the time to sit down and discuss what is going well and how we make improvements. There is just so much to talk about!" Teaching is so incredibly busy and teachers are very giving of their time when it comes to students' needs; it is essential they are asked on an ongoing basis what they themselves need!

## **Challenges and Next Steps**

So, with all that Neville, Victoria and I learned this school year, what is next for us? What is next for the reading team? My hope is that I will be able to build time into my timetable to meet with teachers periodically and work collaboratively on our school and division goals. This will look different with every teacher so it is a big challenge in both time and effort. Neville and Victoria will use some of the ideas we implemented this year and will also change some of our plans to better fit a new group of students and to reflect their own learning of what works best for each of them. Neville and Victoria will be a large part of spreading the word to others on our staff about the necessity of teaching reading. Here are Neville's thoughts on what he needs next: "more professional development and more opportunities to collaborate." As I work with our school's primary professional learning community team, I will need to make this happen! Our reading team will learn new strategies from this research to incorporate into next year's plan. We will take everything we learned and reflect upon it. We are a determined group and know that "successful and lasting change depends on solid trust, high expertise by the change agents, excellent resources, sufficient time and practice for adjusting and learning, and a whole host of complex factors. It also depends on taking the time to reflect on where we are and where we want to be" (Routman, 2014).

## Cheryl's Story

(Learning Coach out of Meadow Lake, Servicing the North Schools)

My role as learning coach is to support the professional growth of teachers through job-embedded professional development. The McDowell Foundation grant helped provide the financial supports needed to explore the possibilities of this role. Routman (2014) states "In communities of professional learning, groups of teachers and administrators come together regularly to share what's working, to read and discuss research and literacy practices across the curriculum, to observe and analyze best practices, to apply those practices to their classrooms and schools, to assess what's working, to celebrate learning and to responsively adjust to do better" (p. 219). Believing in the potential that highly functioning professional learning communities have to positively affect student learning, my goal through this project was to support teachers as literacy learners and to help develop literacy leaders within a professional learning community. To do this effectively, I chose to work alongside a group of teachers whom I have worked with in the past and have already established positive, professional relationships deeply rooted in mutual respect and trust, as "A culture of trust provides the emotional infrastructure that makes risk taking and openness to change possible" (Routman, 2014, p. 24). Only one member of this group was somebody whom I had not previously worked with.

The group included four classroom teachers, one school-based instructional leader/SSST, and one administrator/SSST. The school had been implementing professional learning communities for over a decade; therefore, this group already had regularly scheduled professional learning community time embedded within their day. The majority of the work focused on the four individual classroom teachers who were committed to improving their practice and graciously agreed to devote the necessary time and energy to support the efforts of this research.

At our initial meeting, we established an understanding of roles by exploring and discussing elements of effective literacy coaches (Dorval & Plant; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Once roles and responsibilities were established, we were able to collectively choose goals based on the needs of the teachers and their students. Staying committed to the school division and Ministry's initiative of implementing Saskatchewan Reads, teachers were asked to explore the instructional approaches outlined in the document and choose an area of need to focus on. The teachers willingly determined they needed and wanted to work on guided reading within their classrooms. Because of diverse teaching experience and needs, it was important to assess and reflect on each individual teacher's current understandings and practices, much like we would for our own student's learning. "Responsive teaching and assessing means we are always teaching for understanding, continuously checking for understanding, and adjusting instruction as needed" (Routman, 2014, p. 37). By accessing resources available on the SaskReads website, at our next meeting teachers explored FAQs of guided reading and completed an initial self-assessment reflecting on their current experience with guided reading. Through thoughtful, honest self-reflection, these teachers revealed that they really had very limited understanding of and experience with guided reading. Prior to our next meeting, to help gain a better understanding of this instructional approach, teachers read an article explaining guided reading which we discussed at our next meeting. Additionally, teachers observed me while I modelled a guided reading

lesson which we also discussed and reflected on later. After these knowledge-building learning experiences, teachers determined the next actionable steps they each needed to take to make guided reading a reality in their classroom. Teachers then explored, chose, and implemented classroom management options that would allow for small-group reading to occur. Finally, teachers allowed me to visit their classrooms and provide them with some feedback while guided reading was going on. What was discovered next was likely the most pivotal and important finding of this research experience. While attempting to implement guided reading, these teachers realized that they needed to develop a better understanding of the grade-level outcomes and expectations in order to know exactly what they needed to focus on within their guided reading sessions. Responding to this identified challenge, the group saw a need to change the focus of their professional learning community from implementing guided reading to understanding, assessing, tracking, and monitoring student progress of grade-level expectations. The group broke off into grade-alike teams and created common assessments to help guide their instruction. After the common assessments were created and administered, teachers collaborated and discussed the results and possible teaching strategies to target essential skills. Teachers then embedded the teaching and learning of these skills within all instructional approaches including modeled, shared, guided and independent reading, and further reflected on the effectiveness of these strategies through ongoing formative assessment. Because my goal was to support literacy learners and develop literacy leaders, at our final meeting together, I asked teachers to assess and reflect on their experiences within this professional learning community using reflective questions suggested by Routman (2014). Here are some of the highlights of their reflections:

What do you notice that you've done well?

- I have come to a better understanding of how to address the ELA outcomes, specifically the reading strand.
- I feel more confident in leading a guided reading lesson.
- I think we worked very well as a team and worked toward a collaborative goal. I think we had *huge* goals in mind when we started by realizing we had to go back and set goals that fit the students' needs. We then came up with practical goals to help understand where our students really were (common assessments) so that we have a starting to move forward from there.
- I have done well to track student progress with regards to reading development (cues and conventions).
- Set a goal, realized there needed to be a step before that, so we refocused. Stayed on task and got something to be proud of.
- I think I've been a good support for the PLC teams. I've listened and gave input to both groups and asked both groups where I can help the most.
- Collaborated; set goals aligned with SaskReads and School Division; collected and analyzed data.
- Used the results of the testing that the Grade 3 teachers did to guide instruction. Separated some groups to allow for those quiet personalities to open up more. Managed to hit different areas of need with those students in a larger small group. Tied in reading material to classroom themes and interest.

How are you moving closer to your teaching/learning goal?

- I now have several common reading comprehension assessment tools to continue using in the future. These tools have helped me have a better understanding of where my students are at in regards to specific reading comprehension skills.
- I can now move closer to my goals because I understand the process. I have the basics and can move forward.
- I am going to continue to develop a tracking system and common assessments for comprehension strategies next.
- Having a better understanding of where my students are ALL of the time; better at teaching to their needs.
- Through our PLC meetings, I can gain insight into how I can best help within my role.
- Open, ongoing conversations and action planning.
- Direct instruction on areas of need as shown by test results; will be testing students with Fountas and Pinnell to track progress after this month of small group targeted instruction.

What's the most important thing you need to do next?

- I need to take what I have learned about where my students are at in regards to their specific reading comprehension skills and use it to be more intentional in my independent, small-group and whole-group instruction.
- Next, we need to plan lessons to help strengthen the skills we are assessing for. Then we want to fit them into units.
- Reflect and keep changing/trying new teaching strategies to find which ones work best for me and my students.
- Develop my skills even farther when doing the targeted guided reading groups.
- Keep attending meetings, keep growing and learning and not be afraid to try new things and take risks.
- Continue to set new goals.
- Fountas and Pinnell tests; GROW meeting to discuss progress and planning.

What questions do you have?

- How can we keep this up (longer periods of time)?
- How can I individualize these plans? How can they fit other places/classes? Will we have the time to plan next year?
- How to utilize/change PLC time (we have one period every six days) to be used the most effectively?
- Is the support we were given this year maintainable every year? It was great, but is that available for others to achieve a highly functioning PLC?
- I am constantly asking myself how I can be a good support for the PLC teams.
- How can the work that has been done in this group continue and be sustainable without the grant money?
- Do we try again if we don't see results? Or try something different? Was it a long enough timeframe to see significant results? Are these stories engaging enough for

students with focus issues? Is that a big part of the problem? May not have the same amount of time with an extra teacher next year, what can be done instead?

What help might you need to move forward? Where and how can you find that help?

- I need to continue finding texts for guided reading that relate more to what we are covering in class (curriculum connections). Also a better fit into my schedule.
- Just organizing and clarifying. Finding check lists and plans that will fit our ideas. More time to plan and set goals.
- The main help that can be given is the PLC time to develop the resources and tracking systems.
- Watching other guided reads, other classes, YouTube.
- I can move forward with support from learning coaches and admin.
- Continued involvement in PLC groups, perhaps intermittently.
- Continue learning about effective questioning.
- Can seek help from reading, colleagues, SBIF and Learning Coach.

## **Key Findings**

Through this experience some common themes emerged that demonstrated evidence of meeting the goal of developing literacy leaders and supporting literacy learners within a professional learning community group. These themes include building capacity, using evidence and data to inform practice, and empowering and utilizing literacy learners.

## **Building Capacity**

Through this professional learning community process, we improved our capacity in the areas of curriculum knowledge, assessment/evaluation/monitoring, instructional approaches, and the PLC process.

## **Curriculum Knowledge**

We explored SaskReads and identified areas where teachers felt they needed more. We discovered that in order to effectively do guided reading, more work needed to be done identifying and understanding curricular grade-level expectations, specifically in the areas of cues and conventions and before, during and after reading comprehension strategies.

## **Assessment/Evaluation/Monitoring Progress**

Once the expectations of the curriculum were identified, teachers worked to create effective assessments of the necessary skills and knowledge and used these assessments to inform instruction. Teachers created tracking systems to support ongoing assessment of these reading skills.

## **Instructional Approaches**

We explored and implemented specific strategies, such as "t-charts" and questioning, that intentionally and explicitly teach the identified skills within modeled, guided and shared reading instructional approaches.

We collaborated, held rich conversations, set goals, adjusted goals as needed, applied new practises, observed and analyzed student achievement, and reflected on practises.

### **Looking at the Data/Evidence**

Multiple pieces of evidence including teacher self-assessments, student achievement data, classroom observations, and research-based practices were collected and analysed throughout this process. Reflection of this data helped us determine student and teacher needs and identify next steps within our professional learning experience.

### **Empowering Literacy Learners and Developing and Utilizing Literacy Leaders**

Through professional collaboration, we increased our capacity of teaching reading, knowing and understanding curricular expectations, assessment practices, and the professional learning community process. This group effectively co-created goals relative to the needs of the students and the teachers and reflected on their practice within a high-functioning, supportive professional learning environment. In spite of the wealth of growth that we experienced as literacy learners, this group demonstrated a growth mindset by noting that there is more work and more professional learning surrounding literacy that needs to be done. We can continue to work towards new learning goals by asking questions, getting and giving feedback, and supporting each other with our own strengths and talents as literacy leaders. I am proud of the commitment and professionalism of this group and look forward to learning alongside them as we all continue to develop as literacy learners and leaders.

## **Dawn's Story**

(Principal at a Prekindergarten to Grade 4 School in Meadow Lake)

As the Principal of a prekindergarten to Grade 4 school in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, the focus to improving literacy has to be the driving force behind the entire school culture. Without the existence of this philosophical framework, related initiatives would be more difficult to establish and maintain. That said, it became incumbent that I establish a school-wide culture promoting the good of literacy development in every manner by implementing collaborative practices. As validated and measured by much educational research, collaborative practices have emerged as one of the single most important foundational principles to improving school system efficiencies. "Successful schools encourage teacher risk-taking, learning from errors, and sharing of good ideas in ways that lead to increased self-efficacy, high expectations, and shared learning" (Strahan, 2003, p.129). This creates a strong culture for collaboration among teachers and, when done effectively, creates an environment to improve student learning. In order to move towards a literacy-based school-wide culture, emphasis was placed on building trusting relationships, shared leadership and empowerment, embedded professional development and the role of the principal as lead learner.

### **Trust Relationships**

The most significant role in the development of a collaborative culture is the ability for the leader to establish trust relationships among all stakeholders. As an administrator I continually remind myself about the importance of building positive, trusting relationships with all staff members. Chicago, Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert "Principals are crucial for shaping "trust in schools" which has dramatic influences, both direct and indirect, on the effectiveness of the school" (as cited in Fullan, 2007, p.161). In my initial staff meeting, part of our agenda was to collaboratively examine and analyze the 13 Parameters: A Literacy Leadership Toolkit, which is a research-designed framework to improve reading instruction and achievement. Collectively, the staff decided which parameters we were currently having success with but also identified areas to improve upon. The areas requiring improvement became goals that guided our reading focus throughout the year. To further build trust, I tried to exemplify the ability to learn alongside, possess knowledge and skills of current reading practices, and provide mentorship. Through this, I gained inroads with trust, creating a more conducive pathway for holistic collaboration. My leadership philosophy required a keen effort to establish trust amongst the staff because in order to fulfil collaborative processes, trust must exist within the system. "Without professional trust, schoolwide achievement is not possible or sustainable" (Routman, 2014, p. 22).

### **Empowering Literacy Learners**

With a high degree of trust established within the system, collaborative processes became more fluid and effective. The next focus was developing and empowering teacher-leaders to allow the school to experience growth and development as it relates to collaboration and student learning. "Research suggests that collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership, we need to promote and mentor shared leadership for optimal learning across a school and district" (Routman, 2014, p. 184). As a

leader, I placed much emphasis on empowering and developing teacher-leaders within the school. Fullan (2007) claims, “Effective principals share – in fact, develop leadership among teachers” (p. 156). The key success at our school has been the development of leaders in the area of literacy and how to teach reading. I provided professional development to train teachers regarding research-based reading practices, demonstrated mentorship, and collaborated alongside throughout the process.

Some of the key in-school initiatives that empowered teachers to learn more about teaching reading included sending a team of teachers from each grade to attend the Reading Summit. Subsequently, these teachers would come back to the school and share their knowledge per grade at their embedded professional learning community meeting. Furthermore, our School-Based Instructional Facilitator attended all professional learning communities and acted as a liaison in reporting data and researching best practices for the staff. Profound results were realized through capacity building, including increased student achievement, teacher-leaders sharing their expertise, and creation of a collaborative culture.

Another developing trend due to strong collaboration in our school was the effective use of student data. Datnow and Park (2015) state, “Without collaboration and collegiality, data use is impossible” (p. 11). Therefore, in order for our school to move forward for the greater cause of improving student reading, it was critical for me to empower teacher leaders to effectively analyze and use student data. Routman (2014) states, “Another essential element for improving student learning is providing time for looking at data in school teams for the purpose of noticing areas of strength, student growth, and needs, and determining how to use these data to improve performance” (p. 227). One example included was using the first Professional Collaborative Day in the school calendar to analyze Fountas and Pinnell benchmark data of our students from June. From here, teachers, student services support teachers and administration collaborated to develop individual learning plans for Tier 1 instruction as well as creating Tier 2 grouping and interventions. Through the use of several collaborative processes, our school was able to create a team of data experts who utilized their knowledge to have an impact within their own classroom, as well as the remaining classrooms within the school. Communicating the data was important, so teachers decided to create a confidential data wall for professional use. Mid-year, embedded data meetings were also utilized to analyze student achievement and reflect on best teaching practices used in Tier 1 to meet the needs of all students. Time was also allotted to allow teachers, student services support teachers, and administration to align Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction to ensure maximum learning was taking place. “School leaders play an important role in cultivating a belief that teachers share responsibility for all students at the school, not just those in their classrooms” (Datnow & Park, 2015, p. 12). Some of the key understandings that were conveyed were providing benchmark training for new teachers along with professional learning on analyzing benchmark data. The establishment and empowerment of teacher leaders in this capacity acted as a catalyst to inform best teaching practices and improve student learning, all through effective collaborative practices.

### **Job-Embedded Professional Learning**

We found that a collaborative culture created many opportunities for our school to inform teaching practices and improve student reading. Scheduled meetings were planned to discuss student work which led to an understanding of related curriculum and assessment

practices. As a result, our Response to Intervention Team and kindergarten teachers placed significant attention on ensuring phonemic awareness skills were thoroughly taught in both the classroom and Tier 2 interventions. Furthermore, these collaborative processes allowed administrators and learning coaches to be part of the sharing process to yield even higher results in professional learning and student growth. Another impact was continuing with embedding grade-alike collaboration time into the timetable. We also decided to use staff meetings to collaborate and learn professionally which strengthened and extended our knowledge. During staff meetings, we participated in initiatives such as referencing the Sask Reads document and NWSD-related webinars. Other meetings consisted of our school-based instructional facilitator presenting on the Five Pillars of Reading and the NWSD Learning Coach in-servicing staff on cross-curricular reading instruction. Routman (2014) claims “The best professional development is professional learning that leads to new insights, confirmations, expanded thinking, improved and enhanced teaching and leading, and – most of all – increased student learning” (p. 219).

Early in the year, the staff identified job-embedded professional learning as a valuable learning opportunity in our school’s collaborative processes. As a leader, this information was taken on advisement and I began to research which strategies would best serve this need. One effective collaborative practice that teachers felt could have a meaningful impact was the need to get colleagues into others’ classrooms. This would require some creative planning and scheduling and I was able to provide release time for teachers to formally visit other classrooms. Before formalizing this process, I made a request for staff to ensure that this process was more than just a classroom observation. My intent was to have teachers reflect on what benefits could be made as it would relate to their own practice. Teachers were asked to identify a target area they could grow in before the classroom visit took place and what they should be looking for upon arriving. During the observation, teachers were asked to note an area of interest or an area of question that may be relevant to their own improvement area. Routman (2014) states, “Time to collaborate and learn together increases the flow and exchange of ideas, as well as efficiency, and enjoyment in our practices, and it leads to greater learning for us adults. Shared learning by all educators also leads to deeper learning for students” (p. 191).

### **Develop and Utilize Literacy Leaders**

Several key understandings and implications have been outlined, but perhaps the most notable learning piece moving forward is the significant role the principal must continue to play in promoting the cause for improvement in student reading. “Vitaly important, the principal must be a ‘leading learner’ who possesses personality traits such as curiosity and desire to learn along with humility, respect for others, and ‘adaptability above all else’” (Routman, 2014, p. 183). With so many stakeholders relying on leadership from the principal in the role of collaboration, it has become apparent that the leader must be well-versed in this area along with staying current with research-based practices in the teaching of reading. “Principals who had the greatest impact on student learning in the school focused on instruction – including teacher knowledge, skills, motivation – and on ensuring supportive working conditions (such as time for collaboration)” (Fullan, 2014, p. 61).

In the end collaborative processes proved to have a great impact on student learning in our school. For this to occur there was a strong foundation of personal and professional trust, a common vision and goal, shared and distributive leadership, time-tabled collaboration

time, and job-embedded professional learning—all for the sake of promoting effective collaborative processes and improving student reading. “Lasting achievement across a whole school depends on a close working partnership and collaboration between and among the principal, classroom teachers, specialists, coaches, and all members of the school community” (Routman, 2014, p. 183).

## Jennifer's Story

(Co-ordinator of Student Services and Division Literacy Lead in Turtleford)

The diversity of the hats that I wear created opportunities and barriers in this research endeavour. I looked to support and learn from the NWSD Reading Team members as the division literacy lead, as well as supporting and receiving guidance from the Director and Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, providing support and guidance to in-school administrators in their schools and at admin meetings and retreats and to the student support services teachers/educational assistants in schools. I was also fortunate enough to be part of some division-wide professional development opportunities as well as job-embedded professional development. In my various roles and capacities, I was able to continue my growth as a literacy learner, but also share some of my knowledge and experiences regarding effective literacy instruction and practice. My own collaboration with the NWSD Reading Team, the senior administrators, in-school administration, teachers, and educational assistants all provided opportunities for learning and reflection to occur.

### Building Capacity

A crucial piece of supporting administrators and teachers in the area of effective literacy practice and instruction is knowledge and understanding of teaching reading and data analysis to guide instruction. "The complexity of teaching reading can be, quite simply, overwhelming. How does a teacher teach the various skills in reading to the point of mastery, while simultaneously attending to the school ... guidelines, using an appropriate variety of materials, and meeting the individual needs of all children in the classroom?" (Wisniewski, Padak, & Rasinski, 2011). Teachers and administrators will do the best that they can with the knowledge that they have. Many educators in our division are really good at teaching, assessing, and using the knowledge gained from assessment to guide their practice; however, many have simply not been trained or don't have much experience with the five pillars of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), understand the value of running records, and the data analysis in which to improve practice and strategically plan for literacy deficits and strengths. I learned that although all of our schools were using the Fountas and Pinnell assessment benchmarks for our grades 1 to 3 students, not all teachers and administrators knew what to do with the benchmark level that was received other than to put the letter result into the student data system as required. This showed me that more was needed to build capacity of teachers and administrators in the division around the data analysis to guide instruction. I was often able to look at schools in the division and thought that I needed to do a data analysis of where that school or that teacher or administrator was at and use that information to guide the next steps in the same way that teachers need to use the Fountas and Pinnell benchmarks to analyze where a student is at and then what that student needs to continue to move forward and grow. Seven months into the research and I recognized that what was necessary for next steps to move reading results forward varied among schools in the division to the variance of one classroom to the next in the same school. One size fits all doesn't meet the needs of every teacher and administrator in our division, just as one size fits all doesn't meet the needs of every student in our division. "The one size fits all approach adopted by such programs – with, of course, the best intentions–resulted in programs that met the minimal needs of the students, that lacked the creative flair that

only a teacher can give a program, and that absolved teachers of a good deal of the accountability for teaching their students” (Wisniewski, Padak, & Rasinski, 2011).

Providing opportunities for teachers and administrators to increase their knowledge and understanding in the area of effective literacy instruction is part of my role as the literacy lead and has been a main focus for me in the role of action researcher. I was able to provide professional development to the administrators at a fall administrative retreat and then do multiple follow-ups at administrative meetings through the course of the year. This allowed for it not to be one-shot professional development and then move on, but giving admin numerous opportunities to learn, explore, have meaningful collaboration and conversations with other admin about their unique and diverse situations and create action plans to move schools from where they were at to the next point. Some schools moved more quickly than others and some may not have moved at all. I also worked with one specific school with lower reading scores and worked to analyze what they needed to move forward and do specific job-embedded professional development as we know that “effective professional development is not simply an isolated program or activity; rather it is an ongoing, consistent learning effort” (Wisniewski, Padak, & Rasinski, 2011). I know that what is needed to support teachers in supporting literacy growth is knowledge and understanding put into practice every day and responding to the needs of the students on a regular basis. The challenge, of course, is not overwhelming administrators and teachers through the process but rather providing the time to learn, take risks and work through comfort levels for the benefit of the students.

### **Looking at the Data/Evidence**

As I reflect on the action research that our team embarked on, I was surprised at how much of what we needed to do to move forward mirrored what educators do in moving forward with analysis and planning for instruction with students. Just as an effective teacher will do to determine next steps, they “need to know on an ongoing basis that every child is learning by making ongoing assessments and by incorporating that information about each child’s learning into daily instruction – a nonnegotiable practice” (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012). We need to do the same for our educators to support where they are at and move them forward as literacy learners. In planning we know that assessment is where we start. We begin with the end in mind. Educators are to use the tool that we utilize division wide, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment, and we hope that they are doing this assessment for more than just submitting the level but to also see the value in the knowledge that they are able to gain to plan for instruction based on the needs and the data analysis. As I spoke to the administrators in the school whom I worked with, it became evident that this had not been occurring to the extent that it needed to. This was great data for us and the Vice-Principal, and I recognized that this was an area that needed to be reconciled. I stepped into more of an instructional coaching role and asked some questions as I knew she had the answers from the data that they were collecting within the school and teaching framework. After doing some of her own data analysis with minimal support from me, only a few leading questions, the answers she had gave her the “aha moment” that was necessary to move the school forward. She knew that work was to be done because they were seeing low reading scores consistently, but now had the insightfulness to see what they needed. “I appreciate all your help and knowledge on this matter. Our low reading scores are attributed to an instructional gap ... [teachers] do not assess and understand MSV. What day can you come and train around MSV and data

analysis?” (email correspondence – March 2016). There was little coding around accuracy errors to allow for planning to happen regarding instruction to meaning, structure or visual cues which support proficient readers or whether the struggles were with comprehension within, about or beyond the text. Working through this action research gave time to the school to learn and go through assessments that were done and analyse the data they had, learn about what they could do with the data and plan instruction. “Learning happens in the minds and souls of individuals, not in the databases of multiple choice tests. Putting FACES on the data happens easily and naturally when assessment and instructional approaches are aligned-following one after the other every day in a never-ending cycle of perfecting practice. Starting with the end in mind, we discuss what our vision is ... (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

### **Develop and Utilize Literacy Leaders**

I have been privileged and excited to work and collaborate with the strong literacy leaders who are part of the NWSD Reading Team. I know that I was able to develop my own expertise through dialogue, brainstorming and collaboration with the Reading Team. My own authentic and meaningful professional development came in the form of travelling in the same vehicle for eight hours with these colleagues to and from the Summit Reading Conference in Calgary. There is value in a road trip. In the collaborative work of the Reading Team, I have felt that this team can be utilized to build capacity in our teachers and administrators. The concept of having “wrap-around” support can be given to the literacy leaders on the Reading Team and they are able to “wrap-around” teachers and administrators across the division to support effective literacy practice (field text, 2015, October 23).

At a NWSD Reading Team meeting in March, Cheryl expressed how lucky she was to have had an amazing professional development opportunity early in her career that supported good literacy practice and gave her a deeper understanding of how to teach reading and what interventions to put in place if a student wasn't where they should be. In this room, all of us were shaking our heads in agreement and echoing her sentiments (field note, 2016, March 11). We, as Reading Team members and instructional leaders, may not, however, be the norm with amazing professional development opportunities that have shaped and supported our core values and beliefs with literacy instruction. I enjoy and value the collaboration, meetings, questions, and conversations that we have as a Reading Team and see that we are doing data analysis, creating next steps and action plans and pushing/challenging each other to move forward and to move the division forward with our passion for literacy!

## Kristin's Story

(Learning Coach out of Maidstone, Servicing the South and Central Schools)

### Building Capacity of Self

For the purpose of this project I chose to examine how building the capacity of others as literacy lead teachers would enable me to “effectively support the implementation of research based literacy instruction in Grade 1-3 classrooms.” Before I could fully embark on my project, I had to first reflect on my own journey of self. When I became involved with this research project, I had just started my new position as Learning Coach. Previous to this role I spent many years as a Grade 1 classroom teacher. During my years as a classroom teacher, I developed a strong and confident identity in who I was. I lived and breathed as a teacher of literacy.

During my transition to my new role as Learning Coach, I experienced an identity crisis. I realized before I could consider the building of capacity of others, I needed to build on my own capacity of self. I needed to determine my skills and knowledge as a teacher of student learners in my previous role and transfer those skill sets to my new role working with adult learners. Collaborating closely with the NWSD Reading Team members and becoming involved with this research project helped steer me in the right direction. In order to answer our research question, I first asked myself how I, as a Learning Coach, was able to “effectively support the implementation of research based literacy instruction in Grade 1-3 classrooms.” This question and the project that followed gave me direction and focus in my role as Learning Coach. My reflection revealed that who I was as a literacy teacher in the classroom could be transferred to my role as Learning Coach. I realized the foundation I had built as a strong and effective literacy teacher could be used to build those strengths in my adult learners.

### Building Capacity of Others

My assignment includes working with teachers in five schools in my school division. There are four other learning coaches assigned their own schools in the north, central and south locations. Each one of my schools encompasses kindergarten to Grade 12. My role as Learning Coach can be overwhelming due to the number of people I work with and the vast amount of educational needs. Keeping the inquiry “How can I, as a member of the Division Reading Team, effectively support the implementation of research based literacy instruction in grade 1-3 classrooms?” in the foreground of my mind helped me balance and align my goals with the goals held by the school division, ministry and province.

For the purpose of this project, I focused on how I, a member of the NWSD Reading Team and a learning coach, could build the capacity of the teachers within my assigned schools. I set out to find teachers who were not only capable teachers but also strong literacy teachers. In their book *Realization*, Lynn Sharratt and Michael Fullan define capacity building as “an investment in the development of the knowledge, skills, and competencies of individuals and groups...” (2009, p. 8). My goal was to work with such teachers, to build their capacity to become “lead literacy teachers” in their schools and throughout the school division. By establishing a connection between these lead literacy teachers and teachers who were

new to the education profession as well as educators seeking further support in their own teaching of literacy journeys in their classrooms, communication and time allotted for collaboration would be beneficial.

### **Developing and Utilizing Literacy Leaders**

Trust was a key component to the success of my project. In order for teachers to open the doors of their classrooms to me and allow me access to their thought processes, I had to form a relationship built on trust and the keeping of confidences. My desire was to delve deeper, not only offering surface strategies during their literacy block of instruction. I wanted to determine the root of their needs and work collaboratively, utilizing our strengths of literacy knowledge to grow together as literacy teachers. Once this trust was built we would be ready to move forward.

It was essential to have outstanding literacy teachers to take on a leadership role in my project. Mary and Martha have a deep knowledge and understanding regarding the foundations of literacy instruction making them integral to my project. The initial phase of my project focused on self-reflection enabling them to see themselves as Literacy Leaders. As stated by Sharratt and Fullen (2009), "Capacity building, a highly complex, dynamic, knowledge-building process, is intended to lead to increased student achievement in every school" (p. 9). Working with them to come to the realization that the understanding and knowledge they held and proven practices stemming from this knowledge was worth sharing with others. As Mary said, "It's always good for me to analyze my own things that I'm doing and reflect on them to make positive changes" (Field Text, 2016).

### **Empowering Literacy Learners**

Mary and Martha were chosen because of their expertise and willingness to share their knowledge and techniques as lead literacy teachers. They saw themselves as reflective learners and were committed to searching out best practice for themselves and their students. I chose Rebekkah and Sara as my final team members because they were new to the teaching profession. They were eager and had a desire to learn about and use instructional methods that would guide their students to success. These four teachers made up our team.

The first step of building the capacity of other teachers began by showcasing Mary and Martha as literacy leaders within their own classroom. This first step would be a demonstration of what good literacy instruction looks like, sounds like and feels like. I desired those teachers to make connections beyond conversation, to actively participate with Mary and Martha in their physical space. I helped others to see how important a management system (in this case Daily Five) is in effectively delivering literacy instruction. I wanted the teachers to observe and hear how the children were immersed in literacy from the moment they walked in the door. Rebekkah gave this feedback, "...they don't dumb down the words for Grade One. They use words like 'comprehend' and 'fluency' with them and they understand what that means to them and what is expected of them. I need to do this" (Field Text, 2016). During phase one of the project my goal for these teachers was for them to not only make connections to their own practices but to also move them from "I used to think" to "now I think" (Ippolito, Dobbs, Charner-Laird, & Lawrence, 2016, p. 35). I hoped they would be inspired and motivated to return to their own classrooms

ready and willing to try something new. My personal goal was to collect data through the conversations and my own observations about the possible barriers that hold teachers back from “implementing effective literacy instruction” within their own classrooms.

Once this observation component was completed, we moved to roundtable discussion for the rest of the afternoon. Offering these teachers the chance to come together for focused collaboration became phase two of my project. My intention was to use this data to focus my efforts as a Learning Coach with the teachers in the grades 1 to 3 classrooms across the school division.

Throughout our first team day of observation and collaboration, these four teachers expressed excitement and gratitude over being involved in this opportunity. They eagerly made notes, shared in the discussion, and moved from “I used to think” to “now I think” (2016, p. 35). The feedback I received spoke to their shared belief in the benefits of teacher collaboration. In Rebekkah’s words, “I love, love, love grade alike collaboration. Just being able to share in what Mary and Martha are doing in their own classrooms and listening to what Mary and Martha and the others had to say was amazing. It’s so beneficial for us newbies” (Field Text, 2016). It was my goal that through offering focused collaboration time, these teachers would see the positive result and impact their literacy instruction had within their classrooms.

As literacy leaders, Mary and Martha continued to play a large role in the process of building the capacity of the rest of the group. As the project unfolded, I was able to set aside four more meetings for collaboration focused on the topic of becoming effective literacy instructors. I believe that through the meaningful conversations, reflective learning processes, and the sharing and discussing of important resources including the Saskatchewan Reads document, resulted in a positive change in each of the four participants’ classrooms.

### **Looking at the Data/Evidence**

I noticed a change in the remaining participants as we continued to meet throughout the project. As Rebekkah and Sara were new to the profession of teaching they were just beginning their journey of self-discovery. They were actively learning the strengths and skills they had yet were unsure of what they could contribute to the group. After our first meeting Rebekkah said, “Mary and Martha are so welcoming. They do their best with the ridiculous questions I have for them!” (Field Text, 2016). As the year progressed, she began to openly and enthusiastically share her own ideas and feel like she was contributing. Our last focused collaboration meeting took place at Rebekkah’s school. Upon touring around her classroom, I could see evidence Rebekkah had adopted literacy practices resulting from previous observations and collaboration meetings. Not only was the evidence on the walls, it was part of her conversations now. She began to see herself as a teacher of literacy and was able to make connections with her practices within her own literacy program to the programs of Mary and Martha.

In the beginning of this project, there was a lot of “give, give, give” on the part of Mary and Martha. The feedback from Mary and Martha regarding our first meeting was “this was great but they didn’t offer a lot back to us. Yet, I know they’re here to learn from us” (Field Text, 2016). I knew I had to be careful they didn’t lose their will to give because of all the talking that was happening with the new teachers. I celebrated when, at our last collaboration meeting, I overheard Mary say, “I can’t believe our time is over already. We

could sit for hours analyzing teaching and best practices and sharing ideas. This has been so amazing to have had this time together” (Field Text, 2016). Martha agreed saying, “It has been so great to have the opportunity to all sit together face to face and discuss best teaching and assessment practices. I am more willing to take time to meet again if there is anything else we can do to help the other teachers. I also love constructive criticism and am willing to take any tips or advice from anyone that has to offer them” (Field Text, 2016). Hearing from both of these lead teachers how the focused collaboration also benefited them showed me there had been growth in all involved. What had started as a relationship of “giving” had become a reciprocal relationship of give and take.

## **Reflections**

My role as Learning Coach will provide me with the opportunity to follow these teachers and their stories beyond the time frame of this particular project. I will be able to work alongside most of them on their journeys of evolving into effective literacy instructors while continuing to support and build upon their capacity as literacy leaders. The data collected thus far will be instrumental in my own growth as a member of the NWSD Reading Team. Through the conversations I’ve shared with my colleagues throughout this project, I have come to my own deeper understanding of the barriers to effective literacy instruction. Also, I have had the opportunity to learn more about what restrains teachers from their own learning. It is my hope and belief that the deep learnings and understandings from this project have set those willing participants up to lead others in the charge of offering effective literacy instruction within our school division.

## Susan's Story

(Principal at a Prekindergarten to Grade 6 School in Lashburn)

The school looks like the principal.

Written on a sticky note in the shape of a lime-green flower, this message that I wrote into my notes greets me every time I open my (now dog-eared) copy of Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators (2015). There are days when I read this message and I am motivated and excited to imagine that I could have such an influence. There are also days it feels like I am reading an ominous warning. Sitting down to write this summary reflection of a year spent wondering how to effectively support the implementation of the Saskatchewan Reads document, this statement has now become an item of assessment. Does my school look like me? If it does, is that okay? Is my school a Saskatchewan Reads school? Am I a Saskatchewan Reads administrator? Does sharing my story lead to understandings how our NWSD Reading Team can be of use as we continue to implement Saskatchewan Reads?

### Beginnings

In August, when members of the NWSD Reading Team led our school-based administrative teams through a process of first steps in setting literacy goals for schools, we created an opportunity for all of our school-based administrators to see how to develop a plan, together with their teachers, that honours Saskatchewan Reads. We were all at different places in understanding and supporting the document, but regardless of our personal opinions, the message from our Ministry and our division that day was that this would be important and would guide our division-wide plans for literacy.

How can a division team effectively support the implementation of research-based literacy instruction? How can we support the implementation of Saskatchewan Reads? We supported this initiative by providing the opportunity to work through the first steps of creating a literacy plan for each school, deciding together as an administration team what to focus on, where supports would possibly be needed, and considered how best to get started on this important work.

This first meeting and our first task as administrators looked different for each school team. Much like planning for instruction looks different for the needs of diverse children in a classroom, there is recognition that the end goal might be the same, but the way to get there is not going to be the same across schools. As a division team, our "end in mind" could not just be literacy scores of students in our schools. It would need to be about creating administrative teams leading Saskatchewan Reads schools to develop a literate school culture.

During our beginning days in the fall of 2015, my own school spent time unpacking Saskatchewan Reads, understanding the document, looking for ways that our teachers' collaborative time (our planning, instruction, and professional development) would reflect the principles and practices of the document.

I know that I pulled from experiences I have had as a learning coach in the division. This was very helpful as we needed to make decisions about how to start, where to start and what our beginning goals needed to be. As the following email reveals, I was anxious about setting the right pace and rhythm for this process and looking for feedback.

“My one wonder (well not only one but a big one) is knowing if there is too much information or not enough or just how to make sure that [teachers] get the information [they] need when [they’re] ready to hear it ... I have really agonized over how much to share with each of you and when and how to share it – like through your mentor, me, learning coach, your grade-alike T.E.A.M. What is the medium for each of you to be able to see how to implement that piece of the literacy classroom puzzle you are ready to receive? How will I know that you are ready to hear it and make sense of it?” (email to colleagues, 2015 September).

A challenge of the NWSA Reading Team is to give support to administrators as they are negotiating the development and implementation of their school’s literacy plan. Modules of in-school professional development found in Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators (2016) are a place to start to offer direction and support from superintendents and our learning coaches is crucial to every school’s success. Anticipating the challenges that a school-based team might face cannot be left up to the principal. Working collectively, sharing our own stories in some forum that feels solution-based and safe, and developing strategies for overcoming barriers to implementation must be considered as a continuous process of our schools’ literacy plans and the division’s model for implementation.

### **October Road Trip and Wonders**

In my professional life as a teacher, learning coach, and now as principal, my understandings of the place for professional development has been shaped by my experiences. I was excited to attend a reading conference with new and experienced teachers, all members of our school-based early literacy team. I was also looking forward to seeing the other members of the NWSA Reading Team at this conference. As a division, we had many schools attending in collaborative teams similar to my own. Administrators, learning coaches, and teachers are all connected by Saskatchewan Reads.

Maxine Greene (1995) explains that, “to see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviours from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness” (p. 10). In this way, at this conference we were all on our own journeys to understand how our work would inform our division’s literacy goals. It is significant that our seeing small to shape divisional understandings was informed by seeing big, by seeing children and teachers up close, that division practices are informed by the practices of children and teachers in schools.

“Seeing small allows us to see behaviours from the perspective of a system, it does not allow us to see people in their integrity and particularity” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 162). As a principal, I wanted to be connected to my own school and our goals--to seeing big, “from the point of view of the participant[s] in the midst of what is happening. [I am] connected to the plans [they] make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable” (Greene, 1995, p. 11).

The NWSA Reading Team, although still in my mind, was not a primary concern for me. Although, my experiences at the conference informed some of the work we did throughout

the rest of the year. From my own notes at the conference I realized that the way this conference would influence decisions we would be making was not constant for any of us. "Listening to others talk about the conference is surprising me. We are all hearing something different. We are all finding our own meaning that suits our own plans and biases. Makes me wonder what my own biases are ..." (personal conference notes, 2015).

I could see that, like the other administrators there, I was "seeing big," imagining how my own school's literacy goals and plans were revealed within the ideas of each keynote and breakout session. Every one of us there has different beliefs about literacy and learning, and different staffs who are also at different places in their careers. Each of us also holds a diverse group of children in our thoughts and hearts as we imagine literacy instruction in our schools.

At the October Reading Summit in Calgary, I encouraged our school team to look for connections as we experienced the three days of professional development together. My wish for each of them was to find what we were already doing in our school, to look for ways to finetune or further develop our practice, and to consider if there were practices we were doing that were not effective. Just as I saw members of my own school-based team making connections to their own classrooms and teaching practices, we were all there with our own experiences and professional responsibilities trying to make meaning of the work of this conference. Another observation from my conference notes reflects that I was attentive to the diversity of experience among the school team I had brought to the conference.

"GOLDEN LINE for staff PD this year:

What they need,

right before they need it,

as they need it,

and as they realize they want it" (personal conference notes, 2015).

I came to see that my role at this conference was to be supportive as each of the teachers I attended the conference with had opportunity to reflect on their sessions, talk about how the information presented was connecting them to their professional practice, and how it might inform their own teaching or our school-wide literacy plans. Through my experiences as a learning coach I continued to ask open-ended questions to promote their own reflective conversations of effective literacy practices. Through the lens of principal and NWSD Reading Team member, I understood that I needed to go further. It was up to me to create an environment that would lead to increased collaborative work that gave strong literacy teachers the opportunity to be our school's lead teachers, and to expect planning and teaching practices that reflected Saskatchewan Reads. I realized I would have to build supports into schedules, encourage the use of resources that supported excellent instruction, and begin doing work like a learning coach in our school. Professional development at staff meetings would reflect what we learned at the conference but also further work would be needed. As principal and instructional leader, I wanted to show through team-teaching experiences that by stepping into an active role alongside teachers of emergent readers, there were many ways to reach even our most at-risk learners.

Feedback from staff included reassurance that what I set out to do this year as instructional leader was noted and appreciated, as shown in this note from a teacher at the school:

You are a constant presence within classrooms, observing and conferencing with teachers to ensure they are improving on their instructional approaches or getting credit for their successes...because of the trust, leadership, and relationships you have created among the teachers in the school, teachers are receptive to work with you toward school goals. (Linus, field text, 2016)

How can professional development effectively support the implementation of research-based literacy instruction found in Saskatchewan Reads? "Seeing small" helped me understand that conferences sharing research-based literacy information, strategies, and support can be a place for a division team to gather knowledge that can be shared with schools by adding them to our division implementation plan.

However, as principals we need to see big and look for ways that our school-based professional development plans will support literacy goals at the school level for the diverse children who constitute our classrooms. An expectation that every staff member's Personal Professional Growth Plan will align with the school's literacy goals supports this ideal. In this field note, a beginning teacher shared how taking time for professional conversations enriched her own experiences this year:

Having those real and meaningful conversations about how to make my teaching better was helpful for me to know where to take my teaching ... if you give me one strategy that is proven to work, then I will do it and implement it tomorrow" (Sally, field note, 2016).

One of the ways principals can have those conversations is by taking time to go through the school division's teacher assessment rubrics as part of the supervision of and professional growth for each teacher. Each one offers many opportunities for reflective conversation that can "promote growth, development, interaction, fault-free problem solving and a commitment to build capacity in teachers" (Zepeda, 2013).

This simple act, although time-consuming, connects the goals of the school to personal goals and can, as this field note from a first-year teacher shows, lead to personal insights. "The rubrics were helpful and sitting down with you because I was able to see and show how well I am doing...it made a difference in my confidence as a teacher and moving forward where I need to work on (Lucy, field note, 2016).

The model of professional development in our school division is necessarily understood by division administrators as small (Greene, 1995). It must be, as that is how system-wide professional development must be structured. Principals need to attend to this while holding the concept of big foremost in their minds as they consider the lives of the children, families, and teacher in the schools they administer. The challenge is to "learn how to move back and forth, to comprehend the domains of policy and long term planning while also attending to ... the unique" (p. 11). Teachers at my school interpret and filter the information that is presented to them in experiences of professional development at our school, at conferences, and in experiences beyond the school level. I am proud of the ways the teachers with whom I work have embraced the opportunity to meet as professionals and use their time and resources to reflect on teaching practice and student achievement, aware of their own narrative authority and sharing classroom experiences to "[make] sense of situations, explain their own actions, and examine their stories in concert with others"

(Olson & Craig, 2001, p. 670). Our school is a “safe, story-telling place where [they] narrate [their] experiences [and] negotiate meaning for such experiences” (Craig, 1995).

Living out my story this year allowed me to move back and forth between seeing big and seeing small and using both lenses to inform decisions and plans at my school and to shape my collaborative work with the NWSD Reading Team.

In the end, the most important piece of this research puzzle fits backwards-by-design (Wiggins & McTighe) models of planning for our learning units. If we know from the start what is expected of our schools and our principals in order to meet Ministry literacy goals for our students, then we can develop our role as instructional leaders mindful of the specific needs of our school. It is not much different from the expectations that we have for our classroom teachers: figure out what your students need to know, what they already know, and what they are struggling to learn, and then design instruction to meet those diverse needs. It makes sense that a similar, intentional school-based plan can be made based on the goals of a division.

Principals need to be able to see themselves within the plan or understand how they fit, and what their role needs to be. If they do not, supports must be made available to help them develop a school-specific plan for themselves and for their teachers. Accountability is an important piece of this puzzle. Because the literacy goals of the entire division are a priority this should not be left as assumed that it is being done. In a larger context literacy goals must be met to support the lives and futures of children. Our superintendents have an important role to play as they set the expectations for each principal and hold them accountable for the work that they do in their school.

Setting plans in motion, encouraging the kinds of behaviours we want to see in our literacy teachers is, in part, the role of superintendents, school-based administrators, and our support teams of coaches and other consultants. Ultimately, however, just as “the school environment has tremendous power to shape children’s thinking about themselves as learners early in their school career,” (Principal as Early Literacy Leader, p. 32) it is the division environment or culture that also has a significant influence on the successful implementation of a document like Saskatchewan Reads in its schools. Where “the design of the school teaches students what is important through what is placed on walls, what behaviours are modeled, what gets talked about, and what opportunities and resources are offered and provided,” (Principal as Early Literacy Leader, p. 32) so does the design of a plan for implementation. Our plan asks much from its school-based administrators, what it values and pays attention to in all aspects of the division, and how it supports and encourages administrative teams who are all at different places in the writing and implementation of their own school-based literacy plan. When we pay attention to the strengths, needs, and professional development of our teachers/staff and honour the expectations of Saskatchewan Reads and Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators, we will have created a division model worthy of our students.

The school looks like the principal. True story.

# Collective Findings Across Our Stories

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Even though we are in different places in our careers, in our division, and in the way we tackled this action research project, there were commonalities in each of our stories. In seeking to better understand how we, as the NWSD Reading Team, could make an impact and effectively support teachers and administrators with literacy strategies, we found that the big ideas and successes tended to have the same themes and that the challenges or barriers that one would find would be common across all of our stories. Building capacity, empowering literacy learners, developing literacy leaders, job-embedded professional learning and looking at and utilizing data/evidence were the themes that everyone on our team found to be important in making an impact. Collaboration and building trusting relationships so as to support collaboration was also a key piece to our Reading Team work as well as the work that each of us did in the schools that we worked in. Our trust and collaboration as a team supported our work in our schools. When we took time together to go through the commonalities by each writing our big ideas on sticky notes and sorting through the ideas, we all found that we were writing similar ideas and, therefore, the grouping of themes turned out to be relatively easy. Even though we didn't take a one-size fits all approach, we did find that our research and discussions showed those big ideas as necessary components for growth in literacy knowledge, understanding, and effective practice, and this growth occurs at the pace that the teacher/administrator is ready for.

As a reading team we have to make sure every teacher of reading has time to reflect on their practices and be encouraged to relate those to the Saskatchewan Reads document. In first reflecting the reading team may help fill in the gaps either by leading professional development or utilizing our members for job-embedded professional development. The NWSD Reading Team's work with both learning coaches and administrators is also a key element in building capacity and an awareness of the questions to ask/things to look for in the hopes of strengthening the reading lessons by all of our teachers.

# Moving Forward

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Having completed this project and having been involved in the action research that went along with this project, we eagerly await this fall. This project has opened up so many windows for us. It allowed us to connect with different teachers and administrators. It helped us to discover some of the barriers that hold teachers and administrators back from their own learning and it gave us direction as a cohesive reading team. In moving forward we will be more able to take all that was learned and discovered and use it in meaningful ways in working with schools, administrators, and teachers.

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