

Collaborative Teacher Inquiry and the School Learning Commons

Jeanne Conte
Instructional Coordinator, Library
Educational Librarian
Peel District School Board

INTRODUCTION

Together for Learning School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons A Vision for the 21st Century presents a highly collaborative view of teaching and learning as a means of responding to an era of complex change. This resource document developed by the Ontario School Library Association with the support of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the Government of Ontario's Ministry of Education, states that "In the Learning Commons, everyone is a learner" (Ontario School Library Association, 2010, p. 8) and further, that the learning commons is an environment where "Teachers become learning coaches and facilitators of new learning. By drawing on the expertise of everyone – students, teacher-librarians, library technicians, community members –learning becomes relevant and dynamic" (Ontario School Library Association, 2010, p. 11). Similarly, the Ontario Ministry Of Education monograph, *Collaborative Teacher Inquiry*, Secretariat Special Edition #16th which is part of the Capacity Building Series, posits that "through collaborative dialogue, teachers seek emergent possibilities –new questions and solutions to student learning and achievement" (p. 2). This alignment of thinking about collaborative practices in education is beginning to move beyond the theoretical and into the realm of professional practice, the effects of which can be seen in many classrooms and other learning environments today.

At present the Ontario Ministry of Education is placing a good deal of emphasis on collaborative teacher inquiry to drive new directions in professional practice. The *Collaborative Teacher Inquiry* Monograph previously cited states that one of the main goals of this initiative is to help the Ministry to achieve its mandate to reach every student, a goal described in the monograph as "complex and therefore requiring a collaborative approach to teaching and learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, Secretariat Special Edition #16, 2010, p. 2) More specifically, the monograph states, "When educators work together to inquire about their students' learning and engagement, they embrace this complexity as an opportunity for further understanding rather than something to simplify" (2010, p.3). Herein lies the *power* of collaboration –working together to engage, not only students, but also teaching practitioners as teachers *and* learners.

In their traditional roles teacher-librarians collaborate with teachers to assist with accessing resources, teach research skills and also endeavor to promote a love of reading within their schools. However, as a collaborator extraordinaire, the teacher-librarian is also positioned to reach beyond this traditional role and work with teachers to *plan, teach and assess learning at every level*. In today's educational climate teacher inquiry is rapidly becoming a commonly held stance within professional practice in Ontario as we transform our conceptions of professional learning (Hannay, 2010). By working together teachers can question, inquire and create new knowledge about the power of collaboration both in and out of the classroom.

In the Peel district School Board, teacher-librarians have been engaged in a number of collaborative learning networks. What follows is a brief description of teacher-librarian networks that were

established in the South, Mississauga West, and North Field Offices, as well as a collaborative inquiry in its second year involving intermediate ESL teachers and teacher-librarians.

SOUTH FIELD OFFICE –Elementary Teacher-Librarians

Twenty-six teacher-librarians in the South Field Office met for 3 half-day sessions per school year over a period of three years. Initially, the SFO1 TL Network was invited to explore specific ways school library program might support classroom teachers with assessment *for* learning. The network was provided with fairly rigid guidelines that included specific goals tying their work to *Growing Success* and *Together for Learning* to frame their inquiries. Teachers were, however, encouraged to differentiate their inquiries based on the needs of their own schools. Topics chosen included exploring ways to support teachers with student achievement as articulated in their schools' Teaching and Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) goals, supporting teachers in understanding and using triangulated evidence of learning and differentiated assessment to gather evidence of learning, and finding specific ways to collaborate with classroom teachers to support the hubs and networks in their field office. Teacher-librarians formed collaborative teams based on common ground and then worked together to co-construct criteria to guide their inquiries. They communicated via e-mail to support one another as issues arose and also to communicate successes. The network met two more times after this initial meeting during this initial school year, once after school to share their progress as a larger group and one more afternoon when they were released to share final results and consolidate their learning. Overall, teacher-librarians felt that their participation in the network helped them to align their school library programs more directly with their school success goals and agreed it would be beneficial for them to continue their learning in the following year. Goals would continue to focus on how teacher-librarians might collaborate with classroom teachers in constructing a deeper understanding of assessment *for* learning connected to the frameworks in *Growing Success* and *Together for Learning*. As previously mentioned, this network is in its third year. At present, teachers in the network communicate via Voice-thread to share ideas during and between meetings. Four teacher-librarians have stepped forward to take a leadership role in planning meetings and keeping the work focused on the network's goals. At our final meeting coming up in April, a survey will be given to help determine future directions.

Over the course of the current school year, two more teacher-librarian networks have been created in the same district field office, one elementary and the other secondary. The newly established SFO2 TL Network (elementary) and SFO1 TL Network will be meeting as a larger group this coming April at which time they will share their learning journeys.

SOUTH FIELD OFFICE –Secondary Teacher-Librarians

The third network of secondary teacher-librarians is much smaller and employs a different model altogether. Eight teacher-librarians and eight classroom teachers were released for a total of three days over the course of one semester to engage in a collaborative inquiry to explore the impact that co-planning, co-teaching and co-assessing might have on teaching and learning. For the morning of the first session, the teaching partners participated in a facilitated professional learning presentation led by the library and assessment coordinators with the support of two resource teachers. The group was provided with specific learning targets as well as guidelines to align their collaborative teacher inquiry with frameworks in *Growing Success* and *Together for Learning*. Following a facilitated learning session designed to co-construct a working definition of collaborative teacher inquiry, teachers worked in focused groups to deconstruct the key learning targets for the collaborative inquiry. The remainder of the day was devoted to planning time for the teacher partners. Further, each set of teacher partners will have a full day at their school sites to continue to work together to plan and implement their lesson or activity. They will meet as a full group to discuss what was learned from their experiences,

challenges, opportunities and possible next steps. All too often secondary teacher-librarians are relegated to teaching research skills while the classroom teacher takes over the rest. It is hoped that by providing the teacher partners with the gift of time to work together from the beginning planning stages, through to the implementation and assessment stages, a more comprehensive definition of what a full collaborative partnership might look like will emerge.

In the 2012-2013 school year all three of the above networks will be restructured into a K-12 format in order to align with a new PDSB senior administrative model. It remains to be seen what affect this restructuring will have on the networks.

MISSISSAUGA WEST FIELD OFFICE –Elementary Teacher-Librarians

The Mississauga West Field Office teacher-librarians collaborated with teachers to support the TLCP work of their schools in a more general way. In this model, they attended team meetings for the purposes of keeping on top of where grade teams were in their TLCP plans, and assisted in various ways, from providing the resources needed to support specific learning goals to working directly with full classes and smaller groups on TLCP related learning tasks. The resource teacher assigned to this field office approached the library and assessment coordinators to discuss possible opportunities to engage the teacher-librarians more directly in a collaborative inquiry to explore how they might support assessment *for* learning in their collaborative practices. Hence, the MWFO TL Network was formed. It is hoped that as this Network develops a deeper and more common understanding of the role of the teacher-librarian and collaborative practices as related to assessment *for* learning, teacher-librarians can better support schools in going deeper with their TLCP work. The MWFO TL Network engaged in a full day session facilitated by the resource teacher who already had an established working relationship with the group. The resource teacher worked closely with the assessment and library coordinators in order to ensure alignment with the work of the SFO TL Networks where applicable. Initial goals were framed around developing a common understanding of the collaborative inquiry process within the context of the *Growing Success* Assessment Framework and the guiding principles in *Together for Learning*. On the second day, teacher-librarians were joined by classroom teacher partners for a half day and provided with resources to help them collaboratively design a rich task to implement either in the classroom or the school library. They will meet again in May at which time the group will share their work, consolidate their learning and discuss ideas about possible future goals.

NORTH FIELD OFFICE –Elementary Teacher-Librarians

A team of three teacher-librarians and one resource teacher who sit on the Peel Picture Book Review Committee leads the North Field Office Teacher-Librarian Network. The Peel Picture Book Review Committee is made up of a mix of teacher-librarians, classroom and resource teachers who meet four times a year to examine picture books supplied by tendered vendors. The committee endeavors to select resources that match Peel's criteria for "Excellent" picture books. A group within this committee identified a need to involve a broader spectrum of teacher-librarians in co-constructing rich tasks to support teaching and learning through the use of "Excellent" picture books. This group approached their Superintendent who agreed to support release time for teacher-librarians in his family of schools to engage in professional learning focused on creating rich lessons around the selected books. They also met with the library coordinator to discuss support and direction for their project. The NFO TL Network has met twice, once to participate in facilitated learning to deepen their understanding of how to create rich tasks and once to work together to co-construct lesson plans which were then submitted to the teacher leaders for editing. The three teacher-leaders and resource teacher were also provided with some release time to plan and edit the lesson plans submitted. This network will meet once more in May to continue to deepen their learning around rich lesson plan design and to select exemplary lessons

that will be uploaded to the Peel Board's SharePoint website. They will also be discussing future learning goals, as they wish to continue as a learning network.

ESL/TL INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Together for Learning states that "in working together, teacher-librarians in partnership with others can modify the process, content, product and environment to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The result will be empowered learners." (Ontario School Library Association, 2010, P 12) This powerful quote was the inspiration for the ESL/ELD coordinator and library coordinator to collaborate in creating a learning opportunity for intermediate ESL/ELD teachers and teacher-librarians to work together. The structure of this inquiry was such that the ESL/ELD and TL teams met for a morning of facilitated professional learning followed by an afternoon devoted to planning an activity to support English Language Learners in their schools. The collaborative inquiry was titled *The Power of Working Together to Support English Language Learners –Teacher-Librarians and ESL/ELD Teachers*. The learning goals were:

- To facilitate collaborative practice between intermediate teacher-librarians and ESL/ELD teachers to support increased academic achievement of ELLs
- To make connections through adapted programs and culturally responsive resources to current initiatives in schools, i.e. Collaborative Inquiry, current Ministry Equity Policy Documents, *Growing Success, Together for Learning*
- To explore rich tasks, differentiated instruction, and current resources that support ELLs' academic achievement

Each school team was provided with a copy of Pauline Gibbons' *English Learners Academic Literacy and Thinking; Learning in the Challenge Zone* to work from. A copy of *Mirror* by Jeannie Baker for use as a possible resource to build a rich learning task was also provided for each school team. The teams had three months between the first and second meetings to implement the task created. At the second meeting teams shared their work. They were asked to describe the learning task that was created, making links to the Gibbons book. They were also asked to share how students responded to the text, what the student work was telling us, what evidence they collected of student thinking and any challenges and opportunities encountered. The learning tasks teachers shared were quite varied ranging from engaging ELLs in creating Voice-threads to narrate events in the book to supporting ELL students to create their own dual language books to describe their personal migration stories.

This year, the ESL/TL collaborative teacher inquiry is continuing with the same goals, but with a focus on oral language. For the first day of learning, teachers were provided with Andrea Honigsfeld and Maria G. Dove's *Collaboration and co-Teaching Strategies for English Learners*. Teachers were invited to revisit the Seven Intellectual Practices in Pauline Gibbons book and also participated in facilitated learning to enhance their knowledge of creating well-designed learning tasks that model culturally responsive practice and pedagogy. The collaborative teacher inquiry will culminate in May when we share our learning and begin to plan anew for continued future collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Exemplary School Libraries, A study by Queen's University and People for Education states that "Key to an exemplary school library program is the teacher-librarian's ability to be an effective teacher, providing educational support and leadership through partnering and collaboration, while finding opportunities for integration and cross-curricular connections" (Klinger, 2010, p. 6). It is this collaborative aspect of the role of the teacher-librarian that places the school library program at the

heart of the learning commons. Traditionally this collaboration has been focused mainly within the school. The current Ministry focus on collaborative teacher inquiry has provided incentive for the Peel District School Board to explore a variety of ways for teacher-librarians to collaborate with each other to develop a deeper and more common understanding of how school library program can support increased student achievement.

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