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Chapter 2

Working Together As a School

Only through sharing ideas, materials, resources, and expertise do teachers develop, survive and thrive. (Villa, Thousand, and Nevin 2004)

Teaching is a complex endeavour. Gone are the days — if they ever truly existed — when it was assumed that one teacher, working alone, could meet the needs of all learners in a classroom. We believe that together we are better, that working as a member of a team and within a school helps us grow as professionals and supports us in being the best we can be in the classroom, and in having the greatest impact on student learning.

Many teachers work with their students to develop vibrant learning communities. Over the course of the school year, they see their students begin to thrive. But making a difference in one classroom in one academic year is only the beginning. Shared efforts among teachers and across years of schooling build the potential for making a more significant impact. When teachers work together with shared goals, they help students develop understandings and strategies that can be celebrated and thus reinforced and applied in various settings. When teachers work together as interdisciplinary teams to understand their students' strengths and challenges, they develop approaches that help students connect to, process, transform, and personalize important concepts and thinking skills. Their schools become learning communities, the most important unit of change.

All Teachers, All Subjects

Over the years, we have worked with elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers and staff to develop “thinking classrooms.” We believe that every classroom should be a thinking classroom, a place where students get to

- access and use their prior knowledge
- process and make connections among ideas
- personalize and transform what they have learned

We want engaged, meaning-making, critical, and self-regulating thinkers. The behaviours developed in thinking classrooms are relevant in all disciplines and in all jobs in the world. They are used by writers, mechanics, statisticians, actors, chemists, translators, cooks, parents, taxi drivers, grocers ... the list goes on.

As well, to participate in a democratic society, all citizens have to use what they know to make sense of new situations, keep their minds open to new possibilities, make decisions when considering multiple sources of information, and reflect on their beliefs and actions using their increasing understandings. We see schools and classrooms as places where students are apprenticed into this way of being in the world. We want to nurture their thinking skills, building from what they already bring us, rather than thwart their creativity and individuality. We want our students to participate in

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authentic learning activities that contribute to their future choices and potential to participate in the world.

To create authentic and coherent learning opportunities for diverse classrooms, teachers benefit from working together to plan lessons and units of study. Teachers focus on aligning formative assessment, instruction, learning sequences, and summative assessment. In using their combined knowledge and expertise, they can better engage and support our diverse learners to simultaneously learn key concepts and develop learning strategies (Smith and Wilhelm 2006; Wilhelm 2007).

How Can We Work Together to Best Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners?

We believe that when individual teachers make time to understand and build from the learning profiles of their students, they can make a difference in the school success of those students and thus in their life opportunities. In particular, we know that, when teachers use information from formative assessments to set goals, make plans, and involve students in developing specific strategies and practices, students and teachers get better at what they are doing.

Much of what we have learned comes from working with elementary, middle, and secondary staffs to develop approaches to better support their learners. To explain this work and situate it in research, we refer again to the Carnegie Corporation's *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (2004) and the six "infrastructural improvements," or school-wide factors that it recommends.

1. Extended time for literacy

When you stop to think, it is just common sense that a person becomes better at something with practise. But someone had to describe that in detail. In fact, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) calls this general rule of success "the 10,000 hour rule." Ten thousand hours is the probable number of hours that any expert has spent in practice in order to develop expertise in his field. Reading, writing, and, yes, thinking are skills — and you become a better reader, a better writer, and a better thinker the more you engage in — that is — practise these skills.

This is particularly true for reading and writing in the content areas. None of the approaches described in chapter 1 could make much difference if students had no opportunities to read, to write, to analyze, and to discuss texts that could contribute to learning the subjects they study. You can see what teachers, teams, and schools value by what actually goes on in the classrooms. If we want students to become better readers, writers, and thinkers, then we have to set up opportunities for them to develop and practise strategies that help them learn about increasingly complex ideas by using increasingly complex texts.

The *Reading Next* experts suggest that students need two to four hours of literacy-connected learning daily. Within this time period, teachers are to focus on direct, explicit instruction in which they model particular thinking skills and embed them in content-area learning. For example, teachers might choose to focus on

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comparing perspectives within a Social Studies unit. They model the process by assuming first one point of view, then an opposing view, and still another that is in between. Then, they help students practice comparing perspectives on the same or a different issue. As follow-up, they ask students to help decide on the criteria for assessing this particular skill in an assignment that they will complete independently. This process is essential because it takes time to gradually release strategy instruction so that students learn to read and then write in the style of the scientists or historians or writers or actors whom they have been reading and discussing. We believe that students can develop these thinking skills while they are learning the content. The two go hand in hand. They need the thinking skills to access and explore the concepts at the heart of the discipline. In order to help develop literacy within a discipline, students need extended time to engage in reading and writing activities throughout a unit of study. Experts agree that such literacy activities help students think deeply about the concepts, themes, and issues through the differing perspectives of the disciplines (Alvermann 2001; Smith and Wilhelm 2006).

When we work together to integrate planning, assessment, and instruction, we can use our shared expertise to create engaging learning activities for students and plan how students' reading, writing, and thinking abilities will be used and developed over the course of a unit. Our collaborative efforts to build in the time for students to learn strategies and to identify the big ideas in a discipline through reading and writing help them demonstrate both their knowledge and their skills more successfully by the end of a unit of study.

In summary, research studies related to extending the time for literacy learning suggest that adolescent learners thrive when teachers

- increase the amount of reading and writing that students engage in to develop their skills as strategic learners
- organize instructional time and activities so that students are actually reading and writing in class
- develop text sets on a topic so that students have an opportunity to choose from books and resources of varying format, content, and reading level
- model and apprentice “thoughtful literacy,” which requires students to think about what they have just read, what they have written, or what they have acted upon, and explain or describe their thinking
- design opportunities for students to use and demonstrate the

2. Professional development

Ongoing professional development significantly helps teachers reflect on their students' learning profiles, uncover trends of strength and challenge within the class or the grade, and design a plan that incorporates approaches that build student engagement and lead to active, strategic, and self-regulated learning. Effective professional development must continue over time for teachers to develop, explore, and integrate ideas and practices that support the development of their students' literacies. One-time workshops are out. Working together over time to understand and support students and their learning is in!

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We know that sustained, collaborative, inquiry-based professional development can help teachers develop new understandings and approaches. For individual schools and school districts to make a difference in student learning, the best approach is to set up ongoing professional development activities in which teachers learn collaboratively. The *Reading Next* panel advocates professional development activities that include “opportunities to implement and reflect upon new ideas ... and help school personnel create and maintain a team-oriented approach to improving instruction and structures that promote better adolescent literacy” (20). This means having many opportunities where teachers use what they know about their students, the content of the curriculum, and their research in order to plan, try out, and reflect upon approaches that they helped choose, create, and adapt. Research and research based methods and approaches are offered as possibilities to be explored in relation to other factors. This is different from suggesting that a generic approach (i.e., an instructional strategy) will work the same way in different classrooms. Instead, teachers need opportunities to look at formative assessment information, set goals together, and select, plan, or adapt related ideas and approaches. When professional development activities also offer repeated opportunities for teachers to work together to reflect on how things are going, they are better able to make the curriculum more accessible while building students’ reading, writing, and thinking skills (also see Butler and Schnellert 2008).

3. Ongoing formative and summative assessment of student learning and programs
When our formative and summative assessment activities are linked to the content and strategies we teach, we can reflect on whether or not our teaching is making a difference for our students by examining student progress against criteria. Without assessment information that focuses on key thinking skills, it is difficult to support student learning or to examine the effect of particular pedagogical approaches. When we see our students successfully learning and developing the thinking skills that we have been working on, we can target new thinking skills. When we see that things are not progressing as expected, we plan and teach new ways to help students develop the thinking skills we have been working on. Paying careful attention to our students’ work helps us to be very specific in our goal-setting and to focus our planning and teaching on helping all students move forward in their learning.

Within the units we teach, we include our students in examining or developing the criteria used for assessing. Summative assessments should allow students to show what they have learned about the key content of a discipline and the skills they have developed over the course of a unit. When we focus our assessments on the most important concepts and the related thinking skills that we have targeted, the focus of instruction shifts from teachers covering content to “students making meaning and developing deep understandings.” (In chapter 3, we discuss formative and summative assessments in greater detail, particularly how we can use them to support all students in their learning.)

Teaching teams and schools should engage collaboratively in cycles of assessing, planning, goal-setting, doing, reflecting, and adjusting (Schnellert, Butler, and Higginson 2008). They then can use meaningful data from formative assessment at the school

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level, such as a fall performance-based assessment of reading or writing (see chapter 3) to set grade- or school-wide long-term goals that are specific to the students. A teaching team focused on one grade might set one shared goal for student learning (e.g., determining importance) and the individual teachers might set another more class-specific goal (e.g., supporting responses with relevant details).

Performance-based assessments of reading and writing are often used formatively in the fall to target thinking skills, then summatively in the spring to gauge student progress. They help schools track the students' improvement, and they provide the teaching staff with specific information to help plan future professional development activities and to consider what additional goals might be set for the next year or mid-year.

Both types of assessment are meaningful at multiple levels. Teachers can use them to assess individual progress toward learning-centred goals for individuals, classes, grades, and schools. They can use them to plan appropriate supports for students and teachers. When we use formative assessments as descriptive feedback for our teaching, we teach more responsively. When we look at formative assessments, we ask ourselves What is working? What is not working? and What is the plan? Summative assessments provide information about what individual students have internalized and can do independently.

The information that these assessments provide differs from that provided through formative assessments. The information provides a synthesis of the number or percentage of students achieving at different levels related to specific school, grade, and classroom goals. Grade-specific or school-wide assessments that are administered in the early spring provide teaching teams and schools with evidence of student progress, useful for establishing school goals for the fall and data to teachers in the classroom to inform their instructional goals and provide descriptive feedback to students for the remainder of the spring term.

One of the most important things that we have learned is that teachers and students are integral to making assessments meaningful and useful. Whenever possible, teachers and students need opportunities to reflect on assessments so that meaningful classroom and school decisions can be made.

4. Teacher teams

The *Reading Next* panel of experts point out that as students get older and move from primary to junior/intermediate to middle and, finally, to the secondary years, they have to relate to more and more teachers as their curriculum evolves into distinct disciplines. Students' experiences of schooling may end up fractured and confusing at an age when they crave interrelatedness. Does your school's structure support coordinated instruction?

Are there interdisciplinary teams? Teachers do not have to teach in similar styles to coordinate what they do and to reinforce key thinking skills and approaches. Adolescents bring rich literacy practices and understandings into their later years of schooling because, in early years, literacy was at the forefront and lessons and units were often integrated. Yet, as students move into discrete subject areas, they often do

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not tap into their full skill sets. A common challenge in learning is applying and adapting what you know and are newly capable of doing to new or different settings and situations.

Teachers working in teams can identify the thinking skills that students need in order to expand or develop. By coordinating their efforts, teachers can visualize how shared goals for shared students can be refined in their specific subject classes. While teamwork promotes higher collegiality and staff communication across disciplines, it also helps ensure that the students do not receive conflicting messages about learning or fall between the cracks from class to class.

The importance of collaborating should not be underestimated. Working together to develop community-minded classrooms, where all kinds of learning styles are not only welcome but celebrated, takes flexibility and planning. We have worked with a number of schools that have focused their energies on designing learning experiences both to help students develop targeted thinking skills and to invite them to use their prior knowledge, interests, and talents as a way to connect to and personalize new content. You will see several of these examples in the later chapters of this book — from Leyton's and Linda's field books and field notes, in which students start by examining their own experiences, to Stacey's and Lisa's literature circles and Kathy's information circles within an inquiry unit. In each of these examples, teachers worked together to develop and share ideas related to increasing student engagement and learning. Working together helped sustain teachers' belief in their innovations, and sharing their expertise resulted in units of study that are more accessible for more students. Embedded within these coplanned units are key criteria or, using Hourcade and Bauwens' terminology, "high standards." We set the expectation that all students can learn and improve from wherever they start. From these expectations, teachers target their teaching while personalizing the experience for students by having them work toward the criteria and receive descriptive feedback.

Grade-wide teaching teams can make a significant difference in student learning. Teachers who meet regularly as teams increase coherence for students moving from class to class and help them make connections across subject areas (*Reading Next*). By using formative assessment information and looking for links between curricular areas, teachers can develop and reinforce the same thinking skills in all subject areas.

In classrooms where teachers work together — learning resource teachers and classroom teachers co-teaching, literacy coaches and classroom teachers working together, two classroom teachers combining their classes — we see more students getting support when they need it. In collaborative classrooms, inclusion is not a special education model; it is a school model, and it is different from pull-out models of support. The emphasis is on designing learning experiences so that more students have more success in each individual classroom. As professionals, we want to constantly examine and refine our practice. By working together, we discover what does and does not work and can adapt our instruction in real time. When collaborative teaching is ongoing (i.e., when teachers work together weekly), we always build in five to 15 minutes to debrief and to determine how a lesson went and to plan ahead. We have

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found that collaborative problem-solving and teaching result in new ideas, new or better thematic units, and a feeling of connection with colleagues. Working together, teachers can develop lessons and activities that reach more learners. Most importantly, we design learning sequences that better engage our students while we become more strategic in our teaching.

5. Leadership

Many an initiative lives or dies based on the support of a principal or superintendent who fulfills a key responsibility — that of instructional leader. Their participation in the school community is crucial. Collaborating with teachers in their classrooms, covering a teacher's class so that he or she can co-teach or co-plan with a colleague, and sitting in on grade-wide planning meetings are ways that administrators can help teachers as they work together to improve student learning. A leader in education has to keep up to date with practice and research by attending professional development activities with staff and taking part in professional book clubs. Principals who teach or co-teach a class and who publicly share their own process of revising and integrating their planning with instruction and formative and summative assessment support the development of the school as a learning community. The practice of principals' promoting and participating in teacher learning and development activities has a more profound impact on student learning than any other practice (Robinson 2007). To develop collaborative, community-minded classes that are focused on learning, school leaders need to participate in staff learning communities. Both formal and informal leaders play a key role in modelling learning.

Similarly, teacher-leaders must take a collaborative, learning-centred approach to professional development and curricular innovation. Literacy coaches, consultants, and department heads follow the same approach; they model and contribute to a culture of professional learning. Working in this way honours a range of teacher philosophies and styles. We recommend that leaders openly share what they are learning and how they are developing their own practices. Within this context, more opportunities arise for educators to collaboratively establish instructional goals as colleagues, allowing for each professional to have input.

6. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program

The first five *Reading Next* "infrastructural improvements," or school-wide factors, should be part of a school's comprehensive and coordinated literacy program. Extended time for literacy requires teachers to build reading, writing, and thinking activities into their units of study. Cross-curricular teams are needed in order to make thinking skills a priority across classrooms. Targeting a few thinking skills based on formative assessment information allows students and teachers to focus on developing and integrating them into content learning. Deep-content learning is possible when these strategies are used.

Coming together regularly to share information and plans and to problem-solve is the behaviour of a learning community — that is, one that values all members as well as their efforts and questions. Developing a vision and goals for students and a range of approaches that support student learning must be a shared process. A comprehensive

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plan informed by research must be developed and refined over time. When teachers and leaders take part in this process, their innovation has an impact beyond a single classroom.

Final Thoughts

Experts agree that schools and cross-curricular teaching teams working together on shared goals can make a significant difference. Both the schools and the teams should establish these shared goals using data from formative assessments that

- focus on developing students as active, independent learners
- can be embedded in content teaching
- are shared by teachers across classes and subjects
- are shared with and reflected on by the students themselves
- are maintained and sustained across one or more years

The data from the end-of-year summative assessment can then be used to reflect on and refine team efforts and set new goals for the next year.

Some of the richest examples of successful implementation of shared goals involve collaborative teaching among classroom teachers and among classroom and support teachers (e.g., resource teachers, librarians, literacy coaches). These co-teaching arrangements are based on a shared ownership of the goal to improve student learning and lead to richer professional learning for the teachers involved. There are so many ways to collaborate! (Samples of collaborative scenarios, of teachers working together to support student learning in the best ways possible, are found in chapters 5 through 12.)