

REVIEWING THE LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM IN A LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Abstract: The article describes a review of the Language Arts program in the Primary Division of a large urban school district. Data were gathered from all stakeholders using surveys, interviews, and observation. The evidence revealed limitations in the planning and delivery of Language Arts in the early years and provided the groundwork for remarkable system-wide change in the three years that followed.

Résumé: Cette étude décrit une révision du programme des arts du langage au cycle primaire d'un grand district scolaire urbain. Des données furent recueillies de tous les intervenants par l'entremise de sondages, d'entrevues et d'observations. Les résultats ont révélé des limites dans la planification et la livraison des arts du langage dans les premières années et ont fourni la fondation d'un changement remarquable au niveau du système durant les trois années suivantes.

■ The assessment policy of the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB, formerly the Metropolitan Separate School Board) appears in a document titled *Implementation Guidelines for Student and Program Assessment* (Metropolitan Separate School Board, 1996b) and affirms this board's commitment to ongoing student assessment and program reviews. The document states that the purpose of assessment is to "optimize student learning, modify instructional methods and programs, renew curriculum design, allocate resources, and make other informed decisions at both the local and system level" (p. 9). Recognizing that program reviews are integral to the school improvement process, the board has completed several system-wide program reviews in recent years.

Of late, the review of the Language Arts program in the Primary Division has been most critical because it provided the impetus for vast systemic change that came about in the three years that followed the review (i.e., 1997–2000). The major outcome of this review was the implementation of “Balanced Literacy,” a framework adapted from Patricia Cunningham, designed to address early literacy needs (Cunningham & Allington, 1994). Details regarding this initiative, its implementation, and its successes have been documented elsewhere (e.g., French, Morgan, Vanayan, & White, 2001; French, Puma, Vanayan, White, & Morgan, 2001; Meagher et al., 2001; White, Vanayan, French, & Morgan, 2001). This article focuses on the review process and the main findings of the review.

METHOD

The methods involved a literature review, analysis of Ministry of Education and district documents, interviews and surveys of teachers, parents, and students, and observation of classroom practices.

Participants

There were 191 elementary schools and 36 secondary schools in the district, serving about 100,000 students and employing over 6,000 teachers. For more than 40% of the TCDSB students, English is not the primary language.

Forty-eight schools participated in the review. The schools were representative of the district as measured by enrolment and the proportion of students from non-English-speaking homes. They were also distributed across the district in terms of geographical location. Of the 48 schools, 12 participated in the intensive phase of the review; 36 participated in the non-intensive phase. In each of the 48 schools, one class was randomly selected from each of the five grades (Junior Kindergarten to Grade 3).

The *intensive phase* involved (a) interviewing 12 principals and 12 teacher librarians, (b) interviewing and observing classroom teachers ($n = 56$), and (c) surveying Grade 3 students and their parents (261 students and 194 parents). In the *non-intensive phase*, one teacher from each of the five grades was surveyed ($n = 166$).

Instruments

The review instruments (Principal Interview, Teacher Librarian Interview, Classroom Observation Schedule, Teacher Student Survey, and Parent Survey) were developed on the basis of Ministry of Education and district documents (e.g., Metropolitan Separate School Board, 1996a). They were designed to address program characteristics, teacher planning and divisional planning, teaching strategies and practices in language arts, integration of language arts with other curricular areas, assessment practices and teacher intervention strategies, parent communication and involvement, student attitudes, and the availability and use of human and material resources.

Procedure

A committee of researchers and curriculum specialists developed the review instruments. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants were guaranteed and standard procedures of data collection were used. Interviews and classroom observations were conducted by teams; one researcher and two curriculum specialists were on each team.

MAIN FINDINGS

A detailed report describing the findings of the review and copies of the instruments may be obtained from the Research Department of the TCDSB (Metropolitan Separate School Board, 1996c). A summary is presented below.

Program Planning

- Program planning was usually conducted thematically by individual teachers; divisional planning was informally conducted. In most schools, principals required teachers to submit long-range plans; few required teachers to submit unit plans or daily lesson plans.
- There was considerable inconsistency in the level of detail and methods of planning. Few plans showed evidence of integration across curriculum strands and teaching methods.

Time

- The majority of teachers in Grades 1–3 reported spending between 6 to 10 hours per week on Language Arts.

Students “At-Risk” with Respect to Language Acquisition

- About 40% of teachers reported that there were between 1 and 3 students “at-risk”; about 40% stated that there were 4 or more students “at-risk.”

Program Modification for Individual Students

- About half of the teachers indicated that they regularly used program modification, but there was only moderate evidence of individual program modification from other sources observed in the review.

Teaching Methods

- Whole class, teacher-directed instruction appeared to be the most prevalent method, although other forms of instruction (e.g., small group instruction, teacher conferencing) were also observed.

Classroom Practices

- The written work of students suggested greater emphasis on narrative and worksheets and less emphasis on personal responses and supported opinions.

Integration with Other Subjects

- Although teachers reported planning for integrated programming, the degree of integration of Language Arts with other curricular areas varied.

Language Arts and Computer Technology

- In most classes, Language Arts was not integrated with computer technology. Few teachers regularly used computers for Language Arts; often the computer hardware was inadequate and there was a lack of appropriate Language Arts software.

Homework Activities

- About 70% of Grades 1–3 teachers reported assigning homework either “daily” or “most days.” The usual homework activities involve reading, writing, work completion, and

assignments that encouraged parental involvement. Kindergarten teachers reported occasionally assigning work involving parents.

Textbooks and Manipulative Materials

- Different textbook series were used for Language Arts instruction; some teachers expressed a need for updated texts, balanced methods (including some phonics), and supplementary materials for weaker students.
- The use of Language Arts manipulatives was not evident in many of the classes that were observed. There was considerable reliance on photocopies and worksheets.

Student Attitudes

- Students held favourable attitudes toward reading and writing and toward school in general. Students also perceived themselves as being proficient in Language Arts.

Student Assessment and Evaluation

- While teachers reported reliance on multiple sources for assessment, sometimes this variety was not evident in their planning. Most assessment tended to be conducted by teachers with little involvement from students and their peers.

Involving Parents

- Most frequently teachers involved parents in their child's Language Arts program by assigning home activities and by making direct requests of parents.

Parent Attitudes

- Parents considered all components of the Language Arts program to be highly important. The vast majority reported that the schools were doing well in developing literacy skills and considered themselves well informed regarding their child's program.

Community Involvement

- Approximately 60% of teachers indicated that they involved volunteers in the classroom; in most cases volunteers offered assistance with intervention programs rather than enrichment.

Professional Collaboration

- Although there was some evidence of involving teacher librarians for resources and information, classroom teachers indicated that ESL and Special Education teachers are not frequently involved in individual program enrichment or intervention.

Material and Human Resources Needed

- There was a clear need for more textbooks, including early literacy kits, literature kits, reading series, and “big books.” Additionally, a need was observed for manipulatives and other teaching materials such as audio-visual resources well as upgraded computer hardware and appropriate software.
- Professional development needs were identified in many areas including the curriculum, early literacy, outcomes-based planning, and programming to meet individual needs and computer literacy. Teachers also expressed the need for opportunities to network.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the Language Arts Program Review was to review all aspects of the implemented Language Arts program in the Primary Division and to make recommendations for improvement of program delivery. The focus of the review was on Kindergarten to Grade 3 — the foundation years for literacy development.

The key finding was a vast inconsistency in the way the Language Arts program was planned and delivered in the Primary Division, in both time spent and content covered. Also, despite the fact that teachers reported high proportions of students-at-risk with respect to language acquisition, there was only moderate evidence of programming to meet individual needs. Whole class, teacher-directed instruction appeared to be the most prevalent method used. Furthermore, the need for appropriate resources was very evident.

A report outlining the main findings was presented to the board of trustees. Alongside this report was a multi-year action plan, listing the recommended actions, responsibilities, timelines and budgetary requirements. The major outcome of the review was the decision to implement “Balanced Literacy” to address early literacy needs (see Metropolitan Separate School Board, 1997a, 1997b). This system-

wide literacy initiative has yielded success and continues to be lauded by both educators and researchers of school improvement and change.

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NOTE

As Superintendent of Program Services, Colleen French led the review process and the implementation of Balanced Literacy system-wide. Marina Vanayan, Nicholas White, John Morgan, and Andrew Portal are educational researchers at the TCDSB and lecturers at the University of Toronto.

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