

CHAPTER FOUR

MAKING CHANGES TO LITERACY PRACTICES

4.1 Contextualizing Literacy Changes

There is very little in the literature on how elementary literacy principals conduct their daily work in the field and therefore the purpose of this chapter is to offer insight into my role and how I went about enhancing both my practice and literacy-teaching practices. I begin by describing how literacy became our school improvement goal; how I developed a comprehensive understanding of what elementary literacy really means; and how I established a number of interventions that I believed would improve literacy instruction. I will discuss how, through literacy, the school's learning culture began to change and how out of our professional conversations about students' literacy assessment scores; we began forming a learning community. This meant continuous professional development for each of us and a commitment to sustain our focus on literacy. For my practice it also meant learning to foster leadership in teachers and sharing leadership.

As I conducted this work in my second action research cycle, my practice evolved from my reflective practice and, in the spirit of action research, the process is the series of actions I undertook to change my practice to enhance the teaching of literacy. In examining my practice in context, I will discuss team building, professional development, teacher mentoring and coaching, authentic student assessment, services for 'special education' students, learning resources, curriculum methodology and our school's literacy-based community of practice.

In this chapter I will present my literacy development and that of the teaching staff through excerpts taken from the journals I kept at the time and from my study notes on action

research. My research notes give a richer understanding of my actions in context and detail the rationale that accompanied my actions during the evolution of my study. My professional concerns and frustration about the road blocks that at times prevented, delayed, or re-routed my action plans are embedded in this description. My second year (2001-2002) at G.E.C. School was a key year that established the foundation for much of our literacy work and the changes that transpired. In retrospect, I believe that the teachers and I made more professional gains in this one year than in any other, so I will focus my description more on year two and less on subsequent years. I will touch on my third action research cycle that focussed on enhancing literacy assessment practices but this research cycle and its challenges will be more fully discussed in Chapters Five and Six.

Intertwined in these discussions are also my embodied professional values and beliefs, my moral leadership (Fullan, 2003b). My espoused theories of moral action through my action research become what Argyris and Schon (1974) term 'theories-in-action' (p. 10-11). I will conclude this chapter with a reflection that reviews my understanding of the literacy changes I initiated and implemented with my teachers. This examination of my practice reveals its impact on the school community and on me as a principal and research practitioner, and how it has re-defined leadership for me.

4.2 Defining Literacy for the Elementary School

I did not commence my work in the school as a literacy principal. When I first joined the rank of elementary principals, I was in awe at how knowledgeable many of my colleagues were about literacy and how well they transferred their literacy-teaching expertise to their roles as principals in their respective schools. My teaching background was more scattered. I taught for more than a third of my teaching career as a Kindergarten specialist; then spent

eight years teaching at the senior elementary level, concentrating on inclusive education for special needs' students, and including teaching a pull-out enrichment program; and then finished by teaching math at the junior high school level before becoming a secondary school vice principal and later secondary principal. Now working on restructuring our school's pedagogical delivery to implement the QEP, I recognized that I needed to be actively engaged at the same time in my own professional development. Through carefully planned professional development, my comprehension of literacy instruction broadened and over time I came to formulate my own definition of literacy for the elementary classroom teacher.

I came to understand literacy to be the students' acquisition of specific reading, writing and oral language skills; skills that are first set as goals in consultation with each student and then jointly developed with the teacher's support through an informed and balanced delivery of literacy instruction. As students provide authentic evidence of mastering their specific and pre-determined literacy goals, the teacher, student, and frequently the parent jointly confer to identify a new set of literacy goals to be developed. In this manner, each student moves along his or her learning continuum to the next stage of development. Through this repetitive process, literacy growth over time is tangibly demonstrated as students develop literacy competency and as literacy competencies are acquired, these competencies transfer across all other subject interventions. My definition respects the QEP's constructivist approach and its focus on authentic learning and assessment.

It is also important to note that as my study began the QEP was just being introduced into Québec elementary schools and its constructivism ushered in a new way of teaching. The full implementation of the QEP at the elementary level took seven years to complete, a period that approximately coincided with the length of this study. Efforts were made to

include teachers as active participants in these changes and not merely recipients of reform (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The literacy changes described in this chapter not only reflect the changes that teachers underwent to improve their literacy-teaching practices but also the deep changes staff had to make in order to successfully transition from skill-based instruction to one that is competency-based.

4.3 Introducing Changes to Literacy Practices

In the previous chapters, I have outlined the work I had done in the school in order to restructure its culture (Sergiovanni, 1996).

... the stage has been set and all the changes accomplished to date were done with a vision of moving the school and the staff closer to the QEP model. This vision has been stated many times during this time of change however, if the staff has embraced this vision or not is another matter.

Now that I am entering year two, a host of cosmetic changes continue to keep up the momentum and image of change, hence more decorating, painting. Six more classrooms will be added as well as other physical enhancements like a second washroom for the staff. The school's enrolment has gone from 180 students two years ago to 365 students for the fall of 2001. Our daycare has gone from 28 to over a 100. More learning materials were ordered including fifteen brand new computers to create a student lab.

...This year we are the board's first elementary school to have electronic report cards. And the list of changes goes on.

... as impressive as the list may be, I don't see these as indicators of real change. If I were to leave tomorrow, the school and the staff would quickly retreat back to much of its former self. Teachers would be a little wiser perhaps; the school would be better equipped and appear to be more physically welcoming but still no real changes in the classroom and in teaching instruction. I believe that I accomplished my first goal that was to arrive on the scene with a bang and to start the change process (that was the easy part for me as I am a doer)....

My real goal and challenge is yet to begin. To change the way that teachers instruct students will be very difficult because it means fundamental changes and the staff has to buy into this process. I am nervous about this challenge because this will not only test my abilities but will also professionally stretch me in ways that may not always be comfortable. I will have to become a

better team player. I believe that this really will be the test as to whether or not I am an effective principal in bringing about the true implementation of the new QEP. How do I facilitate real changes in what happens in the classroom to advance student learning...This is the question and will be my quest. (*Excerpt from journal entry –fall 2001*)

This cultural reconstruction was undertaken so that I could develop not only a learning environment that would be aligned with the QEP but also one in which teachers would be able to embrace the next, most important and difficult part of our journey: to examine, analyze and change teaching practices to improve student learning. As Fullan (2001) explains, “Leading in a culture of change does not mean placing changed individuals into unchanged environments. Rather, change leaders work on changing the context, helping to create new settings conducive to learning and sharing that learning” (p.79). With a foundation for a learning environment in place, I believed teachers were now ready to discuss and analyze student learning. My intent was to help them shift from teachers to thoughtful practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

In my first year, the QEP had been the conduit to re-organize classrooms, to create cycle teaching teams, to assess students’ academic progress, and to equip the school with new learning materials. As we entered into our second year, I believed that what was now required was to inject change into the heart of teaching practices, but how to do this was still unclear. All that I knew, from my discussions with senior administrators and from my previous work as a teacher and school administrator in other schools, was that the teaching practices that were evident in our school were out of date, not well grounded in educational research and, as I found from informal student testing, very ineffective in meeting the academic needs of our growing and highly diverse student population. I knew that I needed to change teaching practices to enhance student learning and achievement but I did not know

how to accomplish this goal. Through my action research, I came to the realization that in order to improve student achievement I had to move teaching beyond the status quo in the school (Marzano, et al., 2005).

Now the staff under my leadership must develop a sense of team with a common purpose so that they can examine their teaching practices and define areas in which to grow and evolve as more competent and effective educators. As principal, I will be examining my practice as to how to influence this learning climate. *(Excerpt from journal entry –fall 2001)*

Cotton's research (2003) found that what principals do in the school does make a difference but principals alone cannot change a school. I could not change practices alone without collaboration and a shared vision. This task meant that I needed to reframe my leadership style to be more supportive and encouraging as I knew I was viewed by my teachers as being authoritative. Therefore in the early fall of 2001, I had resolved to develop a more positive working relationship with the teachers than I had had in my first year as their principal and that I would slowly ease into the conversation with teachers about establishing a curriculum focal point. I began what I have come to call the 'real change' process and as others in the field term second-order change (Fullan, 1993; Marzano, et al., 2005). This order of change extends from Argyris and Schon's (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978) discussion on double-loop learning that occurs when the complexity of the problem can only be addressed through new strategies that are tried until a solution is found. The level of internal changes we required to achieve this order of change demanded that we work as a collaborative and cohesive team (Eaker, et al., 2002; Fullan, et al., 2006). In this transformation, I saw my role as that of curriculum and pedagogical coach.

This process was soon hastened however, by provincial accountability plans that were being implemented. In response, our board decided to initiate board-wide literacy assessment

tools: the *Pearson Developmental Reading Assessment* (DRA) (Beaver, 2006) and the *Developmental Writing Assessment* (DWA) (Beaver, Carter, Taps, & Williams, 2002) throughout its elementary schools. These assessments would be conducted twice every year (fall and spring) and schools' results would be recorded centrally for on-going analysis and review. Principals were also required to write accountability and school success action plans. The schools were free to select their academic focus as long each school could measure and demonstrate its improvement in student learning outcomes.

To give teachers ownership in the process and to encourage their more active participation I had already decided that I would support whatever curriculum area they chose. There was little discussion at the staff meeting and quite quickly and unanimously, we decided that literacy would be our focal point. This was not surprising since, even before my tenure, the school had chosen to work on literacy initiatives by introducing an "I Love to Read" week that involved teachers in inviting local politicians and business owners to read to students, and had also supported a *Reading Recovery Program* (Bourque, Huggins, Matczuk, Stuart, & Van Dyke, 2006). Teachers also decided to focus their pedagogical development on developing literacy-teaching techniques so I developed my plan.

I...want to meet with each staff member individually to discuss...goals...how they are planning to improve literacy...and ask how I can help them to achieve these goals. I believe that the next level of change has to come from the teachers and I am merely a facilitator...Once I meet with each teacher, I will know more as to where each teacher is. I predict that every teacher will be on a different page and that some will be several pages apart.

...the next step in the process must be to get teachers closer to...a common vision and a united approach to provide students with some consistency. Our assessment tools... are the Pearson reading and writing assessment tools. Since all teachers...will be using... these assessment tools, it will be easier to discuss common findings, concerns and goals.

Part of the guidance that I provide must be to get teachers to examine their practice and to seek ways as to how they can improve...they have to want to change their instructional methods to become more effective teachers. There are two ways that can be initially used to create a need to change and an interest in changing.

First, our students' results from...testing have been examined and... although not at the bottom of the school board's range, certainly are not at the top. Teachers in our school have always prided themselves as being excellent teachers and (believe) that the kids in our school receive a good education...so it is important that they see our students' results as compared to those of other schools. We must take time to discuss this as a staff and explore ways in which to improve our results.

The second way to instil a desire to change is to place teachers in an acting lead position...if I believe them to be competent then they are more likely to perform more competently. With that thought in mind, I have volunteered our school and our teachers to participate in a number of research efforts that go beyond talking about changes in the classroom to actively doing educational research...These projects will focus us...

To further support a sense of professionalism, I have been investing over the last six months in a number of current professional educational texts to begin an in-school teacher lending library. I also download from the Web from time to time, professional readings to circulate to teachers. (*Excerpt from my professional notes for my action plan for 2001-2002*)

4.3.1 Action Research Cycle 2

My second action research cycle began in year two and extended into years three and four.

The research framework for this period was developed from the school's plan for professional development (2001-2002) shown below (*think*). I believe that the most exciting outcome in this period was the interest that teachers developed in exploring the concept of professional learning communities (*act*). This plan evolved over time, was adjusted to suit the learning environment in the school as changes occurred, and was at times changed by my professional reflections when I believed that the plan had to be re-directed (*reflect*). Periods of labour unrest are sprinkled throughout the data collection in my second action research cycle and the resulting tensions also altered our work. However, significant changes did take

place during this action cycle as both the teachers and I grew professionally as illustrated through the many vignettes in this chapter.

4.3.1.1 School Plan for Staff Development Plan Year 2001-2002

These strategies became incorporated into the following professional development plan:

This year at our October School Council meeting the following motion was passed: “That in-school training be directly related to cross curricular literacy in regards to our school success plan...” All staff at end of cycle 1, 2 and 3 will get training in using the Pearson DRA and the DWA. At our school all cycle teachers not involved in the Board’s training will get in-school training from teachers attending the Board’s workshops in how to use the DRA.

Our Literacy plan will include guided reading activities and the introduction of student writing portfolios. P.D. (Professional Development) will be provided to teachers who are unfamiliar with this assessment tool by other teachers on staff who have used writing portfolios. More work needs to be done on how to do running records- our three trained *Reading Recovery* teachers can assist in this training as required...

There will also be in-house P.D. for teachers on how to use assessment tools to screen and detect reading and writing weaknesses in students as part of our Literacy project. Teachers have requested more development on creating student centers and how to use the project approach more effectively.

Our school improvement grant will take a small team of teachers from K and cycles 1 and 2 to study a balanced approach to reading. We will be visiting 3 schools in Edmonton who are trained in this...

Our two PDIG (Professional Development Improvement Grant) proposals if accepted will have teachers from cycles 1, 2 and 3 doing action research in literacy...

One of our cycle three teachers is representing our Board at the provincial table to establish the criteria and the content of the grade six English *épreuves* (government exams).

Another of our cycle 3 teachers is working on a PDIG proposal if accepted to work with other teachers in our Board to establish English writing exemplars.

Our resource teacher is working at the Board level in developing areas of special education support. *(Submitted to the school board by: Marian Lothian Principal October 2001)*

With this level of productivity, our joint efforts led me to believe that I was working more closely with the staff, and that a sense of team was slowly evolving. However, all of my enthusiasm was soon dashed by a province-wide work-to-rule action, because all of our funded initiatives were interpreted as work falling outside of the teachers' contract.

4.3.2 The Introduction of Literacy Assessment

With the assistance of Fran Halliday, a member of the Ministry's provincial school improvement team, I nevertheless set out to implement our literacy plan in the uneasy climate of greater accountability and teachers' labour unrest. Fran had been independently researching literacy delivery models and had assisted me in the fall, when I had applied for a Partnership for School Improvement Teacher/Administrator Scholarship Programme (PSI) grant. The proposal covered the key elements and would successfully engage teachers, as teacher action researchers, in examining their own literacy practices while also learning about balanced literacy.

...in December, Fran and I presented our school stats to the teachers and stressed the importance of dealing with this information to enhance learning. Our teachers were not pleased by the news and felt as if their classrooms have been invaded. The idea of big brother watching loomed heavily in the background. It was not the greatest of meetings but the message was delivered and the sense of urgency to change what and how we teach...One walks a fine line between stirring the teachers to take action and in overly discouraging them... This is my challenge as principal. It will not be an easy task. Some teachers are quite set in their ways while others are brand new and struggling...Others are feeling very threatened by all of the accountability issues. *(Excerpt from journal entry December 2001)*

...The last few days I have been working with Fran on DWA and the teachers are saying that writing is composed of two areas...Fran and I have been working on breaking down the scores into the two components being content and conventions. Hopefully this will give us a more accurate picture of our students as writers...

Yesterday, I had a staff meeting when much of this work and the rationale as to why was shared with staff. Fran was there to be involved in the work with

the teachers. Teachers were very defensive and concerned. They did not like being under a microscope but they were told that we all were and that we had no choice but to improve. What Fran and I are concerned about is that teachers do not make up excuses for why the kids are doing poorly and believe that if only we had more reading materials in the school etc...that our scores would automatically go up. If only it were that easy. Yes, we need more reading materials and this will help but the teachers must also realize that they will have to in some cases radically change how and what they teach in the classroom...real change and improvement will not come easily or quickly to some classrooms. (*Excerpt from journal entry December 11/01*)

Although our literacy plan needed to include valid and reliable literacy assessment tools to guide our learning as educators as well as that of the students (Stiggins, 2004, 2005), the manner by which these assessment tools had been introduced was hardly conducive to my efforts in introducing collaborative planning. In this context of provincial reform with its mandate to collect data and to critically review it, a new and unavoidable tension now existed for me as the school's principal (Earl & Fullan, 2003).

Of equal concern was that, by being actively encouraged to focus on using such a narrow range of literacy assessment tools as the DRA and DWA, we abandoned our efforts as a staff to develop what Booth and Rowsell (2002) describe as a repertoire of assessment tools. Building a repertoire of literacy assessment tools enables teachers to examine all areas of students' progress from their strengths to their weaknesses. In doing so, teachers become better equipped to design learning programs tailored to meet the individual learning needs of their students (Booth & Rowsell, 2002). In the previous year, I had hired a trained *Reading Recovery* (Bourque, et al., 2006) teacher with vast reading expertise, and she had started to show our teachers how to do running records, record miscues for analysis, use Dolch (1948) sight word lists to record students' sight word vocabulary and use the Slosson Oral Reading Test (Slosson & Nicholson, 1990) to determine students' reading levels. We were at the very emergent stage of developing an array of strategies to assess our students' literacy but now

with the introduction of the DRA and the DWA as mandatory literacy assessment instruments, all of our previous assessment strategies were abandoned.

The timing of these two independent provincial movements – the Government’s accountability plan and the teachers’ association’s work-to-rule, could not have coincided at a worse time. The pace of change had quickened at the same time as we were learning together how to use and interpret the DRA and DWA. Teacher morale was low, and although principals were directed to introduce accountability measures and school success plans simultaneously and quickly, we were unsure how to proceed. My confidence as a principal had been shaken considerably by these directives. My working relationship with my teachers was already very fragile and I had decided that it was best to slow down the momentum of change a little and take time to re-group, but my timing as a change agent had been seized. All of this upheaval did little to assist my literacy agenda in the school because there was continuous uncertainty as to what the teachers would agree to do as they interpreted what fell within their assigned workload:

This week was a better week, I engaged in meaningful conversations about the DRA...After long discussions I felt encouraged that we were discussing literacy on a professional basis and that even though teachers are supporting work disruption...five of them stayed in my office after school one night for two hours voluntarily. The topic of discussion was reading scores had to include comprehension because reading without comprehension was not really reading but decoding. As a result of these conversations our school board has re-thought how they are collecting data and will now include comprehension scores. *(Excerpt from journal entry December 11/02)*

4.3.3 Introducing Balanced Literacy

My goal had been to introduce a curriculum framework to enhance the teaching of literacy. From my many discussions with Fran, I had decided that a balanced literacy program would provide both sound teaching practices and a structured approach for the teachers’ literacy

instruction. Balanced literacy is a framework that according to Booth and Rowsell (2002) “...promotes reading skills and literacy among school-age children based on the characteristics of reading stages...emphasizes speaking, listening, presenting, writing, reading and viewing” (p.50-51). Through scheduled blocks of time devoted to literacy, daily instruction in reading, writing, and working with words through shared, guided and independent activities is provided by the teacher to meet the students’ different literacy levels (Booth & Rowsell, 2002).

The possibility of a grant provided our school with an opportunity to grow professionally ...It also provided a climate for teachers to discuss literacy. I had one meeting with all interested teachers to...explore...our...using a balanced literacy approach...Teachers had several questions and were genuinely keen...This meeting was followed up with general information about...balanced literacy...that I downloaded from the Internet and supplied to...teachers.

In November, we had a morning workshop on balanced literacy for interested teachers to discuss...what it might mean in our school...It was generally decided that we might like to focus this year on enhancing our guided reading with students and to exploring student/project centers... to provide time for the teacher to have guided reading times.... At this time various materials for professional reading were also shown and recommended to staff. It should be noted that several teachers attended the QPAT (Québec Provincial Association of Teachers) Convention out of town and were not present for this workshop as there was a call for a teachers’ rally to protest the position taken by the Government. Some had expressed disappointment about not being able to attend both. *(Excerpt from course work for Introduction to Action Research, Bishop’s University November 2001)*

My goal as principal will be to support teachers’ growth in these literacy initiatives and to create an educational team at the school level to improve our student’s literacy success rate. *(Excerpt from action plan 2001-2002)*

However, work-to-rule had cancelled the teachers’ visit to Edmonton schools leaving me feeling very unsure about how to proceed effectively. These immovable roadblocks challenged the very core of my leadership and forced me, as an action researcher practitioner, to continuously reflect and re-direct my actions.

...I am questioning my leadership in this school. I tend to look at things from the big picture perspective and I fear that I am not very good at looking at things on a smaller scale. I have worked hard to turn this school around and have done a fair amount but I have not successfully connected with the teachers. I have connected with most of the parents quite well on our Governing Board...but I do not experience this with the teachers...as an elementary principal – all of one year and three months...I am still on a learning curve... I also wonder if teachers sense how joyless I find this school...

...I fear that as long as teachers do not have ownership and are not more actively engaged in exploring ways to improve literacy... we will not progress...

I need to re-think this project and to attack it from another angle...Teachers need to be encouraged and I need to make them feel that it is easy and they can do it...I will need to explore how to bring in P.D. about ‘Balanced Literacy’ to the teachers... *(Excerpt from journal entry December 1/01)*

With the teachers withdrawing support...I feel that I am floundering minus a team and an action plan that was based originally (on having) more teacher involvement. The question now becomes how to salvage my action research plan...

I have met individually with all but one teacher whom will be re-scheduled...With the teachers, I discussed their weakest students. It was evident that few if any modifications were being done to assist students who are struggling. The teachers need help in how to manage the needs of different learners and to use centers more effectively to manage groups of students... (my) notes/concerns were shared with our spec. ed. consultant. *(Excerpt from journal entry January 3/02)*

I am still going to visit Edmonton schools...and plan to bring back as much information as possible. I recognize that bringing back second hand information...is not as effective as first hand information but under the circumstances this is the best that I can do. The challenge will be for me to make this information meaningful and relevant for my staff. Due to the...unwillingness of teachers...to freely use their time after school to meet pedagogically, I have decided to re-structure staff meetings.

Future staff meetings will include...staff discussion about using a balanced literacy approach...This is timely I think as most of our teachers are now finished their Pearson DRA and DWA testing and are disappointed with the results of their students...I am planning...to schedule staff meetings by cycles. This will allow more in-depth discussion and analysis. This will mean for me three staff meetings a month but...I would have scheduled ad hoc cycle meetings to accomplish the same tasks. What...would normally have

been handled at a staff meeting will have to take a different form and that will mean an increase in my workload but manageable if done...through memos and surveys.

I have also created a...survey for teachers...in early January...The purpose of this survey is to keep the momentum going for change in classroom instruction in literacy and to earnestly inquire what I as principal can do to help...I also plan to meet with each teacher...to discuss his or her literacy initiatives and...I believe that these discussions will provide me with an insight as to where the teachers need support.

Some time will have to be found for training in...balanced literacy...We have some...P.D. days in February. I plan to make this time compulsory in-house P.D...I will need to have this approved by our School Council...Perhaps it may be possible to join up with another school or schools within our Board who are also working on literacy improvement initiatives.

I am going to ask that every teacher keep a student portfolio for each student in reading and writing...to assist teachers in knowing as the year progresses whether or not their students are making sufficient progress in order for our students to reach the goals stated in our accountability plan. (*Excerpt from Bishop's course work January 7/02*)

As principal, I am under pressure to improve our literacy assessment results. I have invested a lot of time in researching literacy practices during January and February so that I could be more knowledgeable about effective literacy practice...the sole voice bringing forward ideas for changes...is mine. This makes the task harder to say the least.

I have chosen to move the staff forward...and to push hard for change. I recognize that this course of action is not easy. I believe that unless we drastically change the way we teach we will not drastically improve our results. I have shared this with staff to try to create a sense of urgency that will drive the need for change. After a recent meeting in which I tried to create this mood of urgency, I shared a proposal for a balanced literacy program for our school. One member of staff who often assumes the unofficial role of speaking for staff informed me the next day that I had demoralized staff. At first upon hearing this I was angry and then reflected. Whether or not this is true for all staff is irrelevant as some staff feel this way. I have to address this sentiment.

...Not all teachers have to change their practices to a great extent as some teachers have excellent literacy training. I have three trained *Reading Recovery* teachers in the school and one other with some training in balanced literacy. These teachers are definitely keener and supportive of a more balanced literacy approach in our school. (*Excerpt from Bishop's course work March 5/02*)

With other Québec colleagues (two language arts consultants from other English school boards and an elementary principal from my board) and Fran Halliday, I visited schools in Edmonton in January 2002, to see their balanced literacy program. After much discussion when I came back we decided as a school to implement balanced literacy. I timetabled ninety minutes of uninterrupted time to facilitate literacy instruction so that teachers had time to teach, model and to provide practice time for students to develop reading, writing and oral language competencies.

My embodied values of believing in doing ‘the right thing’ for the students was regularly called into action and fuelled my energy to continue seeking change in adversarial times. I hoped that my efforts would eventually result in some greater good for our students. This is what Fullan (2001) refers to as moral purpose. As he expands: “...moral purpose...must be accompanied by strategies for realizing it, and those strategies are the leadership actions that energize people to pursue a desired goal” (p.19). In hindsight, I believe that if it had not been for Fran Halliday’s continuous support and mentoring, I would not have been successful in achieving this important goal that marked a turning point in the teachers’ literacy-teaching practices.

4.3.4 Introducing Literacy Changes in the French Immersion Program

I was anxious to have French and English teachers work together to adopt a common methodology on literacy initiatives. They participated in selecting a series of books for the different levels of student readers, including – with more difficulty – appropriate French texts.

Since half of our students spend half of their day...using French reading and writing skills, it is imperative that the teachers of English and French come together in a more unified literacy approach.

We have to ask ourselves if our students are scoring lower because of our strong 50/50 Immersion program. This topic is extremely sensitive as it is a flagship program for our school...and draws students from other schools. I have shared this with staff and they are very apprehensive...as many of them can only teach in one language and more importantly it rocks the very foundation of the school.

...I have also asked teachers to think about how we could work more closely (in) English and French language arts...to make the acquisition of these skills easier for students...In our last two meetings I have observed an increase in the French teachers' participation...A sense of team has to extend across the two programs. *(Excerpt from Bishop's course work March 5/02)*

My mantra in the school became that it is hard enough to teach young children to read and write in two languages without increasing the challenge by using two totally different teaching methods. To facilitate the cohesiveness of our literacy teams in our English and French Immersion Program, a number of interventions were put into practice. All cycle team meetings consisted of English and French colleagues working together to jointly develop three common themes during the school year so that teachers could share methodologies. French teachers were also introduced to a French literacy assessment tool (Trousse d'évaluation en lecture GB+ pour le préscolaire et le primaire (Nelley & Smith, 2002)) which is comparable to the English DRA. I assumed that if our literacy teachers used comparable assessment tools then they would be in a better position to develop common teaching strategies. Our teachers also attended the same professional development activities when the focus was on literacy.

Aligning our two balanced literacy programs took time and patience but these interventions made a difference. New teachers frequently commented on how well our teachers worked together, that they felt supported by the other teachers and that this had not been their experience in other schools. In her first year in our school one Immersion teacher shared with me: "I have taught French in other provinces but it was not like it is here with

English and French teachers working together.” These comments showed that our teachers were beginning to work as a team.

4.3.5 Literacy Accountability

Accountability is a major recurring theme that runs throughout this narrative. As accountability became a more significant component of Québec’s educational reform, it had a profound effect on the work that I conducted in the school. Not only did it change the course of events that I had planned for the staff and shaped to a large extent the literacy initiatives that took place, but it also transformed my leadership. I was held accountable for what was happening at our school in terms of our students’ rate of success and our teachers’ state of professionalism and performance. Society entrusts the care of its children’s education to principals and expects high ethical standards of its school leaders (Fullan, 2003b; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). However, the natural state of moral responsibility for principals is enormously heightened in a time of reform changes. The accountability report required by the school board and reproduced in Appendix A indicates the degree to which I was held accountable as a principal.

I share this to describe the ontological pressure I faced continuously and that I could not ethically share with my teachers. My role was to carry out directives to the best of my ability, sometimes being caught in crossfire coming from both staff and senior management. Our school board applied great pressure to improve students’ results. Performing in this tension-filled context transformed my practice, supporting Fullan’s (Fullan, 1993, 2001; 2003a) contention that without tension meaningful change does not occur.

I deeply believed that the teachers and I needed a time to heal from doing battle during most of our first year together. I was far from abandoning my quest to change teaching

practices to improve instruction but to achieve more solidarity I was prepared to wait a little while for this process to unfold. But accountability allowed little time for us to jointly strategize and implement a course of action to improve teaching practices. Schools were now required to produce immediate and demonstrable improvement in students' results, whether teachers were ready or not.

At this point of time, many things have changed and reflection is necessary. I have come to more fully appreciate that setting a learning climate...is even more challenging than I originally had imagined...I am...having to move staff pedagogically quite quickly as we are catching up to other schools in which their staffs practice more up-to-date teaching techniques...Staff that is 'au courant' is more ready to change and be more flexible as they are asked to meet new challenges, I think. I have to balance this quick pace motion forward with the need to have teachers buy in so that the change can penetrate through resistance and take hold so that it can be sustainable over time. Yet buying in takes time and that we cannot afford at present due to accountability demands. *(Excerpt from Bishop's course work March 5/02)*

As principal, I found myself in the grey zone that I discussed in Chapter 2. On one hand, I was being directed by my school board to develop a school success plan according to Ministry directives as quickly as possible with my staff, while on the other hand, I believed that this work was too much and too soon for our school. I worried that my working relationship with staff would be strained to the point that I might never be able to form a true learning community. I was being stretched in my ethical leadership and taken out of my zone of proximity (Wink & Putney, 2002). I found myself living my contradictions as Whitehead describes:

I experience a concern when some of my educational values are denied in my practice; I imagine a solution to that concern; I act in the direction of the imagined solution; I evaluate the outcome of the solution; I modify my practice, plans and ideas in the light of the evaluation. The ‘I’ exists as a living contradiction in the sense that values which we hold are not being lived fully in our practice. (Whitehead, 1989a, p. 48).

4.4 Shared Leadership and Critical Friends Who Fostered Literacy

Although year two began with hope as I felt that I was beginning to work in closer harmony with the teachers, the road blocks that surfaced over the year played havoc with my plans. I needed guidance about my role; how I could achieve what I was being directed to do while at the same time achieving what I believed was needed to improve practices. I was not certain that these two objectives were complementary because I feared that our school success plan could negate most of the literacy gains we had made. Until I encountered these challenges, I had been comfortable with my own decision-making in my leadership role but this dilemma led me to open up my leadership and to share it with other educators to seek their counsel. As a researcher practitioner, I was often too close to problems to be objective and to see solutions close at hand, so as Mills (2003) suggests, I sought critical friends to help me clarify situations. It was not just their advice that I sought but I actually opened up my leadership role and shared it with them. I was sharing my leadership, not with teachers but with outside professional colleagues – a profound change in my practice and I grew professionally.

My critical friends fall into the description provided by Smith and Sturge-Sparkes (1999) who state that, “‘Critical friends’ are people who will help you get through the exercise. They

are close enough to provide the support you need. At the same time, they are ‘outsiders’ in a sense, so that they can remain objective about what you are doing. Their feedback can keep you on track...” (p.2). Fortunately, I had the benefit of having the three members of the Ministry of Education’s Professional School Improvement (PSI) team, Fran Halliday, Jean Fillatre and Carolyn Sturge-Sparkes to act as my mentors during this time of unrest. Since the PSI team members were working in our school on a regular basis, they were able to offer me advice appropriate to our context.

I met the PSI team in the spring of 2001, when the school board’s Director General had arranged to have them visit our school. Their mandate was to support the implementation of the QEP and to assist schools in the formation of non-denominational schools. I was directed to inquire what supports could be offered to me as principal and to seek assistance in areas in which I needed help. The team was very encouraging and supportive of the work that I had accomplished in my first year, but recognizing the huge tasks that still lay ahead, they agreed to work with me the following year (2001-2002).

Each member of the team supported me differently. Fran quickly recognized my limited literacy background and assisted me in seeking appropriate professional development. I thank her for arranging for me to visit schools in Edmonton because this experience provided me with a pedagogical literacy base that gave me the confidence and knowledge to effectively lead the changes that I sought. She also introduced me to action research as a way to make sense of the work that I was trying to accomplish with the staff and to find effective solutions to the problems I encountered as principal. She acted as my professional coach and literacy mentor, as reflected here in one of her emails:

Marian,

I have begun a plan that might work for (your school) - begins with a complete needs assessment accomplished by teacher teams. This will allow teachers to provide any evidence they have regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the children in their classes and be part of a literacy team - building on Helen's idea of working together. For PD, what about if I worked with Susan, Helen, Carole, yourself and we built up a plan and shared the leadership. I think we need to address the notion of balancing the 4 blocks - 1. Reading and Writing to (by the teacher), 2. Reading and Writing with - Shared (between students and teacher, students and students), 3. Guided reading and writing - students read at their instructional level, reading & writing strategies taught, 4. Independent reading and writing (95% accuracy rate). As we look at this I think we can see ways to include most of what a teacher is already doing - and work at enriching it. This would provide everyone with the opportunity to be part of the team - and establish a balanced curriculum for your school.

Perhaps there could be a possibility to team up with (another school) for PD. Is there a way to dismiss early one day a week? Is there a way to have an alternate programme one half day a week which uses only half of the staff and other community persons? What kind of solutions might the staff come up with?

We will have to think about using presence time. What is in place in cycles 1 and 2 is the curriculum, not reform. A strong literacy programme is the responsibility of each teacher - and so is professional development as per the 1997 document on PD. Jean will come to a staff meeting to discuss some of these issues if you need her to do so - she can take some of the heat off of you...

Fran (email from Fran Halliday 16/12/01) Please note that the names of the staff have been changed to provide anonymity.

Fran's monitoring of our students' literacy assessments guided my work with the staff.

More in-depth analysis of the Pearson DRA and DWA testing is required in order for us to effectively target the areas in which we must focus our teaching to maximize improvement in our students' scores. This will help to create an understanding of each student's literacy profile. A critical colleague (Fran) has suggested a small team of teachers...who are trained in *Reading Recovery* ...assist with this work. This is an excellent idea... (*Excerpt from Bishop's course work January '02*)

Jean and Fran worked together with the staff and sometimes they met only with me to strategize. In this process, Jean became my personal mentor who helped me to reflect on my

goals as principal, to focus only on what really mattered, and to keep initiatives as simple as possible. From our conversations, I learned how to analyze what was at the heart of nagging questions and I worked on developing an action plan that had been tweaked by her probing questions. Our on-going professional conversations provided me with a fresh perspective to critically review my practice (Loughran, 2002) and become more objective in my approach. Carolyn invited the staff to work with her on deciding what school improvement initiatives they could undertake and how they could move forward collectively.

In their respective roles, each of these Québec women educators assisted me with my action research. They gave me both wisdom and courage to continue to push for change when roadblocks seemed insurmountable. When their team was disbanded in 2002, each of them continued to be a critical friend. Without their support, I do not believe that I would have tackled some of the things that I did nor would I have been as successful at changing literacy-teaching practices. It was very important for me to have professional mentoring because the role of principal is an isolated position within the school, especially when there is no vice principal. It is even more important in times of adversity as the 2001-2002 school year proved to be. My practice was enriched by our exchanges and they helped me to open up my practice (Loughran, 2007; Russell, 2007) in ways that I had not done before.

4.5 The Conclusion of Year Two

Administrative factors interfered with the smooth progress of my research. The already overcrowded school received more students, resulting in on-going changes to staffing and teaching assignments. Space also became a prime factor that caused the school board to consider moving G.E.C. to another building.

As I reflect further I...had never before really considered the real level of change going on in the classroom itself almost daily. My view of change focused more on the school level and not on the classroom level. It was only as I talked out my problems, concerns, and doubts...with the group (critical friends) did it occur to me that a critical element had been virtually overlooked.

...there is so much disruption going on with the constant movement of students and changes being made to...teaching assignment(s)...This critical moment of revelation was confirmed for me when Fran said that although she has been in the school several times that she too had never considered this before but obviously this was an important factor. In only the last few weeks, I have added three new teachers...this marks about the fifth major change in teaching assignments this year. Very few teachers have not been affected by these changes. There is also the student movement in and out of the class that occurs some weeks daily...obviously teachers are reeling from these changes over which we have no control.

What I now ask myself is to what extent has my action research been hampered by my need to manage change rather than lead change as an educational leader? As I reflect on my work activities over the past three weeks, I log a great deal of time spent in...hiring staff, the changes that have to be made to the timetable and supervision schedule, the letters that need to be sent to parents to keep them informed, the help required from me to set up the new staff (buying furniture to accommodate them, finding a work space in an over crowded school etc...)

Additionally, we have the announcement of the new school...I have attended a four-hour Board meeting...I have had meetings with staff...the Governing Board chair and the Director General to discuss the...possible implications for our school. All this work took place since (spring) break in the last three weeks in addition to the daily work that running a school requires of a principal! I think that I can say that perhaps I am also reeling from these changes and that this does this impact on my action research. (*Excerpt from journal entry March 29/02*)

Our new school site was being used as a junior high school that now also required re-location. We were seen as school poachers, making a visit to our new school very difficult to arrange and this created great stress and concern amongst our parents, staff and students. We all relied heavily on support from our board to help us get through this massive move. Attention to the move consumed all of us during the last months of the school year. Our work

just halted abruptly and was left suspended until we could once again have time to move forward professionally. As for me...

The move took a great toll on my energy and work schedule and I feel that school in the normal sense has been suspended from May (2002) through to Christmas break (2002). So much time was consumed by attending to extra details arising from the move from street safety, working with the city to how and where to load students for buses,...to installing more security in the daycare and the list goes on. Since Christmas break I have been playing catch up so that I have now just recently finished teacher evaluations that were suspended from the announcement of our move, to January. I am beginning to find time to do the usual principal tasks like budget, attendance, overdue school fees etc...

It is therefore safe to say that pedagogy has largely not been on my front burner and we have progressed rather slowly so far this year. But I sense that the staff is content in our new space. People...comment that our school feels warm and inviting...Apart from being very tired as all staff hit the decks in August running very hard, I sense that our overall school atmosphere is good. Students are friendly when I walk down the halls and often are engaged in one project or another. The staff room comes alive briefly at lunch and teachers appear to be getting along well with each other. So I feel our environment is good – very good. (*Journal excerpt March 10/03*)

4.6 Professional Growth in Literacy - the Continuing Challenge in Year 3

In spring 2003, our school quickly volunteered to participate in a literacy project that our board had initiated. All the Kindergarten and cycle one French and English teachers and I were scheduled to attend literacy workshops throughout the year. For this project, each school received additional staffing to create a literacy facilitator and we decided to split the position to have a part-time facilitator for each of our English and French Immersion Programs. Our facilitators worked very well in tandem and enhanced concepts taught in the training sessions. Our literacy teachers were able to practice new methods, and then shared their experiences as they experimented with literacy instruction. Literacy had become the common thread that tied all of our work together and this project moved us forward as a staff.

Most notably, the Kindergarten and cycle 1 teachers started to close some of the distance that had existed between them.

Regrettably budget cuts a year later led to the cancellation of this board-wide literacy initiative, affecting our literacy progress in a number of ways. Teachers who had grown to be more supportive of our school board became cynically distrusting again, and those who were still working on mastering new teaching strategies felt abandoned. We carried on as well as we could by using time after school, led by our resource teachers, to develop better literacy-teaching practices but the wind that had been taken out of our sails was never truly replaced. We continued to make progress but it took us more time and effort. I had also lost Fran as my professional coach as she passed away shortly after we moved into our new school building. I had therefore come to depend on the board's literacy program to help move us forward so I too was very disappointed as I was once again left to my own leadership devices.

We needed to re-think practices and move expeditiously towards realizing our literacy goals, but as Sergiovanni (1996) cautions we needed to be careful of 'quick fix pressure' for 'easy answers'. These approaches would not bring about meaningful change. Our teachers required additional time to foster real growth and development in their teaching of literacy. Several teachers were still not very familiar with effective literacy practices and so I continued to encourage them to change how they taught literacy skills, so that we could see significant progress in our students. I fostered changes to teaching practices by supplying professional articles about literacy and engaging in conversations with individual teachers about their literacy teaching practices. For this order of change, our teachers needed to accept their role in the change process and that we needed to change not only classroom literacy instruction but also our school's approach to literacy. With the introduction of balanced

literacy, a lot of change occurred and much of it was good. However, we still struggled with finding effective teaching strategies for our ESL (English Second Language), special education, and Immersion students. Teachers experienced their greatest difficulty in effectively meeting the broad and diverse learning needs of their students.

The board-wide literacy training that our Kindergarten and cycle 1 teachers received was very helpful as it enabled teachers to provide our primary students with some degree of consistency. However, as this training had been terminated before reaching our cycle 2 and 3 teachers, a common school-wide literacy approach was still lacking. This was a topic of discussion at several of our staff meetings. Common literacy assessment tools tracked our students' progress and provided a comparison of our results with the board's average, but we had not achieved a uniform literacy delivery across cycles. To try to address this need, our board offered literacy training to our resource teachers who were then expected to share their learning with other teachers, but other critically important tasks meant that they were not always available to share their knowledge on a regular basis.

Overall, I believe that our literacy practices changed due to a number of interventions: continuous professional development, stocking good instructional reading materials, matching literacy instruction to expected literacy outcomes, and frequently engaging in dialogue about how to improve literacy. Our student population growth enabled me to hire new teachers with skills and knowledge that had been absent in our staff. These elements forged a healthy literacy culture in our school that enabled change to occur.

4.7 Forming a Professional Learning Community

On-going professional discussions about how to improve our students' literacy scores led teachers to see the merits of forming a professional learning community. In spring 2003, we

had settled in our new site and our staff was exploring ways to continue our literacy initiatives without the board's literacy program. The timing seemed right to raise the topic of professional learning communities (PLCs) at a staff meeting and the concept was well received by teachers. Additionally, our resource teacher had also been researching PLCs and was very keen to pursue this idea. She and I discussed the notion of trying a mentoring program for the coming year to extend support to our literacy teachers and we applied for a grant that was later approved. This funding provided for a mentoring team (consisting of a principal on leave of absence, my former resource teacher who now was a school board consultant, and myself) to meet regularly with teachers; opportunities for teachers to visit neighbouring literacy programs; and some coaching of literacy teachers.

Time is a very critical component of the change process (Fullan, 1995) and needs to be scheduled. Our work was done at weekly cycle team and mentoring meetings that took place after school. These meetings were built into our teachers' workload as part of their contractual in-school presence time and were approved by staff. This time enabled us to examine the literacy targets in our school success plan and to brainstorm solutions to improve students' results. It is important to note that our mentoring program⁶ involved teachers to a greater degree in the analysis of scores and acquired competencies and therefore for the first time in year three, teachers set our school success targets.

For the cycle team meetings, teachers selected the items to be discussed and they gave me minutes of their meetings. To facilitate these meetings, to keep our focus on literacy, and to aim for consistency across cycles, I met weekly with my two resource teachers. We reviewed which students and teachers needed support, how we could best support them, and

⁶ See Appendix C: for a visual presentation of our mentoring program model.

how we were progressing with our literacy initiatives. The resource teachers took these ideas to the team meetings and often the focus of the meeting arose from our conversations. I created a way for me to give input and feedback while at the same time nurturing teacher-shared leadership. Each cycle team had a cycle leader whose responsibility was to set the agenda, have the minutes recorded, and bring forward cycle concerns to me or to the resource teachers. I found this structure to be useful as I had previously tried to attend cycle meetings but too often found myself unable to attend or pulled away to address issues demanding my immediate attention.

These discussions provided a context for our teaching staff to examine their teaching practices (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) and in our mentoring meetings teachers were encouraged to ask relevant questions such as: What do my students need to know? How will I know if my students have mastered necessary skills? What do I need to know as a teacher so I can teach these skills more effectively? These questions encouraged them to become action researchers and to formulate a shared vision about what our students need to learn. This shared understanding gave us a clearer vision of what needed to change (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1995). I knew that my teachers had not yet truly seized our school's learning agenda which is why I endeavoured to transfer much of the decision-making surrounding pedagogy to teachers and to foster their creation of a professional learning community.

... I was feeling very positive about the school year and looking forward to great things happening with the mentoring and the formation of a professional learning community. Teachers were excited about analyzing where to go from here. We had looked at our results and had graphed the DRA from last spring. The French teachers were beginning to do running records in French and I felt that things were beginning to move along and that teachers were having good discussions about reading... *(Extract from journal entry November 5/03)*

4.8 Literacy Mentors

The action research that I have conducted for my doctoral studies has focused on my professional practice as a principal, and therefore this story is told in first person and centers on my involvement in the school. However, I would not want to leave the impression that all of the work and the change process were done exclusively by me. I had the strong support of several parents; particularly those involved on our Governing Board, and some members of my staff, in particular my former resource teacher, our literacy resource teacher and mentors from the educational community who lent their support to initiatives to move our school forward and to strengthen the quality of our work. My former resource teacher, now a special education and literacy consultant, was invaluable in years two and three by providing teachers with weekly professional development in literacy. She was a well-respected mentor, for while she was on staff, she had formed professional relationships with each of them and developed trust. She and I continued to have in-depth conversations about instructional practices, and she too has become a critical friend to my research.

Teachers learned to say that they needed help and to come to me for assistance. I took these requests as an indication of the professional trust that had developed between us. I believe that this trust was forged from the foundation work conducted in the early years of my principalship that is shared in this chapter. As my study progressed it shaped my practice to become more supportive of teachers, and, in later years as I evolved in my role, I had regular conversations with the many new and inexperienced teachers on staff about instruction. Frequently they would tell me that other teachers had told them to share their professional needs with me and that I would find ways to help them. I brought in other educators to work with them on specific areas of literacy. It was good to know that staff had

come to appreciate this level of support and that they had faith in my leadership to guide their professional learning.

4.9 Action research Cycle 3

Unfortunately in the fall of 2005, teachers grew very concerned about the lack of a provincial teacher contract and consequently, teaching workloads were carefully reviewed by the provincial teachers' association. This concern filtered down to both local school boards and teacher associations that led to a grievance being filed by my teachers about the professional use of their time after classes ended. This action forced me to immediately re-direct our work that was being done after school to create our own literacy-based professional learning community (*think*). Since there were provincial changes in assessment and student reporting taking place and we had already begun some work in literacy assessment, I made the decision to focus my work with teachers on literacy assessment during this period of unrest (*act*). This decision moved my study into its third action research cycle and the one that proved to be the most difficult (*reflect*). I will discuss the pedagogical actions undertaken to further develop literacy assessment practices in this chapter but I will leave the challenges arising from my third action research cycle to be fully reviewed in Chapters Five and Six.

4.9.1 Assessment for Learning

In December 2005, MELS amended the Québec Education Act so that other assessment practices could replace a report card for one reporting period in each year of the cycle. This change introduced major changes to our assessment practices and led us to conduct research on how to effectively use student-led conferencing accompanied with student portfolios to replace a report card.

Concurrent with all this work, as a lead school, we continued to develop authentic assessment practices. We continued to learn about how to measure whether literacy was improving. For the purpose of this thesis, I will describe only those elements that directly relate to literacy. As we began student-led conferencing and teachers began to work with students to collect samples of their work as evidence of their progress, our teachers began important exchanges about how to demonstrate growth in reading and writing. What samples of students' work should be kept and shared with parents? How could we best share evidence of growth or non-growth? Teachers worked in their cycle teams to answer these questions. These meetings generated very valuable pedagogical discussions not only about what evidence students should share but also about how each teacher framed their literacy program. As teachers discussed these issues at cycle meetings, they began to compare how literacy was actually being taught in different classrooms within the cycle, and so, in a non-threatening manner, they began comparing their practices. This exercise strengthened their literacy-teaching as they began to incorporate 'best practices' into their classroom.

Our work was supported by a Québec Government grant that provided funding for teachers and administrators to visit other schools to study 'best practices'. With the assistance of Dr. Anne Davies, whom we met in an assessment conference, we arranged to visit Hawaiian schools that are working with Dr. Davies on authentic student assessment, progress folios and student-led conferencing. This research was invaluable in helping our understanding of authentic assessment and how to take subject domains and to break down the competencies into student-friendly rubrics. We also learned to how to develop student exemplars. We began to model these practices in our April 2007 student-led conferences and these two photos, taken in April 2007, are evidence of our learning.

These photos show that our teachers were beginning to deconstruct literacy competencies and through this deconstruction they began to develop a greater professional comprehension about the stages of literacy development. When I visited classes and began to see these charts appearing on their classroom walls, I became very excited. Although these charts appear in a crude format as shown in the photos, they marked for me the turning point that teachers were digging deeper with students into the many facets of literacy and were developing both teacher's and students' understanding of authentic literacy assessment. This raw data provided me with tangible evidence about the profound literacy changes taking place in the teachers' practices – teachers were both learning and assimilating what we were talking about in our PLC sessions into their teaching.

In keeping with action research, I include this evidence to substantiate that literacy-teaching practices in the school were changing and I believe that this evidence cannot be adequately captured by my written explanations alone. I am quite passionate about these pictures because of all of the work and progress they represent as I know how hard we all worked to arrive at this stage of professional development. This knowledge enabled our teachers to construct teaching strategies that were more precise and specific to the individual needs of students. Students were now provided with opportunities at their level of development to develop each skill required to master the provincial literacy competencies.

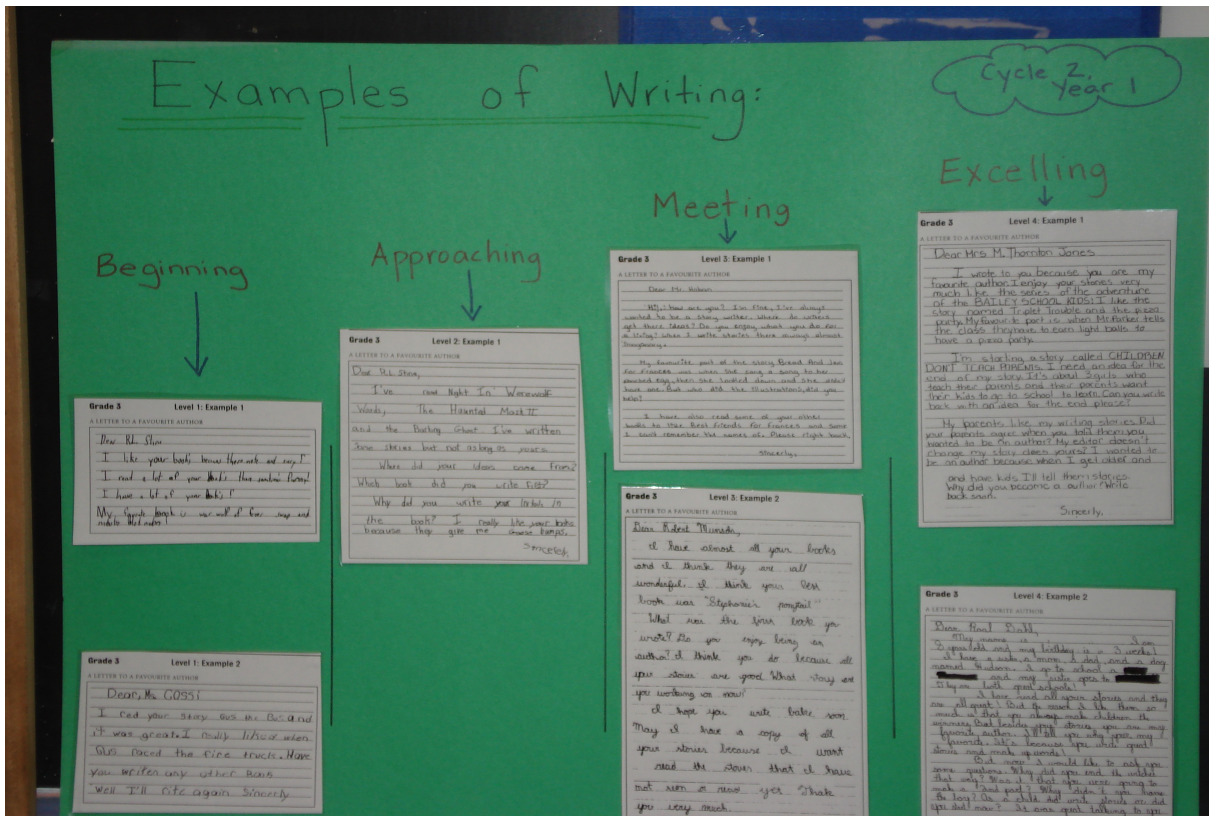


Plate 1:

Teachers' Exemplars of Attainment Levels in Writing Competency - Example 1

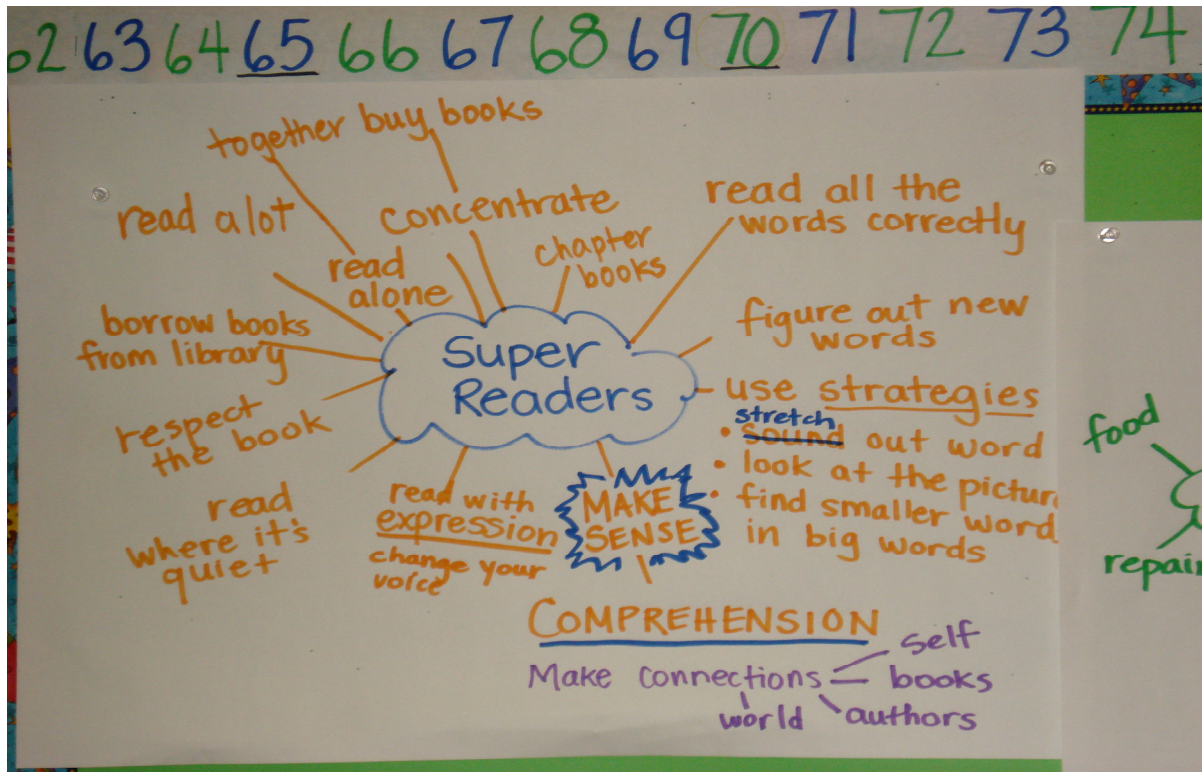


Plate 2:

Teachers' Descriptors of High Attaining - Example 2

Thus the need for assessment and the new form of assessment promoted important pedagogical discussions (Noonan & Renihan, 2006) and allowed me to provide an alternative form of professional development for the teachers. It also engendered pride in what they were doing when I presented our work to other schools at a provincial conference. Had my appointment to the school been longer I would have encouraged the teachers to further develop this work and to refine it over time.

4.10 Summary of Reflective Analysis

I think that after.... moving big and often controversial changes forward, the key to my success in the sense that the staff still talk to me and work with me is that for every perceived negative change, I have tried to provide a bit of silver lining. I believe that change does not have to be negative and can be positive with up sides to it. I search for up sides and try to balance perceptions as we proceed. *(Excerpt from Bishop's course work March 5/02)*

As I review this work, I begin to realize that literacy practices in our school changed and that I was the change agent. In my professional crisis as a principal struggling to make sense of my work and being accountable for my actions and for those of my staff, I sought several forms of help. Thanks to Fran, I grew as an educator with knowledge that made me a more effective principal and I discovered action research. Its methodology gave me a structure to develop ‘think-act-reflect’ cycles. In this study there are three action-reflection cycles that evolved and each action phase was accompanied by a grant to initiate change: 1) The first action research cycle explored a balanced literacy delivery model and was supported by a grant (2001-2002) to visit schools in Edmonton 2) The second action research cycle introduced a balanced literacy-based professional learning community and was supported by a grant (2003-2004) to have mentors work with the staff to explore the work of Eaker, Dufour & Dufour and 3) the third action research cycle introduced authentic student assessment for literacy and was supported by a grant (2005-2007) to visit schools in Hawaii to view the work of Dr. Anne Davies.

As a school community we worked on implementing each action phase. We put into place a balanced literacy program and we worked in cycle teams as a professional learning community to refine our school’s balanced literacy delivery. In the (2007-2008) school year, Cycle One staff participated in a project led by our former resource teacher to implement literacy methods detailed in the book, *The Daily Five Fostering Literacy Independence In The Elementary Grades* (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Our PLC was still experiencing growing pains and took a major step back in 2006-2007 when a third of our teaching staff were new teachers who required a lot of individual mentoring and coaching. In supporting these teachers, our PLC reviewed ground already covered to consolidate everyone’s understanding

of literacy instruction. Our authentic student assessment practices further evolved as Cycles Two and Three worked on developing literacy exemplars to explain the learning continuum in a clearer and more precise fashion for students, parents and teachers.

4.11 Summary

...the fact that we are asking questions about school success and student achievement tells us that we are moving forward and it is encouraging...
(Carolyn Sturge-Sparkes' professional notes from cycle 2 meeting May 22/02)

My action research was based on changing literacy practices, and because there is little documented work on this topic (Booth & Rowsell, 2002), I have described some of the complexities I faced: my initial struggle in getting teachers to focus on developing literacy instruction and on improving their own practice; the many competing interests and challenges principals face daily as pedagogical leaders; how well thought out plans can be derailed by outside forces beyond the school's control. Nevertheless, our school's literacy journey did proceed and I have outlined how our response to reform and accountability issues created a culture of learning that fostered a professional learning community. Teachers began to examine deeper levels of change as they grew more knowledgeable about literacy-teaching practices, subject matter, and student learning; all important elements resulting from professional learning opportunities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Most importantly, I have shown how my practice evolved and how my leadership adapted to the circumstances surrounding me. But more than being a chameleon with leadership skills, I underwent change that in turn transformed my practice from an authoritative principal relying solely on my knowledge and research to being a practitioner action researcher who began to use reflection to guide my work through the reflective cycles

of action research. Through the support of critical colleagues, I came to share leadership and to foster cycle teams and project leaders.

In Chapter Four I have documented in detail the multi-faceted approach I adopted to improve literacy-teaching so that the role of the principal in this process is fully exposed. My actions over time evolved into literacy themes that will be discussed and examined in the following chapter. Chapter Five will also describe the data I collected to examine whether there is evidence that I was able, by applying these initiatives, to improve literacy-teaching practices and thereby to improve student literacy.