

**How can I improve the clarity and precision of students' written responses to comprehension questions, as well as encourage answers that consistently demonstrate a general to thorough understanding of the text?**

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### **Biography**



Cindy is in her 14th year of teaching with the Grand Erie District School Board. She is currently teaching a Grade 3 class at Lansdowne-Costain Public School, Brantford, Ontario. She is a graduate from the University of Western Ontario with a Bachelor Of Music, Honors Music Education degree and Bachelor of Education degree. This is Cindy's second action research paper. Her first action research was completed in 2003 and was published in the *Passion in Professional Practice: Action Research in Grand Erie* (DeLong, Black, Knill-Griesser)

**What is the question - Why is it important?**

*How can I improve the clarity and precision of students' written responses to comprehension questions, as well as encourage answers that consistently demonstrate a general to thorough understanding of the text?*

Since 1996, the Grade 3 students of Ontario who attend publically funded schools are required to participate in provincial testing. The provincial testing is designed by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). "EQAO was established in response to the public's demand for clearer information about, and greater accountability for, student achievement in Ontario schools." (ENSURING QUALITY ASSESSMENTS: Enhancements to EQAO's Assessment Program, pg. 2). It tests the areas of Reading, Writing and Mathematics. The test is a written examination with some multiple-choice answers. The school in which I teach has consistently scored below the provincial achievement levels set by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. Other schools have been able to attain the provincial average and score within or above the achievement levels and I wish for my students to do the same.

I have always been concerned about the reading scores on the EQAO for Grade 3 at my school. I see it as a reflection of my effectiveness. The questions are considered challenging and often require inference and critical thinking. When administering the test, the teacher is not to read or interpret the questions posed to students. The classroom is silent with no reason for interaction between the teacher and the students with the exception of the opening remarks scripted by the EQAO Teacher Plans. I believe that students that are reading at grade level should be able to attain at least a Level 2. To be at Grade Level which is considered Level 3, "The student is able to work independently. He or she reasons consistently, with general understanding, and can explain ideas of some complexity. The student uses a variety of forms and communicates clearly and precisely for specific purposes. The student organizes his or her work in an appropriate and logical way. The student uses most of the language conventions studied, and makes only a few minor errors and /or omissions." ( from The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 - Language (1997) document, pg. 8). I'm always disappointed when

I run trial examples and mark students' work to note how little detail is used to explain their answers and how many answers are incorrectly answered. I have reflected upon this problem and have come up with a variety of reasons for these results: 1) the students do not read with understanding the posed question; 2) the students' written answer lacks clarity and precision; 3) the students do not have the skill to find the answer; 4) the student cannot comprehend the read text.

The Comprehension Questions: It occurred to me that one of the reasons more students don't do well is that they do not read the question posed correctly or they don't understand the question. I believe that there are three issues around the question posed: 1) attending to the details of the question and 2) the ability to comprehend the question and 3) having the confidence in their ability to read the question and decipher its meaning independently.

The Clarity and Precision of the Written Answer: Another issue is the lack of clarity and precision in the writing of the answers. I find that the students are unable to articulate their ideas in written or with oral response with clarity and precision in a way that demonstrates their understanding

Finding the Answer: Some students have not learned how to delve into the text and find the answer.

Comprehension of the Text: For some of the students, the chosen texts are above their reading level, so they are unable to encode and /or decode the literature.

It is my job to train and encourage the students in my care to meet the standards as stated in The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 - Language (1997) document. Overall, for students to succeed in the testing, the efforts of my teaching must produce confident, independent test writers.

## Setting the Stage

As written into my Action Research question, the area of emphasis for this report is written communication of reading comprehension responses. I use the guidelines for assessing the progress of the students from The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8- Language 1997 document distributed by the Ministry of Education and Training. In this document, the Achievement Levels and the Expectations are laid out for each grade. When assessing the student's work for this project I will primarily focus on achievement in the areas of Reasoning and Communication. The standards are : "the student reasons independently, using ideas of some complexity, consistently and with general to thorough understanding" and "the student communicates independently, clearly and precisely". The Overall Expectation for Grade 3 that suits this project is "By the end of Grade 3, students will express clear responses to written materials...." The Expectations in Specific Areas that support the content of the paper are found under the heading "Reasoning and Critical Thinking".

The Ministry of Education and Training uses written responses to measure students' achievement in reading so I , too, follow their model as one of my methods of reporting on reading achievement.

## Term 1

With the idea of teaching the class how to read and understand the question posed, I began in

September to teach the class to read the questions and highlight important words (key words). We then would use the key words to skim the text to find the answer. I modelled these techniques with the class and had them do it with a partner and then by themselves. In introducing new routines and skills I often used the The Gradual Release of Responsibility Instruction Model (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983, pg.317- 344).

The reading program from September to November was whole class instruction using non-fiction texts and teacher modelling. I liked to begin with non-fiction texts because I found the content would interest most of the class. As well, non-fiction texts lent to teaching many important lessons that were transferable to writing, science, social studies and fiction reading. I chose a common reading level to most students to compliment whole class instruction. I chose whole class instruction to establish reading expectations and routines. I also taught the purpose of paragraphs, topic sentences, subtitles, diagrams, glossaries, table of contents and indexes and how using these with skimming the text can assist in finding the appropriate information. Students were expected to answer in complete sentences that avoided ambiguous words such as “stuff, things, it , they.”

In September, I did not put scores on papers but I made “Next Step” comments , suggesting improvements to make on the next assignment. The students were to view this work as practising and an opportunity to make improvements. I did not have them make corrections on these papers but expected that the following assignment would show improvement.

In October, students read and answered an exemplar independently that was provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. After the exemplars were completed, sample answers for the same test , as provided by the Ministry, were handed out. Students were asked in small groups to read and determine which sample was a Level 1, 2, 3, and 4. The class then reconvened and discussed which sample was which level and why. This led to the class designing a rubric for reading responses that could be used for the year and was then posted on the classroom wall. Students were handed back their unmarked papers and asked to score them based on the rubric and then hand them back to the teacher to score. The purpose of this exercise was to give hands-on experience with reading evaluation and to see the standards set by the Ministry. The hope was that students would desire to be level 3 and 4 and now know how to get there. From this exercise on, their reading assignments were marked according to the rubric and they were given Next Step comments. They were told that if Next Step comments were not improved, these comments would be used on their first term report cards that went home in late November.

At the end of November, an EQAO reading assessment from 1998-1999 was given. It was called Plants Change Night and Day . It was noted that often there was one or more questions left unanswered, or lacking detail and/or written inconsistently with clarity and precision.

## Term 2

I looked at the results from term 1 and thought to myself that what they needed was more practise and I would increase my availability with the individuals while working in the smaller reading groups. The non-fiction reading skills would be reinforced in the other disciplines of science and social studies. As well, papers on ‘following directions’ would be used to continue practising highlighting key words

that were now often referred to as the verb, the preposition and key nouns. Students were expected to follow the directions carefully and precisely.

The class transitioned from non-fiction to fiction reading. The class was divided into reading groups according to Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) reading levels.

On January 31<sup>st</sup>, I administered another former Grade 3 EQAO assessment in the area of reading from 2003-2004. It was called "Goose Crossing." I noted that some of the students performed at the Level 3 and 4 area whereas several others left more than half of the questions unanswered. I decided to meet with the class in their smaller reading groups to conference and find out where individuals were having difficulties. I went through and modelled what the LEVEL 4 answers would be for "Goose Crossing" and then asked the students to go back to their desks with a new copy of the paper to practise writing the Level 4 answers. It took several weeks to review and rewrite the answers.

I looked for ways to continually integrate the reading/writing skills that they needed to use into other disciplines. i.e. emphasising clarity and precision when writing up science experiments on Magnets.

### Term 3

On Easter Monday, I was frustrated. I felt that I was making no progress and was ready to withdraw from the action research group. I decided that before I did such a drastic move that I would commit the day reading and reflecting in my journal as I read through *You and Your Action Research Project* (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996). Afterwards, I browsed through the *Passion in Professional Practice 4-2004*. In the *Passion* I was encouraged to read that another researcher was frustrated with the "clear and descriptive" writing in her classroom. How can I improve my practice so that the writing produced by my students is clear and descriptive? : Diane Clark. Clark also states "Whether writing a narrative, responding to reading comprehension questions, or answering questions in core subjects such as social studies and science, it has been an on-going struggle to get the students to write with more description or information, or to clearly express their message." I was encouraged to see that her techniques were the same as the ones I have used i.e. "Model the writing for the students; model the process, ....model my expectations; use verbal feedback to guide the students with their writing.....; use student writing as an example to explain the processes.... ; immerse the students in examples of the type of writing they will be producing.....; provide the students with the necessary tools to be efficient writers, gear lessons specifically to a skill....." This gave me hope to continue.

I administered three more EQAO reading examples before the 2004-2005 EQAO test was to be administered from May 25-May 27, 2005. One of the examples was the former EQAO test from 1999-2000 - *Septimus Bean and His Amazing Machine* and the other two were samples (*Bees Need Plants and Plants Need Bees* and *Venus Flytrap*) that were provided by the EQAO in the document- *Language: Grade Three Samples 2005* for practise for this year.

With the sample named "*Bees Need Plants and Plants Need Bees*" I was still amazed at the answers that did not match the question and the answers that lacked clarity and precision. I typed some of the poor answers composed by the students on an overhead and as a class we analyzed the answers for both reason, clarity and precision.

## Reflecting on the EQAO Test for 2004-2005

The first day of the EQAO test was on May 25. The assessment was one hour and mostly involved answering reading comprehension questions. I noticed that almost all of the students' written communication was clearly and precisely written. The reasoning was not necessarily Level 3 but the communication aspect was.

On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005, as I was marking these EQAO reading booklets for my personal use, I considered a question regarding the EQAO test for 2004-2005, asked of me by my principal. He asked me if I thought the testing was valid now that the amount of multiple choice was increased and the written response portion had decreased. I was undecided, however, it did cause me to ponder some interesting points.

The Ministry rubric is divided into 4 components: Reasoning, Communication, Organization of Ideas and Application of Language Conventions. This means that Communication is only one quarter of the evaluation. I have several students that are not articulate when writing their thoughts down with clarity and precision. When filling in the multiple choice questions, this took the 'communication' component out and they could just focus on the 'reasoning'. For many of these students their scored Level was one level higher than when the questions were purely written responses. This way the student still has the opportunity to prove that they understood the story without being tested on their written ability. The multiple choice questions were more precise when marking the areas of Organization of Ideas, Application of Language Conventions. The problem with scoring multiple choice is scoring with accuracy Level 4 and Level 3 and the Level 2 and the Level 1. If the answer is right- should it score a Level 4 or a Level 3. If the answer is wrong- should it be scored a Level 2 or a Level 1. Because of these changes, certainly comparing the scores from previous years to this year would not be valid.

If this is the way of the EQAO assessments to come I will teach a bit differently. From analyzing the assessment for 2004-2005, the multiple choice kept me from being distracted by the written communication. As well I realized that I needed to teach through the reading more of the language conventions and the organization of ideas. The class as a whole was not able to consistently recognize, label and describe the language conventions and the organization of ideas and their purposes. I spent considerable time teaching these aspects through the writing, however, the majority of the students could not apply the information to their reading.

## Looking at the Data

### Directed Reading Assessment (DRA) Levels

Students	First Term	Third Term
Cassie	Level K	Level N
Cullen	Level L	Level O
Lukas	Level N	Level S
Dylan	Level N	Level S
Sean	Level O	Level O
Emily	Level O	Level O
Jakob	Level P	Level P
Kyndra	Level P	Level P
Aidan	Level S+	Level S+
Rachel	Level S+	Level S+

It is mandated by the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB) to complete The Developmental Reading Assessment at least once each school year for each child in grades Kindergarten to Grade 3. One assessment must be completed and filed each spring to measure the independent reading development. The GEDSB provided a form that organized these Levels into terms and the grade scores that each child should receive based on their achievement. (see Appendix 1).

### Written Comprehension Assessments

#### Goose Crossing

Name	% answered	% not answered	% Level 3 and 4	% Needs More Detail	% Wrong Answers	Comments
Cassie	36	64	18	27	0	*major spelling marred clarity *100% of sentences did not begin with an upper case letter
Cullen	37	73	0	9	18	
Lukas	36	64	0	36	0	*one sentence began with "because" and another with "and"

Name	% answered	% not answered	% Level 3 and 4	% Needs More Detail	% Wrong Answers	Comments
Dylan	45	55	9	45	0	*one sentence began with "because" *one sentence did not begin with an upper case letter
Sean	55	45	13	55	0	
Emily	73	27	18	36	18	*one sentence began with "because" *one sentence began without an upper case letter
Jakob	45	55	18	9	18	*one sentence began with "because" and another began with "so"
Kyndra	91	9	45	36	9	*three sentences were written with poor sentence structure. *five sentences were written without beginning with an upper case letter
Aidan	100	0	45	45	9	*one sentence began with "because" and one started with "to"
Rachel	100	0	36	27	9	

### Septimus Bean

Name	% answered	% not answered	% Level 3 and 4	% Needs More Detail	% Wrong Answers	Comments
Cassie	75	25	0	25	50	*poor sentence structure, illegible print and poor spelling interfere with clarity of answers
Cullen	75	25	0	75	13	
Lukas	100	0	13	63	13	
Dylan	87	13	13	76	0	*two sentences begin with "because" *one sentence has poor sentence structure
Sean	87	13	0	63	25	
Emily	100	0	13	88	0	*one sentence began with "because" and two started without an upper case letter
Jakob	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	*absent
Kyndra	100	0	50	63	0	
Aidan	75	25	26	51	0	
Rachel	100	0	38	25	38	

### Bees Need Plants and Plants Need Bees

Name	% answered	% not answered	% Level 3 and 4	% Needs More Detail	% Wrong Answers	Comments
Cassie	82	18	9	9	18	*two answered with incomplete sentences
Cullen	65	45	0	27	9	
Lukas	82	18	36	36	0	*three sentences did not begin with an upper case and one sentence began with "And"



Name	% answered	% not answered	% Level 3 and 4	% Needs More Detail	% Wrong Answers	Comments
Dylan	100	65	0	27	8	*none of the sentences ended with a period
Sean	45	64	18	18	0	*one sentence lacked clarity
Emily	82	18	27	36	18	*one incomplete sentence
Jakob	100	0	45	55	0	*two were written with poor sentence structure
Kyndra	73	27	45	27	0	
Aidan	82	18	45	36	0	
Rachel	100	0	72	27	0	*two were written with poor sentence structure

#### Goose Crossing

Name	% answered	% not answered	% Level 3 and 4	% Needs More Detail	% Wrong Answers	Comments
Cassie	100	0	20	0	80	*sentence structure, spelling and illegible print marred the clarity
Cullen	100	0	20	20	60	
Lukas	100	0	20	60	20	
Dylan	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	*absent
Sean	100	0	0	100	0	
Emily	100	0	0	60	40	
Jakob	100	0	20	60	20	
Kyndra	100	0	60	40	0	
Aidan	100	0	40	40	20	
Rachel						

Some written reflections and self-evaluations after completing written responses to comprehension questions on the EQAO test Day 1, May 25, 2005

"I trid my hardest and fild in each questions. I reereeded to try to get the ansers."-Cullen

"I answered every question in complete answers." - Lukas

"I mostly gave rat asers and most Detail. I skimmed." - Dylan

"I skimmed and I skip krastching and go back so I won't get an R" - Sean

"I put captels and perids. skim keywords and I looked back" - Emily

"I skimmed through the text." - Jakob

## **Making Sense of the Data**

Did I improve the clarity and precision of students' written responses to comprehension questions? Did I encourage answers that consistently demonstrate a general to thorough understanding of the text?

The data shows that some gains were made in the area of clarity and precision. Nine out of the ten chosen test students showed some error in sentence structure and/or clarity at different degrees of ineffectiveness. Out of these nine, six showed improvement (Emily, Lukas, Sean, Kyndra, Rachel and Aidan).

Over this school year, September 2004-June 2005, all ten students improved their DRA levels (some by several levels). This means that all ten students were able to demonstrate a general to thorough understanding of the text through oral communication. I did not see a significant gain in raising the students' abilities to demonstrate a general to thorough understanding of the text through written communication with the exception of one student- Aidan. However, all of the students began to answer all of the questions asked on a comprehension test. Cullen, Jakob, Emily and Kyndra showed progressive improvement in answering more questions that demonstrated a general to thorough understanding of the text.

## **Looking Forward**

I have more questions and more ideas. I would like to continue this quest for reading assessment excellence. I have set up an appointment with the Primary Consultant for the Board to share with her my present reading program and action research results, hoping that together we can plan the reading program for next year that will see greater gains in the area of written communication of comprehension answers. As well, I would like to visit these classrooms where teachers have successfully scored Level 3 and 4 on the EQAO testing in the area of reading assessment and interview the teachers. I would like to compare how the teachers in these classes have prepared their students in comparison with mine. I would like to know how the schools of these success stories operate in their primary department. Do they plan cooperatively to achieve this end result? I would like to see if the demographics has any effect. I would really like to discuss the academic gap between DRA scores vs. EQAO scores with consultants.

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