

LEARNING THAT STICKS

When students at WEDJ were committed to daily arts, we had to ensure that the other academic experiences were also engaging and led to solid understanding of the subject matter. In other words, the instructional choices had to make learning stick. Throughout the month of September, I visited classrooms, recognized impressive teaching practices and wrote numerous messages about shifting the focus from teaching to learning.

From my daily rounds, I could see that some of my novice teachers might benefit from planning and team teaching support. I focused my attention on grades 3 and 4 language arts, specifically on developing writing tools. I also welcomed the opportunity to get to know more students. Initially, I asked Ms. Almonte and Mr. Powell if I could pilot an approach to teaching writing that had been very successful when I worked with boys of a similar age at a former school in Toronto. I adapted the approach to include the drawing and labeling of a poster, to brainstorm and outline visibly with images and words that would guide the student writing. The following week, the students were given lined paper to begin their first draft. Students who typically echoed: “*I don’t know what to write*” had their clue words from the labels. I recall, two boys in particular, who carved out a paragraph by building sentences around their detailed labels. I was pleased this pre-writing activity had so successfully prompted the crafting of a first draft. For many students, this was their first detailed and painless paragraph they ever wrote.

After the draft, we made significant gains in teaching students how to edit their work. Our goal was to try and help students become more self-reliant, to help them know exactly what they could do to improve their first draft. Initially, most of the student writers thought editing was about correcting spelling. During this editing process, students had to self-assess if their draft had an assortment of assets, such as different sentence types and descriptive adjectives, at the same time as removing repetitive words and run-on sentences. We wanted to try and help students emulate what writers think about when they craft and re-craft their work. In Ms. Almonte’s words she noted:

Dr. Smith actively came into my third and fourth grade classroom weekly and demonstrated a unit in which students were to develop their ideas for their ideal school. She helped the students to visualize their ideal school by asking the appropriate questions, then had them work in pairs to draw their ideas as a prewriting process. Due to this process, the essays were elaborate and descriptive.

I worked with teachers to help them improve existing methods and resources. Through team teaching situations, and planning I was able to support educators to become teacher leaders. By collaboratively designing curriculum and reflecting on its' implementation, coaching became much more than helping educators choose a good textbook.

It was also important to promote literacy on a school-wide level. When I first arrived at WEDJ, I did view remnants of conventional forms of school-wide reading campaigns. The charts beside the teacher's doors were partly filled in by staff modeling how many pages or books they had read. As well, there were opened and unopened boxes full of novels and other print resources, but even with abundant materials, it was not apparent that our students had grasped a fundamental love of reading.

Grade 1 teacher, Mr. Howard, approached me early on in the year to ask about coordinating a day of community service for the members of his college alma mater. We decided that the books that filled our storeroom, beyond the capacity of our school and classroom libraries, could help build personal libraries in student homes. Grade 1 teacher, Ms. Exum, volunteered to coordinate the campaign. Fifteen volunteers showed up on a Saturday to fill over 200 milk crates full of books that lined the halls and foyers of WEDJ. It was a wonderful addition to *Back to School Night*. I was thrilled to see so many families sifting through the crates, and packing their trunks full of reading material. Populating our community's 'home libraries' became so popular, we extended the school-wide initiative for a month so that students would have a chance to sift through and choose books they really wanted. Our literacy campaign helped us put thousands of unused books, cluttering up the storeroom, in the hands of kids. The school newsletter shared an interview with Ms. Exum:

When Dr. Smith became principal at WEDJ and looked around, she discovered closets and storage rooms crammed with books that teachers weren't using. When she started talking with parents, she realized many families didn't have a lot of books at home. As WEDJ prepared to ramp up its emphasis on reading and literacy this year, the home library initiative was born. First grade teacher Evelyn Exum is coordinating the effort. More than 50 volunteers from Bowdoin College organized more than 300 crates of books that had been gathering dust. The books included materials from previous curricula, some books from the high school that was previously part of WEDJ, easy readers, novels for adults, and everything in between. "The books ran the gamut across all genres," Ms. Exum explained. "So we encouraged parents to take a variety of books." For Ms. Exum, the home library initiative is also a useful way for her to conduct an investigation for a graduate education class she was taking. She was working to answer these questions: "Does having immediate access to books increase time that parents read on their own, that students read, and the time they spend reading together? Does this encourage parents to read on their own, and read and discuss books with children? Are children more enthusiastic about reading?"

Parents were invited to pick up crates of books and take them home on Back to School Night in September. A few weeks later, Ms. Exum launched a survey for parents to see whether the home libraries were having an impact. "So far people are saying they're reading their books, and kids are enthusiastic," Ms. Exum said. "Some people are saying they want to choose their own books next time. Response has been positive so far." There are still more books to give away, and the next distribution is planned for December. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/home-library-project-fills-families-homes-with-books>)

The next year, Ms. Williams, our Special Education Teaching Assistant, followed up the 'Personal Home Library Campaign' with the 'WEDJ School Library Card Drive.' We wanted to promote our student use of community libraries in their neighborhoods. We copied every student and staff members' library cards and posted them in the foyer as a concrete tribute to an important community space that honored reading. I also used this opportunity to promote parent education about the importance of reading. In the November 2013 newsletter, we highlighted details about the campaign:

Reading Everywhere (Even in the Bathroom)

To increase the opportunities that all WEDJ students have to read, write, and improve their literacy skills, we have been working hard to help students get library cards for the DC Public Library system. The Woodridge branch of the library is just over a mile from WEDJ, but with a library card you can always check out and return books at any library branch. Thanks to the resourceful Ms. Williams, WEDJ has applications for library cards for our teachers and students! All we need from parents is their signatures and we will send the information in so our students can have their very own library cards. I am offering a reward for the grades where 100% of the students have library cards. Once you have a library card, it is not about the number of books or pages or words that a student reads. It is what we do with what we read that matters. We know that reading strikes a chord when students talk about and write about what they read. The talking and writing that happens before, during or after reading is exercise for the mind. I used to have home libraries in my bathroom when my kids were growing up. All types of books, all levels – so they could reach for something that captured their interest. Like adults, they would pick some up and finish them, or read a few paragraphs and return them. The bathroom was also our "time out center" (bedrooms have too many fun things to do in them), but if they became lost in a book during a time-out I was okay with that. Wherever you're reading, find something you love, and talk about it! (http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/message-from-the-principal-library-cards-open-doors-for-students?utm_source=November+E-News+from+WEDJ+PCS&utm_campaign=November+2012+Newsletter&utm_medium=archive)

I often see reading campaigns in schools where students are encouraged to read as many books or words as they can. I have yet to discover the research that supports the notion that school or classroom-wide initiatives lead to more engaged reading and thinking. I have witnessed, however, that such artificial incentives can have an opposite effect for many students. The avid readers tend to win the prizes, while the others tend to clap courteously. Obviously, I am not an avid supporter of this conventional type of reading campaign, but I did encourage research and reading for a purpose. It was important that students had access to print. Establishing home libraries and encouraging the use of the community library represented an authentic way to promote reading.

We also purchased novels for students to expand their personal libraries. We wanted to encourage students to ‘read like college students’ that is, circle words, and write notes such as “courage”, “simile”, “humor”, “yes!”... in the margins. We wanted our students to make direct connections inside the various literary and informational texts they were reading. I also worked closely with teachers to build customized project-based integrated units. Students would no longer be issued the conventional novel study that listed a series of questions at the end of each chapter. Student voices, for decades, have told us that such traditional approaches to teaching novels were a ‘turn off’ to reading. In a reference to teaching reading, Ms. Almonte noted:

Barbara also worked closely with teachers to develop a strategic set of novels that closely touched the lives of our student body. Books included Holes, The Watsons go to Birmingham, and more. In addition, she ensured each student was provided their own copy of these books so that they were able to mark it as they read along. The teachers and Dr. Smith worked hand in hand to develop project-based curriculum packets that helped the students comprehend and analyze the novels in an exciting and authentic manner.

Within the first few months we had a team from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) visit to provide an audit for the remainder of our *Race to the Top Program Grant*. The lead auditor was so impressed with the curriculum that she suggested the school look into becoming a *Blue Ribbon School*, as she felt we were well on our way to meeting such exceptional standards.

The determination of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to teach at WEDJ was influenced by many forces. We accepted the Common Core State Standard direction for language arts and math, and continued to link programing for other subjects such as science, social studies, the arts and physical and health education to the established DC Public School guidelines. We did not opt into a specific textbook, using the breadth of already available resources at our fingertips. Keeping in mind our long-term ‘college success’ goals, we added a Research and Technology course for our middle grade students, as well as a Peer Teaching course for grades 7 and 8. The Research and Technology course synthesized the Common Core ‘inquiry-based’ expectations that were prominent in many subject areas. Students took part in deliberate lessons

about research design, technology, and data management. In grade 6 they became an expert in a global history topic, in grade 7 an environmental science topic and in grade 8, they researched the best college choices for them. They read informational text from books, websites and primary sources, and they contacted real experts with survey questions. This type of inquiry-based programming, usually reserved for private school and/or International Baccalaureate students, was now available for inner city youth in DC.

Driven by findings from my graduate thesis, I initiated a two-year Peer Teaching course for WEDJ students, one hour per week starting in grade 7. During that first month students took part in activities to help deepen their understanding of how people learn. Students were informed at the onset, that learning through teaching can help them learn. The rationale for peer teaching, was outlined in their student workbook:

We learn:

10% of what we read.

20% of what we hear.

30% of what we see.

50% of what we see and hear.

70% of what is discussed with others.

80% of what is experienced personally.

95% of what we teach to someone else.

(William Glasser, <http://principalcowart.blogspot.ca/2009/02/how-we-learn-william-glasser.html>)

This is why we need to make sure students talk about what they are learning. This is why we offer peer teaching as a course at the William E. Doar, Jr. School for the Performing Arts! (Grade 7 Peer Teaching Course Book)

I was so pleased to see the students take pride in their teaching roles. They read stories to students, helped them with math, and provided an extra set of hands for teachers in the grades PK to grade 5 classes. I often wrote in my journal how much I looked forward to teaching this class. Building in an opportunity to teach was rewarding for me in so many ways. Having a chance to talk to my own class on a regular basis helped me establish, beyond my rounds, my own pulse on classroom culture. It also demonstrated to staff that I was willing to plan, implement best practices and be vulnerable to admit when I needed to make changes and improvements in my own teaching, based on student responses. By picking up these classes, it also provided additional relief and planning time for teachers.

We also piloted a number of new curriculum initiatives, specifically focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – STEM. In addition to the weekly chess program put in place to enhance spatial understandings in math, we created ‘Wonder Workshops’ for the PK-grade 2 students in January. Ms. Almonte had a science background, so she was eager to coordinate mini science lessons each

CHAPTER 11

week for the younger students to incite curiosity and a sense of wonder about the mysteries of science. I wanted to see our Arts school evolve to seriously address STEM. Ashley created a Wonder Cart and wore a lab jacket that her student lab assistants signed their names on, in brightly colored magic markers. Ashley's initiative was well received by students and staff and continued throughout the next school year.

I recall listening to President Obama's *State of the Union Address* where he spoke about schools needing to do much more than teach kids how to fill in 'bubbles' on standardized tests. His message promoted me to invite him to WEDJ and while he was unable to visit, he did respond reinforcing his progressive views on education that supported the establishment of the STEM Master Teacher Corps. We were convinced at WEDJ that the arts can provide a rich context for inquiry. Not only did we want to ensure a solid program offering in all areas of the curriculum, we believed that a focus on the ARTS could play a tremendous role in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Imagine a school with their own film and television production company, a 'Community Can Press Publication' business, a team of teachers and students working with NASA scientists, a team of students composing a new musical or dance piece with professional artists, composers and choreographers? Kids are going to the Internet for this kind of stimulation – but schools, with an exceptional staff, can make these (and more) experiences happen. All it takes is a willingness to not *'paint the school house red.'*

We achieved much in our first year of operation. While the staff, parents and students were inspired by these ideas, I believe WEDJ was seriously hampered by the 'disconnect' between the school and our Board of Trustees. While I shared the curriculum directions and list of accomplishments in my School Reports at Board meetings, there was little discussion that arose with respect to STEM or innovative programming. By the end of the school year, only a couple of WEDJ Board members attended any school events. The passion of the WEDJ Board seemed to be absent from this mix. I did try to sit down with John Goldman on many occasions to co-plan for the future, but his typical response was something like, I don't care how you do it, just get the scores up. In our conversations, he often admitted knowing little about education, but I wish he had taken more interest in learning more about the field, so he could determine which advice might be in the better interest of the community he was serving.