



Introduction

This edition of the Leadership for Learning Journal offers two markedly different reports from our action research teams. MJ Norris Elementary has attempted to encourage greater involvement of parents in their childrens' education by improving the effectiveness of their home-school communication. There was a particular focus on engaging parents of English Language Learners. A series of "Norris Community Chats" provided the impetus for greater involvement.

The Laronde Elementary action research team focussed on oral language development in their French Immersion program. Increasing both academic and non-academic vocabulary through differentiated instruction became the key driver toward improvement. There was a significant increase in the percentage of students who used French all or most of the time.

The purpose of this bimonthly publication is to promote curriculum and instructional leadership, encourage innovation in teaching and learning, and showcase action research projects that have recently been undertaken in Surrey schools.

The Leadership for Learning Linking Research to Practice Journal is available in electronic format only. Back issues are also available electronically on the Leadership Academy website.

The Leadership Academy Advisory Board

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Bridging the Gap: Creating More Effective Communication Between Home and School

MJ NORRIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ACTION RESEARCH TEAM: Suzanne Rowbotham, Sibli Gill, Brenda Lepine, Pete Nuij, Sharon O'Shea, Judy Grams.

CONTEXT:

During the 2002-2003 school year, MJ Norris initiated a school-wide project to create cross grade groups (called Norris Circles) throughout the school community to increase the sense of belonging. The 26 circle groups included one or two adult facilitators and children from K-7. Siblings were kept within the same circle group and the children remained together throughout their years at the school. This became the focus of our action research during the 2006-2007 school year. This research was entitled, *Norris Circles -what is the experience of those involved with the circles regarding feelings of safety, belonging and the value of each individual?*

MJ Norris Elementary, located in the South Newton area of Surrey, serves a predominantly South Asian community with the majority of families speaking Punjabi at home. In reviewing the data collected from this research, and the demographic profile of the Norris catchment area, we began to question the discrepancy between the school community's feeling of safety, belonging and inclusion and the lack of parental involvement in typical 'Western based' school practices (eg. PAC, hot lunch, field trips, etc.). Therefore, the Norris Community Chats were created as a vehicle for communicating the notions of 'care theory' to our parents as the next step for solidifying the ethic of care in the greater community. They are an extension of Norris Circles under the Ethic of Care philosophy.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Are Norris Community Chats an effective bridge for developing understanding between home and school? (Norris Community Chats are informal monthly meetings, which provide an opportunity for community education and discussion about Core Values.)

ACTION:

In the fall of 2006, informal discussions were held with a number of parents to explore ways we could support the parent population to become more confident in their involvement with their children's school experiences. It was suggested that if the school would provide an informal forum in which educational issues were addressed that many parents would be willing to attend. Further, it was felt, that once parents were attending, we would have the opportunity to familiarize them with common educational practices and introduce ways in which they could become more involved in their children's learning. This was also seen as an opportunity to assist parents in making connections with other parents of all cultures, recognizing our shared challenges and dreams for our children.

The format for Norris Community Chats was developed so that information could be shared, and supportive and caring connections between the adult caregivers would be encouraged. Sessions are kept to one hour, guests are asked to speak for no more than 20 minutes so that there is opportunity for informal discussions. Parents are encouraged to use their first languages to communicate ideas and concerns and those who are able to translate, do so in an informal manner. Coffee and snacks are provided and Grade 7 Leadership students provided childcare. An effort has been made to create an environment which is safe and supportive for all the adult members of our school community, a place where all care givers are welcomed and encouraged to share ideas and receive information relevant and useful for their family.

Once a month, we invited a guest speaker to speak about topics that parents had expressed an interest in learning more about. Some of the speakers to date have been:

- ◆ SFU professor Kelleen Toohey speaking on literacy learning for English Language Learners
- ◆ MJ Norris staff members providing support in Computer Literacy and Internet safety for families
- ◆ Speakers from community based resource centres - ways to support children's learning throughout the summer
- ◆ Karen Sekhon, Substance Use Liaison - Surrey School District - speaking on substance use and our children
- ◆ Rob Rai, Surrey School District Liaison based at Tamanawis - speaking to parents on the role they must take to support youth through teen years - focusing on gang-like behaviours
- ◆ Ruth Hellerud-Brown, Fraser Public Health - speaking on the importance of good nutrition
- ◆ Analisa Fuez, District ELL Helping Teacher - speaking on the importance of utilizing first language to support English language learning

To obtain specific information regarding Norris Community Chats and how parents saw this benefiting their families, we surveyed a random sample of Community Chat attendees. They were asked to comment on perceived needs, concerns or curiosities that parents may have in regards to their children's educational experiences. From those ideas, which were collected on a short questionnaire, we formulated a longer survey. This survey addressed many of the issues that had been identified in the initial document, such as the comfort of parents with school personnel, relationships with other parents, especially cross culturally and their children's relationships with their peers.

The surveys were distributed to the parents of children in grades one, four and seven. Norris Community Chat attendees were also surveyed.

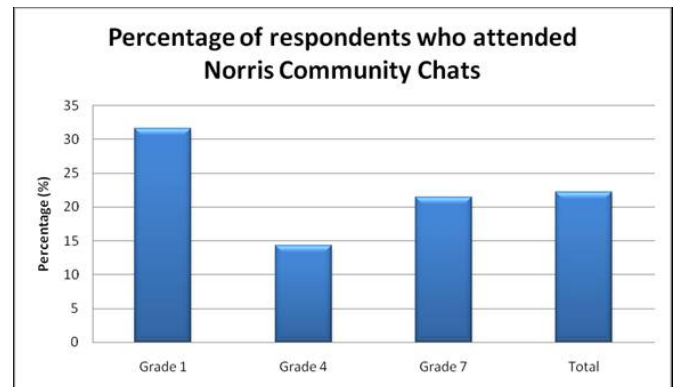
HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Respondents to our surveys who had attended one or more Norris Community Chats, communicated a sense of belonging during and after the sessions. The final survey question asked for input into future Norris Chats. This created a deluge of responses that reflected the need for conversations about powerful, relevant social issues. Some suggestions were for parenting support, issues surrounding alcohol and drugs, financial support and counselling, and domestic violence. This willingness to respond so openly to issues of such personal concern, confirmed to the research team that the chats are making a difference and we are encouraged to continue the program in an attempt to further bridge the gap between home and school.

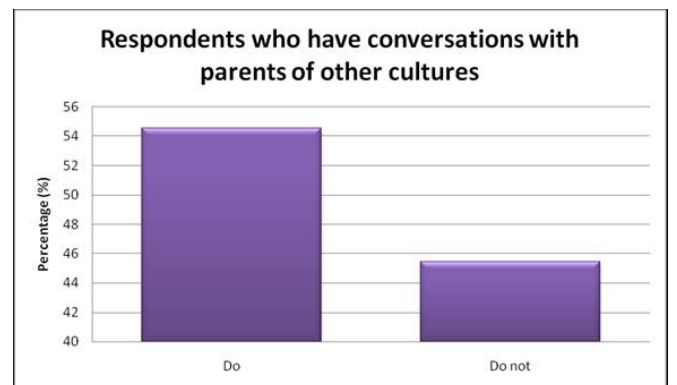
KEY FINDINGS:

Norris Community Chats were attended by approximately 25% of the people surveyed (Graph 1). Looking at the raw data, there was a clear variation in the people who chose to attend specific sessions and the number of participants varied from session to session. This seems to indicate that respondents feel comfortable attending sessions focusing on topics that are relevant to their personal needs and interests.

Graph 1

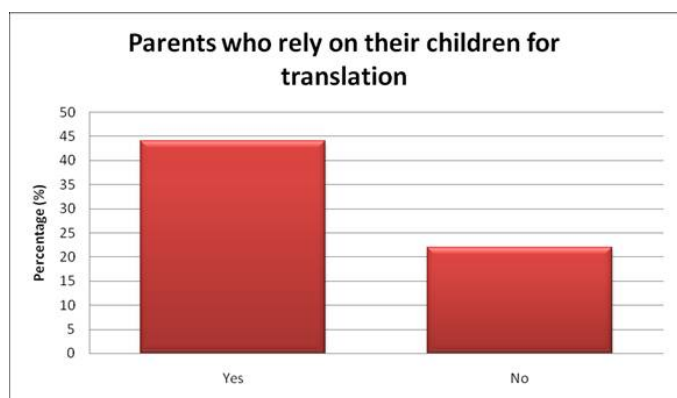


Graph 2



Norris Community Chats provide parents with the opportunity to connect with other parents in the school (Graph 2). Although the majority of respondents indicated that these communications were attempted, there was still a significant number of respondents that were not making those important connections. With the high number of adults with a language other than English as their language of comfort, this may be the barrier that prevents these valuable interactions. In the raw data, the barriers that were identified were: language, age or generational differences, previous school/educational experiences, time factors or shyness. 40% of the respondents identified language as a significant issue.

Graph 3



In an effort to open communication with the school many of the parents are relying heavily on their children to translate important school correspondence (Graph 3). The dependency on child translators is an unreliable way for adults to communicate.

INTERPRETATION:

Norris Community Chats create unique opportunities for bridging communication between home and school. By creating a structure built on relevant and meaningful topics, rich and diverse ideas are exchanged and commonalities are uncovered. This project has had an impact on the sense of connectedness between the adults of the school community. It has the potential to become the unifying force in our very diverse community.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

During the planning stages of this project it was evident that many of our families were unsure of their role within the structure of the BC school system. As a result of recent intense negative media directed at South Asian cultural groups, it is possible that people are hesitant to voice personal opinions, concerns and questions because of feelings of shame or inadequacy or a sense that they are powerless within the school system.

We have learned that people do want to make connections within the community. They want to educate

themselves and contribute to the neighbourhood in which they live. Families are willing to become involved and take an active role in the school community if they are provided with the resources and the support necessary to make the first step.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT? FOR SCHOOLS?

Communication/language challenges continue to be a significant barrier for our school community. In a neighbourhood in which the majority of our student's families speak a language other than English, we must continue to aggressively seek ways to make communication easier for everyone. The families surveyed expressed a desire to be actively involved in their children's school life but often felt limited by the language challenges. There are ways in which both M.J. Norris and the Surrey School District can initiate change.

Firstly, it is imperative that we provide our parents with school community information in the language in which they are most comfortable communicating. For our school, Punjabi is the most prevalent language as with many of our Surrey schools. We need to access the expertise of members of our school communities to have all school communications translated.

Secondly, as adults, and those responsible for the education, safety and well being of the children, we must work together to ensure that the significant adults in our children's lives are fully informed about and involved in their education experiences. This can only occur with open dialogue that is clearly understood.

Adults must be having conversations with adults. With the majority of our parents surveyed, receiving translations through their children, we are limiting the rich and important conversations that encourage a healthy and supportive community.

At MJ Norris we will:

- ◆ Continue to host monthly Community Chats. The responses from those that have attended confirm that they are of value.
- ◆ Make every effort to provide correspondence in the language of the majority of our families - in this case Punjabi. (i.e. newsletters, community bulletins, field trip notices, PAC announcements).
- ◆ Explore district and community resources to access the funding and the resources that would make this reality.
- ◆ Initiate other school-based activities such as informal English conversation classes for mothers and grandmothers.
- ◆ Organize Chat sessions for fathers and grandfathers to explore the important role they have in their children's lives and the challenges they face providing for and supporting their families.

French Immersion and the Development of Oral Language

ECOLE LARONDE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ACTION RESEARCH
TEAM: Janet Brine, Danielle Bue, Caroline DesLauriers, Sarah Fee, Natalie Sanft, and Matthew Seguin.

CONTEXT:

École Laronde Elementary has a student population of 483, of which 322 are French Immersion students. Current research on oral literacy and its connection to the development of reading and writing skills provided the impetus to increase the oral language output of our French Immersion students. To this end, strategies were put into place to develop both academic and non-academic vocabularies and to increase both the quality and quantity of French oral language.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Will a) increasing students' academic and non-academic vocabulary and b) differentiating instruction to provide varied opportunities for students to use oral language result in an increase of both quality and quantity of French oral language output?

ACTION:

1. Project participants researched oral language evaluation methods.
2. A cross sample of 6 students from 4 divisions (Gr. 1, 3, 4 & 5) were assessed in December on their use of French (both academic and non-academic, at their grade level):
 - a) to communicate their preferences, desires or needs
 - b) to join a game or activity already in progress
 - c) to engage in discussion
 - d) to resolve or avoid conflict
 - e) to describe an event or tell a story
 - f) to ask questions
3. The French Immersion staff was released to engage in a sharing session about strategies and resources to develop oral language. Some teachers researched for new strategies and ideas.
4. Teachers based language structure needs on the errors they noted in the initial assessment. Specific strategies to increase oral interaction in the classrooms and to increase vocabulary were implemented. Some included: daily dialogue with students upon entering and leaving the classroom (greetings, asking about their day); Think, Pair, Share to engage students in discussion with each other; oral language games to develop vocabulary; literature circles; songs, rhymes and raps to orally practice language structures and develop vocabulary; using open-ended questions to encourage students to use more language in responses; providing numerous opportunities for students to share orally (student of the day sharing something about themselves, news reporter, partners sharing

ideas then reporting on what the other said; and centers with oral language games and activities.

5. In May students' oral output was re-assessed.

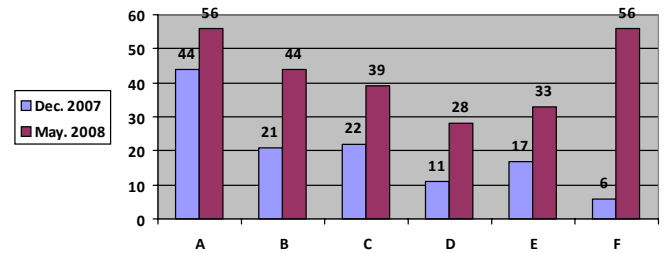
HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The initial assessment allowed us to identify how much French oral language the students were using and in which types of situations. As well, we were able to identify specific incorrect language structures that students were using. Teachers were then able to implement strategies to increase student oral interaction and discussion as well as teach targeted French language structures not only during Language Arts but throughout the school day. Participating teachers became more aware of the value of oral language activities. This action research has also led to teachers exploring the connection between oral language and reading.

KEY FINDINGS:

Graph 1

% of students using French all or most of the time



- A) to communicate their preferences, desires or needs
- B) to join a game or activity already in progress
- C) to engage in discussion
- D) to resolve or avoid conflict
- E) to describe an event or tell a story
- F) to ask questions

Students' use of oral French increased significantly in all settings (Graph 1).

INTERPRETATION:

Planning to have students engage in oral language activities, in both structured and unstructured situations, was key to increasing students' French oral language output. Developing questioning skills had a dramatic impact. When students learned the structures to ask questions, they used them often to gather information, clarify meaning and to engage in discourse.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

We have learned that teachers working as a team, engaging in meaningful discussions and sharing ideas can have far reaching impacts on the school. This action research project generated much discussion amongst our staff. Increasing the quality and quantity of oral language has become one of our school goals for the coming year. We have become more conscious of the

inherent difficulties in assessing oral language and have embarked on finding better tools with which to assess our students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT? FOR SCHOOLS?

1. Develop professional learning opportunities to provide teachers with information on how to develop oral language and to familiarize them with oral language assessment tools.
2. Provide opportunities at a school level for co-operative planning, sharing of resources and ideas.

Websites

Submitted by Dr. Burt Deeter, Principal, Georges Vanier Elementary

Clipart ETC

<http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/>

Clipart ETC is a website chock-a-block full of free clipart for students and teachers. It contains 45,000 pieces of free clipart with more being added every month. Every item comes with a choice of image size and format as well as complete source information for proper citations in school projects. No advertisement-filled pages with pop-up windows or inappropriate links here. A friendly license allows teachers and students to use up to 50 items in a single, non-commercial project without further permission. Although the clipart is all black and white, most of it from historical publications, it is nevertheless a gold mine of illustrations.

Google for Educators

<http://www.google.com/educators/index.html>

Here you'll find a teacher's guide to Google Tools for Your Classroom. And to spark your imagination, you'll find examples of innovative ways that other educators are using these tools in the classroom. You can sign up for the quarterly Google for Educators newsletter, as well as check out the latest from The Infinite Thinking Machine, a Google-sponsored, WestEd-produced blog for educators, by educators. Google has also launched a new community with the Google for Educators Discussion Group. Visit often to learn of new announcements and to share any of your ideas.