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What is a Hub?

WHAT IS A HUB? The first reaction of most people when asked this question is to think of an airport hub. An airport can be a very busy place. People arrive from one destination and then head off to another. It is a common meeting place for people to come together before continuing on their journey.

In some ways, this analogy can be likened to the experience of the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) with the support of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and its adoption of the hub structure for professional development. The analogy applies since teachers from the same grade, but different schools come together to share their professional learning before returning to their own schools and continuing on the journey. However, in our hub structures, the meeting is not transitory and the hope is that the learning shared will have deep and lasting effects in classrooms across our system. I witnessed some incredible learning during the eight-week cycle of our hub meetings.

The TCDSB is divided into ten superintendency areas or family of schools and each area is further divided into a hub grouping consisting of four to five schools. In each of the hubs, teachers in a particular grade from each school meet two to four times throughout the course of a Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (T-LCP).

This article will focus on the experiences of the literacy hub to which my school belongs. Four schools (chosen by the superintendent based on geographical location) set up three meetings that coincided with the start, middle and end of an eight-week T-LCP. Although each of the schools had a different depth of understanding of the T-LCP process and a different curriculum focus for their T-LCP, the commonality between all schools was the goal of improving student achievement through sharing best practices and resources. Furthermore, the high yield literacy strategies that form the

foundation of the pathway are always consistent. This is the piece, which teachers were examining in order to improve their own practice and in turn student achievement.

The principals from each school in the hub met through a conference call with the help of our area literacy resource teacher (literacy consultant) to map out the focus of each of the three sessions. This simple strategy alleviated a great deal of stress about making more time to meet face-to-face. The focus of the sessions was based on the needs identified in each school's School Learning Improvement Plan (SLIP), which was created by the staff at the school level. Although each school has certain specific needs, commonalities again were evident: robust thinking tasks/effective questioning; the gradual release of responsibility; specifically guided practice; and how to give explicit, descriptive feedback to students. Therefore, these became key focus areas.

In the TCDSB, our hubs were facilitated by the literacy resource teacher. Our central literacy department asked that we send the grades three and six teachers for a half day each to our first set of hubs. The rationale for having the sessions facilitated by a literacy resource teacher from our central literacy department was two-fold. Firstly, the feeling was that teachers would be very receptive to learning from a colleague, who was able to bring learning from across the board. As a member of our central literacy team, our resource teacher had up-to-date knowledge and expertise in literacy. She could expose teachers to new resources and ideas. Furthermore, she was someone who was experienced and comfortable working with groups. Secondly, since the long-term goal is eventually to have teachers and administrators facilitate the hub, we felt it was necessary to build capacity through a gradual release of responsibility model for ourselves. Ideally, by the end of the session (and, yes, it did happen), the teachers participating in the hub would be able to take on more of a leadership role at

the school level and administrators would gain greater knowledge in specific curriculum areas.

Each session provided an opportunity for teachers to deepen their understanding of the T-LCP process through a particular focus based on student work and/or lived experience.¹ The focus of the first session was to bring all teachers in the hub to a common understanding of the T-LCP process by sharing their experiences and resources, student work, and tracking or planning documents for their own T-LCPs. Then the focus shifted to how to create robust thinking tasks and/or questions. Teachers were exposed to quality literature with very open-ended and authentic tasks from the Catholic Curriculum Cooperative entitled *Robust Thinking Tasks*.² Teachers were invited to teach a lesson from either the document or one of their own creation. We also confirmed with the participants that the direction of the next session would be on descriptive feedback and the gradual release of responsibility using modeled, shared, guided and independent reading.

My impression of this first session was that although teachers were sharing, they still had not developed the comfort level to take professional risks. It was definitely a *culture of niceness* at work. However, our resource teacher shared her own experiences and she quickly gained their confidence, so much so that by the end people were ready to take on a task and bring back something to talk about at the next session. Teachers attending the session seemed to feel that the sessions were directly addressing their needs as identified in the SLIP and the connections and ideas they were sharing and would have the opportunity to share in future sessions were invaluable.

The second session, during the middle of the T-LCP, started with a deep discussion of where teachers were in the T-LCP process and the sharing of their robust thinking question or task. I found the discussion with the Grade 6 group was focused, meaningful and authentic. Teachers were very candid and shared what worked, what did not work and demonstrated that they genuinely wanted to learn from each other. This conversation was clearly a result of the groundwork laid at the first session. Teachers came knowing what to expect and there was no hesitation to share what they had experienced in their classrooms. Having made the commitment to attend each of the Grade 6 sessions, this interaction affirmed my decision to do so. Teachers saw me as a partner in the learning and any comment, insight or question asked was just as another member of the group, a co-learner in our hub. Since I was a regular fixture, it was not as intimidating as it might have been if I had chosen to drop in and out. I was able to do this because the hub sessions were hosted at my school. Our busy administrator schedules may sometimes preclude our ability to attend every session, but I do believe that there is indeed a great deal to be gained by making the commitment both in terms of my own learning and the trust developed between my staff and me.

After that discussion, we moved on to discuss descriptive feedback led by the student achievement officer (SAO) from the LNS, who was able to join us for the first two sessions. Why was it so important to focus on feedback? To make the point that if we want students to improve, we need to deliver feedback that is

explicit, timely and needs to direct next steps for instruction as well as student learning. Here again it is important to note that although the SAO was present, staff did not feel *under the gun*. The trust built during the first session carried over to the second and third sessions with very positive results. It was made clear, by our resource teacher and our SAO in each session that it was all about the learning!

The discussion on feedback tied directly into our next focus, guided reading, facilitated by our resource teacher. The reason for moving to guided reading was that while teachers felt comfortable with modeled and shared reading, they all had many questions and misconceptions around guided instruction. Although, we only had time to start the discussion and view a clip on guided reading, teachers agreed to try a lesson and come to the next session with both what they did and with any questions.

It was interesting to note that there was an increased sense of excitement (maybe even commitment) to trying something based, in my opinion, on the fact that the sharing session, which started the second session, was so successful. Teachers had various “Aha!” moments when sharing both things that worked and things they would do very differently next time. I believe that the possibility of engaging in another conversation - this time on guided reading - was enticing. Furthermore, sharing student work was being done within a shared context.

The final session focused on guided reading. Teachers shared what worked well with their own lesson and then we clarified many misconceptions. These included, the fact that guided reading is not round robin reading; how to group effectively using classroom assessment; the focus for the guided session being based on student need; and that the focus is based on what has been previously taught in modeled and shared reading. One of the many benefits of having our literacy resource teacher facilitate the sessions was that she was able to really help teachers understand that not only do students learn best when we gradually release instruction, but teachers do as well. By using real life examples, golf and knitting, and having us work through how we learned an activity, we all clearly understood (and many seemed to buy-in) that as adults we all need different levels of support and how much easier it is to learn a new skill when we are supported throughout the learning process. This really illustrated to teachers the importance of not only modelled and shared instruction, but also guided and independent reading.

The final reflection piece, where teachers looked at their own comfort level with the topics discussed in each of the three sessions (robust thinking tasks, guided instruction, reading workshop, feedback) helped teachers identify next steps in terms of their own professional growth. From my perspective, this helped me to discern the type of learning opportunities I need to provide for my staff in the short and long term.

The fact that I know exactly what the Grade 6 teachers need can be directly tied to my attendance and participation at each of the sessions. Following the end of the last hub session, the Grade 6 teachers and I were able to discuss next steps in respect to teacher

learning experiences. I am hoping that the trust developed will lead to the two Grade 6 teachers and me setting up several sessions whereby we plan a guided reading lesson and then two of us watch while the other teaches. Afterwards we will debrief and then have the other teacher try. I believe this will lead to the in-depth teacher learning required to change practice while simultaneously building capacity so that I can enable my teachers to share their knowledge with new grade partners.

I observed that teachers really enjoyed the opportunity to talk, ask questions and share ideas in a non-threatening environment. This comfortable environment in the hub can be partially attributed to the number of participants. With seven teachers attending each session, we were able to sit around one table and each person had the opportunity to be an active participant in the conversation. They were able to clarify parts of the T-LCP that were confusing, share what was working, figure out next steps for their own classrooms and share resources. Essentially, they were able to examine their practice without judgement. Teachers really seemed to leave at the end of the third session with a greater understanding of the T-LCP process and how it helps to focus their teaching on student needs and is not an add on to what they are already doing. Many are now seeing the interconnectedness of the T-LCP to their junior literacy program (*Literacy in the Middle Grades*) and the reading workshop in particular.

Teachers did identify some of the downsides of the hub sessions. These were lack of supply teachers; sessions were too short (Each of the schools in the hub had different start and end times to the day, so each session ended up being only two and a half hours in length); and the time of the year (the last session was during

report cards). However, many of these drawbacks can be easily overcome next year with some adjustments and prior planning.

The exciting news is that this is only the beginning of our journey. Where do we go from here for these teachers? I have identified some direction we have already set for ourselves, but I am anxious to spread out the capacity built in a meaningful manner. As an administrator, I am grateful that the TCDSB has agreed to another round of hub sessions for grades two and five teachers. It will certainly assist with getting more staff to the same knowledge base and comfort level in examining their own professional practice. Having attended the sessions, I know what the focus was and how better to support my staff, which is invaluable.

Ideally, next year, each of the remaining teachers will have the opportunity to be part of a hub session because we know how much we learn from working with others.

Just like an airport hub, we gathered and then continued on our own journey. Unlike an airport hub, we were able to talk and engage in some deep level learning that now spreads back to our various destinations. However, travelling always enriches who I am. I believe that this experience has likewise enriched me and made me a more effective instructional leader.

¹ Although the focus of each of the sessions was on reading instruction, many of the strategies shared can be easily applied to written instruction.

² The document *Robust Thinking Tasks* may be downloaded at www.catholiccurriculumcorp.org/resources/elementary.htm#RobustThink.

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