

Introduction

As Louise Rosenblatt (1978) said, any text is just print on paper until readers pick it up and make sense of it. Then, a text comes alive, not only when readers interpret and savour it but, even more so, when the text influences the thinking and the actions of its readers. The Québec Educational Program is a text, and although it carries the weight of governmental authority and is surrounded with an aura of professional obligation, it too is just ink on paper until teachers decide to read it and make it a part of their lives. This volume contains classroom stories of how ten teachers have made many of the ideas in the Québec Educational Program part of their professional lives but, interestingly, not all of these teachers have read the new curriculum. At the time of printing, the elementary program has not been implemented in Cycle 3, and the curriculum has not yet been written for high school. However, the projects in this volume demonstrate the theoretical and pedagogical principles underlying the program and help to explain what it means what it means to “do” the reform.

Teacher Study Groups as Professional Development

Although writing a new curriculum is certainly one way to influence change in teaching, other ways must be found to help teachers turn the “ink on paper” into practice. Teacher study groups are a form of professional development that provides opportunities for support, sharing, dialogue, and reflection that go far beyond the “shot in the arm” of an in-service workshop. Implementation of the new curriculum for English Language Arts in elementary and middle school is an ideal subject for teacher study groups. For a year and a half, the group of teachers in this volume met regularly to discuss the new curriculum, their classroom projects, their own writing processes, and just to have a good natter with like-minded professionals. They were also able to take time out from their busy schedules to read, write, and reflect on their own practices with other members of the group. This kind of professional nurturing is essential but, all too unusual in the lives of most teachers; however, without opportunities for collaboration, this volume of articles would not have been possible.

The teachers in this project, who teach in all cycles from kindergarten to grade eight, have produced this book which they hope will be a useful resource not only for implementing the Curriculum Reform, but also for creating more student-centred classrooms. Each teacher has written one chapter which is a narrative account of a classroom project or some aspect of the English Language Arts program.

Embedding the Curriculum in Classroom Narratives

Narrative is now recognised as a qualitative-research method. Since teaching is primarily social interaction and composed of an interconnected sequence of events, narrative accounts are particularly appropriate ways to capture the essential elements of pedagogy. Teachers can better understand what they are experiencing in their classrooms by retelling it. In fact, story-telling

is fundamental to an individual's search for meaning. Narration makes abstract ideas concrete by embedding them in experience. Events become more complex when connected implicitly and explicitly to specific points of view and contexts, and paradoxically, become less subjective when compared with the experiences of others.

By connecting their best practices to the Québec Education Program, they hope to situate, in concrete contexts, many key concepts of the program such as, success for all, the role of talk in learning, cross-curricular competencies, self-evaluation and reflection, visual and media literacy, and a focus on learning for life. These key ideas refocus the new curriculum on *how children learn* rather than on *what to teach*. While "student-centred" may have a familiar ring to it, implementation of the new curriculum will require a paradigm shift in teacher thinking in the following areas: 1) making literacy processes the content of the curriculum; 2) creating varied contexts for learning; 3) designing activities that include both special needs and mainstream students; 4) replacing grade-level evaluation criteria with longer-term developmental assessments; and 5) promoting self-awareness and reflection in children through self-evaluation of their learning.

Individually, none of the above ideas is radically new. So, why write a new curriculum based on these elements? There are two possible answers to this question. First, the sum of the above approaches is greater than the parts; this combination of principles provides a flexible and inclusive context for teaching and learning. Secondly, ideas that have been around for a long time have not necessarily been adopted by teachers and, therefore, there is no widespread understanding of how these ideas should influence teaching. There are many reasons for this lack of impact. Persistent notions about the nature of teaching continue to undermine these kinds of change; for example, 1) knowledge consists of external truths that teachers must transmit to students; 2) knowledge is a set of sequential skills; 3) students are empty vessels that must be filled by the teacher; 4) students learn what teachers teach; and 5) all children learn in the same way. The current enthusiasm for standardized testing and reading programs that eliminate the professional judgment of teachers is based on the above beliefs about learning. Unless teachers examine their teaching through the lens of the requirements of the new curriculum, they may be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by these hidden, but generally accepted, precepts and will have difficulty in making the shift to a meaning-based curriculum.

Writing to Learn

The teachers who wrote these articles had a great deal of difficulty in believing that their projects were special and interesting to other teachers. Most of them considered their work ordinary and unremarkable. "But, it's just what I do," was a constant disclaimer. This lack of confidence stems in part from the group's natural modesty, but also, perhaps, from the widespread undervaluing of teachers in contemporary society which, in turn, prevents teachers from thinking

of themselves as professionals and intellectuals. Through completing this project, this group of teachers came to know what they know and what they wanted to share with other teachers and, as a result, have an increased sense of their professional selves. In addition to sharing their work, the writers of this volume hope that they will inspire other teachers to form similar, on-going, professional collaborations.

Most of the teachers who worked on this project did not consider themselves writers, and yet, they all were able to find forms in which to express the individuality of their ideas. Several teachers have used a “multi-genre” approach to best capture the varied elements of their projects, especially the decision-making processes that form an integral part of running a classroom. Elizabeth Ford Makarow, for example, wrote her project on the “van Gogh journals” her grade-three students kept as a series of letters to Vincent van Gogh. She was able to include the artist’s voice in his “replies” by quoting from van Gogh’s journals and letters to his brother. Several other teacher-writers used a series of journal entries, dialogues, letters, time lines, and poems to tell their stories, and all of the articles contain samples of their students’ work and conversations. The result is not only a lively read, but also a demonstration of the expanded notion of “text” that the new English Language Arts program contains.

This introduction is an overview of the projects to guide readers toward specific elements of the English Language Arts curriculum on which each is focused. It is important to stress that the four competencies, -- reading, writing, media literacy, and oral language -- form an integrated program, and certainly, the projects in this volume illustrate how these aspects of literacy interact and are mutually dependent. However, each project highlights particular aspects of the program without losing sight of its integrated nature. For example, while reading and writing are overlapping and interdependent activities, and it is impossible to do either without talking, some articles in this volume will concentrate on only one of these aspects of literacy.

The articles include all cycles between kindergarten and grade eight, but have been grouped according to their themes. Readers should not restrict themselves to those projects done in the cycles in which they teach. Each project has something different to say about the fundamental principles underlying the English Language Arts program and can certainly be adapted to any cycle level.

Reading and Producing Media and Visual Texts

Three articles deal with the newest aspect of the English Language Arts program, media literacy. Josie Salvatore takes her readers through the processes and excitement which she and her grade-two students shared when they investigated the marketing of cereal. By considering the cereal box as a text, her students not only analyzed the structures and features that contributed to the meanings the children found in these texts, but they also explored their understanding of target audiences. Finally, they put this knowledge into action by

designing and producing their own cereal boxes. Collaboration and exploratory talk played essential roles in this and all projects in Josie's classroom, and she has found ways to capture and present this often ephemeral and difficult to describe part of the learning process using a multi-genre approach in her own writing.

Elizabeth Ford Makarow combines her passions for art and English Language Arts in the project she did with her grade three class on the artist Vincent van Gogh. Together, she and her students created sketch journals which enabled her to examine the impact of visual literacy on print literacy and the parallels between producing visual and written texts. Her students learned to read and to create visual texts, and through their writing, to reflect on their new understanding. As they sought ways to express their new discoveries about art as a mode of expression, their understanding of how visual texts work informed, inspired, and enriched their writing.

Karen Rye tells the story of how she and her grade-six students produced and edited video productions of their own versions of their favourite plays by Shakespeare. This inquiry-based, media-literacy project on Shakespeare in contrast to the two previous projects which were done on paper, was a "high-tech" undertaking. Karen's students worked in groups, each of which chose a Shakespearean play to work on. After reading a modern version of the plays, her students wrote their own dramatic versions and performed them. Their performances, complete with elaborate costumes and sets, were videotaped, and the students then edited the tapes of their group's production. While this use of technology might seem to be beyond the reach of most teachers, Karen's step-by-step description of how she and her students planned and carried out this endeavour makes such an undertaking seem feasible. While media literacy was their focus, Karen's students were reading, writing, talking, collaborating, drawing, researching, reflecting, and self-evaluating. A stunning example of an integrated literacy project!

Cross-Disciplinary and Beyond

Dorothy Shaw demonstrates that literacy is developed in all subjects across the curriculum. Through her analysis of the role that talk plays in her math class, Dorothy shows that language is a way to get things done, to explore new concepts, and to express both the process of coming to know and of grasping an idea. Her lucid and engaging writing style enables Dorothy's readers to get inside her head and follow her thought processes as she runs a class discussion in math with her grade one students, many of whom had serious learning problems. This ephemeral, but vital, part of all teaching is rarely captured on paper; however, Dorothy describes the decisions she makes "on the hop" that allow her to tease out her students' understandings of math and build on their prior and developing knowledge. In addition to highlighting the crucial role of talk in her students' learning, Dorothy also incorporates reading and writing stories in her math class. This integrated language arts project demonstrates the truly cross-

disciplinary nature of language, and why proficiency in all aspects of using language is part of all learning.

Two cycle-three teachers developed very different cross-disciplinary projects as ways of extending their students' literacy. Trudy Williams connects language arts to science in an environmental project she did with her grade-five students. Working with her own and her students' enthusiasm for the topic, the project became cross-disciplinary in the truest sense, going far beyond a thematic unit that integrates a variety of subjects across the curriculum. She and her students learned how to define, plan, carry out, and evaluate a project in which they researched a variety of environmental problems. Her students' learning was firmly situated in their everyday lives within their classroom, their school, their communities, and in more distant communities with whom her classes corresponded.

In contrast to Trudy's environmental project, Joan Crossley and her grade-six class explored the geography of the imagination and extended its boundaries through developing their passion for the Middle Ages. She tells how their enthusiasm became a passion for learning itself and a rich rooting system for developing the literacy of a group of reluctant readers and writers. Through this project, a seemingly unpromising group of students formed a genuine learning community in which they supported each others' growth, particularly in writing. Again, the project was much more than a journey across the curriculum but, an experience in how to learn and in how to develop academic and life skills that can be transferred to other situations and contexts.

Connecting Reading, Writing, Drawing, and Talking

Tanya Paradis and Myrna Hynes focus on integrated aspects of the English Language Arts program by investigating the connections between reading, writing, drawing, and talking. Tanya shares her experiences with her kindergarten students and their parents in establishing a home-supported reading and writing program. Although most of her kindergarten students are second-language learners, she has created a meaning-based program in which reading and writing are integrated and firmly rooted in the conversation and experiences of the children. She believes in developing literacy right from the start of school and that reading and writing and speaking in a second language are acquired in the same ways as mother-tongue literacy.

Myrna Hynes demonstrates that developing a response process is central to the development of proficient readers and also the key feature that connects all the other aspects of the reading competency, as well as the other competencies in the new English Language Arts program. Through her work with students in grades two and seven, she shows that when the emphasis of a reading program is the construction of multiple meanings, one approach is appropriate for readers of all ages and stages and requires only minor modifications from cycle to cycle.

When Students are the Curriculum

Two Middle School teachers show what can happen when students become the curriculum. Jennifer Goodall describes the challenges and successes of creating a differentiated language arts program with her grade seven and eight classes through several case studies of students with a wide range of passions, problems, and learning styles. She describes how these students developed in different ways under the wide umbrella of a literacy -- rather than a literature -- program.

Stephanie Vucko's article is about the inclusive nature of a portfolio approach to language arts in her grade seven and eight classes. The portfolio is often considered a form of assessment that records each student's "personal bests;" however, in Stephanie's classes the portfolio is a way of living and learning. An essential element of keeping portfolios is reflection, which Stephanie believes is developmental. She shows how she built a classroom environment in which her students developed processes and strategies for learning how to learn by becoming reflective.

Success for All

These stories are about different subjects, different approaches, different passions, and are told in different voices. However, they have much in common; they are all student-centred, literacy-based, focused on the construction of meaning, and, above all, include *all* students. Not one of these teachers was working in the ideal classroom; most of the classes described in these projects had a very high number of "special needs" students. As is widely acknowledged, the clientele of the public schools is changing, and teachers must find ways to differentiate their approaches to all their students. Indeed, one of the major inspirations for the Québec Education Program was the need to address the high drop-out rate from Québec's high schools. Since there is also a high correlation between failure in elementary school and dropping out in high school, inclusive approaches in the early years of schooling are badly needed. The teachers who wrote this volume have worked hard to adapt their programs and strategies in order to find ways for all their students to be successful. They are most eager to share their experiences with you, their readers.