

From To to With

Working with students to design learning for progress.

by Eileen Phillips

I have recently had time to think about some of the educational initiatives of the past 40 years that I have seen

and I have started to write about ones that I believe have really made a difference. One of these initiatives has been the development of the Network of Performance-Based Schools (NPBS).

As the principal of a large, urban, dual-track elementary school, I was often in and out of classrooms and engaged in discussions both with and about students, parents and staff concerning progress, challenges, accom-

Not until we stopped trying to think of what we might present to the students to help them, and started working with the students to design personal learning frameworks, did legitimate progress occur.

plishments, curriculum, facilities, etc. However, aside from those occasions when I was invited as a guest to a special celebration/event, was involved in teacher evaluation or covering for an absent teacher (due to no 'subs' being available), I found it difficult to spend extended time in classrooms. The key understanding here is that extended, meaningful time with students in classroom settings, can be very tricky to schedule. Committing

For both of the two years I was a member of an NPBS inquiry, involved with mathematical learning, I worked in a principal/vice-principal/teacher team. The first year, the inquiry worked with the grade 3 students in a combination traditional grades 2 and 3 classroom; in the second year, the classroom was Montessori grades 1, 2, and 3 and the inquiry involved all the students. The members of the research team were

to being part of a teacher-principal team undertaking an inquiry over the course of a year was, therefore, a major task.

different each year: I remained the principal, but the vice-principal and teacher changed. However, there was more continuity that initially meets the eye — the teacher from the first year was appointed vice-principal, so for the second year our only truly new member was the teacher.

Each year, the team met and started by discussing which particular area of mathematical problem solving we felt needed more attention and then tried to focus ourselves by formulating and explicitly writing the question that would guide our inquiry. By talking about the teacher's perceptions of what her students needed, we found an entry point into our search. But, it was not until we understood what each student felt would be helpful that a real starting point was reached and our true research could begin. Not until we stopped trying to think of what we might present *to* the students to help them, and started working *with* the students to design personal learning frameworks, did legitimate progress occur.

Getting More Specific

I believe that attending to specific language use is one of the most helpful skills educators can learn. It has been claimed that the mastery of prepositions is one of the most difficult skills when learning English and that prepositions, in some sense, comprise/constitute the essence of English. My experience supports this claim. Listening for preposition usage can provide insights into some of the more human aspects of schools. For example, we have:

- assessment *of* learning;
- assessment *for* learning;
- assessment *as* learning.

Each one of the above different types of assessments is useful. In this piece, though, I want to talk about assessment *for* learning and I want

My growth as an educational leader

Learning to work with our students, by inviting them to participate in their own assessment, enriched our practice and our understanding of the nature of student engagement in learning. And, of course, as principal, the act of working with these staff members and their students, rather than just simply (though not insignificantly) encouraging them to conduct an inquiry, was of ultimate importance to our outcomes and our discussions, and contributed greatly to my appreciation of true educational leadership and my growth as an educational leader. — EP

to discuss the movement along the continuum from working to provide educational experiences to students towards working with students to provide meaningful and purposeful educational experiences.

Going Deeper

As a member of an NPBS inquiry team, I spent many hours working with the other team members and listening to their goals and strategies. At the start of one inquiry, I heard that the students:

- need to learn how to read for understanding;
- have no idea how to translate words into number sentences;
- cannot visualize the story of the problem;
- are unaware of how and when to use manipulative tools.

A discussion followed about how

to teach these skills and we looked at providing opportunities where such skills could be practised. We thought that we could use a *Provincial Performance Standard for Numeracy* to guide our teaching. But, when the team looked at the *Numeracy Performance Standards*, we found that they were not specific enough to meet the needs of our inquiry — one concerned with the role of feedback and coaching to improve mathematical problem solving. We decided that we needed also to look at the *Performance Standards for Reading and Writing* and to design a rubric that would be specific to comprehending and then representing solutions to math story problems.

Designing a new rubric was exciting and we were pleased with our work. We took it to the students. They tried to use it, but found that they sometimes needed us to tell them what a

point meant and/or they often felt they fell somewhere between two descriptors. So, we had the students work with us on the language of the descriptors. At this point, we changed the rubric entirely. We produced a standard, class-based assessment rubric, with space for comments below, that was both student-centred and student-friendly. But we also used a blank form, so the students could design their own personal rubric, defining the area(s) where they wanted to grow and writing their own descriptors to demonstrate learning. Some students occasionally abandoned the rubric in favour of writing a statement of purpose and result. We found that once the students owned their assessment tools, they were keen to define what they needed and how they would judge their own success. Students would make statements such as:

- Today I want to work on reading the problem aloud;
- Today I want to use drawing to represent the problem;
- I am going to ask (*name*) to help me by acting out this problem;
- I think I will use the number line to help me answer this;
- I'm writing my comment to show that I used more

than one strategy to test my answer;

- My rubric shows that I am reading and understanding, but I still need to work on getting the arithmetic correct – I think I need to work on my adding facts

Significance of Going Deeper


Where does this leave us? What has been learned? These questions always point us to the next level of understanding and the next level of questioning. Meaningful educational research, I believe, comprises an organic cycle where the overall learning provides a gestalt that synthesizes the whole into something larger than the parts. That being said, we can still look closely at the parts. In this research, at the student level, we learned that:

- first, it is important to engage not only the adults but also the students in the inquiry;
- second, students—even primary students – can define their own areas of focus/challenge once they have the language and tools to do so;
- third, working on an area of challenge is fun and rewarding

Eileen Phillips is a recently retired Vancouver elementary school principal. She has a PhD in Mathematics Education and has been a member of the NPBS (Network of Performance-Based Schools) for the past three years. Eileen is also the Area Representative for PDK (Phi Delta Kappa). She can be reached at ephilips555@gmail.com.

for all concerned;

- fourth, assessment for learning can be individualized;
- fifth, assessment for learning is closely linked to assessment of learning once fear of failure is removed. That, however, is a topic for another short paper.

At a personal level, I learned that listening to the language that the team members used to describe our inquiry was pivotally important. A seemingly simple shift in our use of prepositions – using *with* rather than *to* when discussing learning intentions – moved us a long way along the path of our inquiry. Learning to work *with* our students, by inviting them to participate in their own assessment, enriched our practice and our understanding of the nature of student engagement in learning. And, of course, as principal, the act of working *with* these staff members and their students, rather than just simply (*though not insignificantly*) encouraging them to conduct an inquiry, was of ultimate importance to our outcomes and our discussions, and contributed greatly to my appreciation of true educational leadership and my growth as an educational leader. 

Aziz, continued from page 2

ing paperless and force everyone else to adapt to the change.

There are regular meetings springing up led by current principals and vice-principals, whether Edcamps, video viewings, online community chats or face-to-face meetings, and the sense of a wider education leadership community has never been stronger. You have to look for some of these opportunities and we, as an organization, would be happy to connect you to some if you are having challenges.

Your leadership role has never been more needed or

vital. You have to find the role that fits and works for you and then embrace and run with it. Trying to emulate or copy others will not have the desired effect unless it is a “natural” fit. No matter what medium we use, the core of our leadership is still going to fall to genuine dialogue and communication and a respect for all ideas brought to the table.

I hope that you will all continue to embrace the leadership aspect of your role and find a way to pursue it that is genuine and brings your natural abilities to the forefront. Enjoy the journey! 