

Improving Student Communication Skills Through Literacy Strategies



A MISA Research Initiative
Spring 2006



Background

Prior to beginning our project, junior division teachers, administrators and the K-6 facilitator looked at pre-data related to student achievement in reading using CASI assessments. The CASI reading assessment, published by Nelson, is an assessment tool which was well suited for use in our study for a number of reasons:

- Achievement in each of the categories of the achievement chart is highlighted through the use of a selection of questions related to each category. We were therefore able to look specifically at the data related to communication.
- Junior division teachers throughout DDSB administer the CASI reading assessment at specific points in the year. The three schools would all have this data for analysis.
- CASI materials provided exemplars for written responses focusing on communication

In each of the three schools, CASI data revealed communication as an area for further study.

During the spring term of 2006, junior division teachers working in three schools from the same family of schools came together to form a professional learning community to explore, implement and reflect upon a number of specific strategies to increase student achievement in the area of communication. The three schools share many similar challenges. All three schools are from the same area with similar socio-economic and demographic backgrounds represented in the student populations. The schools all have small populations; a situation which necessitates several split grade classes and which significantly impacts the opportunities for networking with like-grade teaching partners within each school. With this school environment information in mind, we set as a secondary goal, to facilitate discussion and teacher moderation as we looked at various tasks and student samples. We hoped that by building the community of teachers learning about communication strategies and working together this would allow us to:

- Facilitate communication and networking between the schools
- Share strategies and best practice with grade level colleagues
- Engage in teacher moderation as we reviewed and discussed student work samples
- Sustain the professional dialogue beyond the timelines of the communication project

With the support of MISA funding, we purchased some common resources to support our inquiry in the three schools. As teachers had the opportunity to use these common materials with their students, we hoped that sharing of best practice could be facilitated. By placing these resources in each of the schools within the context of a PLC study, we also hoped to support the sustainability of the learning from our initiative.

Initiative Participants

Mike Bashucky, Principal
Kim MacCarl, Principal
Karen Prins, Principal
K-6 Facilitator and Teachers from the junior division
of each school

April 3rd – Staff Meeting Presentations
K-6 Facilitator introduced the project at each of the three schools

April 10th– Session 1
Establishment of our learning community and discussion of strategies to support communication

We agreed upon 2 strategies that teachers would explore in their classrooms before the second session. Each teacher would come back with classroom samples to share and discuss.

April 24th–Session 2
Discussion and analysis of class samples

Teachers shared the contexts in which the double entry journal had been used with their classes. One class had documented their reactions to a newspaper article while another class had used double entry journals with a read aloud text. The rich discussion allowed everyone to leave with new ideas for the upcoming weeks.

May 12th–Session 3
Discussion and Analysis of Classroom Data

For this session, teachers brought student communication samples from problem-solving tasks, reflections on strategy use from math games and other samples of double entry journals and charts. As teachers completed their mid-session reflections, they indicated that they were already seeing some change in communication and were anticipating some modest gains in CASI post-data.

June 6th–Session 4
Comparing CASI Assessment Data in Communication

Teachers brought their post-project CASI data to this session. We compared the pre- and post-data in the area of communication. Teachers also reflected upon the impact of the learning community experience in terms of their own practice.

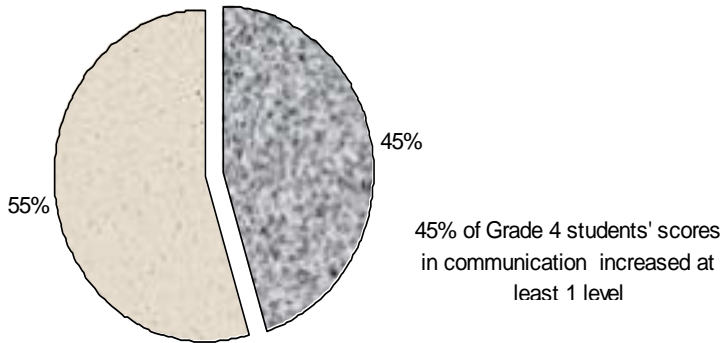
June 26– Final Analysis of Project Data and Implications for Future Directions

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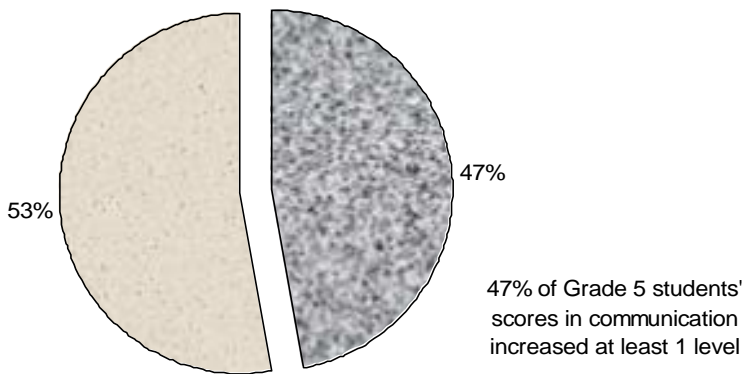
Our Results...

Our Results...

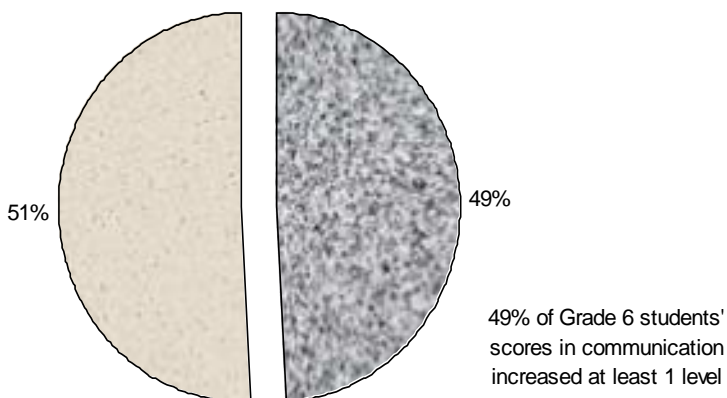
Grade 4 Combined School Data



Grade 5 Combined School Data



Grade 6 - Combined School Data



Analysis of our post-data confirmed what many of the participating teachers had anticipated. Despite the short timeframe for our project, there had been a measurable impact on student achievement. In the combined school data for all grade levels, nearly half of the students had increased one level or more in the area of communication on the CASI assessment. While teachers had noted improvements in the communication of some of the other students, they were insufficient to result in the gain of a level on the CASI assessment. Some students may not have worked with strategies long enough to consolidate their skills; others may have made gains with respect to one of the communication skills being assessed for the category, but not with all. Based on the data, the strategies presented have had a significant positive impact for many, however it will be important to continue this focus to allow a sufficient consolidation period for others.

Anecdotal observations of the three school administrators cited increased cohesiveness between schools and a common focus on communication in the junior divisions at each school.

In addition to the benefits for students in the area of communication, this project afforded rich opportunities for teachers and administrators to use data to inform their use of teaching strategies related to a specific learning focus. As teachers explored new ideas within the context of a professional learning community, the ongoing discussion and sharing provided a highly supportive and positive context for the implementation of new strategies.

Resources and Strategies

As a result of MISA funding, we were able to place in each of the three schools some student and teacher resources to support our focus on communication. We chose a limited number of 'high yield' strategies and matched these strategies with some specific resources that each school would use. Common resources and strategies allowed for a heightened level of collaboration in our sessions. In addition, these materials would support teachers in their work after the completion of our initiative.

The following strategies and resources were highlighted during our work:

- *Boldprint*, published by Nelson (6 copies of 5 titles per school)
The Boldprint magazines allowed teachers to explore short articles with groups of students either in guided reading groups or literature circles. The titles were selected to appeal to the interests represented in each of the classes. There were some titles that were common to the three schools to facilitate collaborative practice and discussion in our professional learning group.
- *50 Problem-Solving Lessons*, by Marilyn Burns
To maximize the impact of our work in the area of communication, we also used a number of math problems to engage students in refining their communication in a cross-curricular context.

Student communication was encouraged through the use of double-entry journals, math journal reflections, literature circles and graphic organizers/charts which linked facts, quotes or excerpts from texts to students' reactions, connections, and thinking.

Comments from Teachers...

"Being a teacher in a small school with only single grade teachers, it provided a wonderful way to network/chat/compare ways of delivering the curriculum."

-DDSB Teacher

This project has had a huge impact on my teaching. This has been a mentoring opportunity. I am surrounded by colleagues who helped me identify strengths/weaknesses in my teaching. I would like to see this practice continue between our three schools..."

- DDSB Teacher

"What's great is hearing the enthusiasm for trying new ideas, and sharing in the success stories."

-DDSB Teacher

"I've enjoyed listening to others and have incorporated some new ideas into my class routines."

-DDSB Teacher