

# WHAT WORKS?

## *Research into Practice*

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Research Monograph #46

How can we change the paradigm for teaching literacy to include digital multimodal literacies?

## Using a Professional Learning Community to Support Multimodal Literacies

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### Research Tells Us

- Literacy has changed as a result of globalization and digitization.
- Literacy instruction is therefore being pushed towards screen-based digitally networked environments.
- As text types evolve, PLCs offer teachers an optimal environment for learning new literacies and technologies, planning for innovation and sharing progress and problems.

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### LITERACY HAS CHANGED.

*In the 21st century, we access interactive texts via ubiquitous portable digital devices,<sup>1</sup> making texts – and the ability to use or create them – collaborative, mobile and complex. To prepare children for present and future literacy needs, we need to revise how we frame and teach literacy. The new comprehensive literacy combines digital multimodal literacies and print-based reading and writing practices. But how do we change the literacy teaching paradigm?<sup>2</sup>*

### Multiliteracies Pedagogies

The New London Group's<sup>2</sup> conceptualization of multiliteracies in the late 20th century brought public attention to the social effects of globalization and digitization, and called for changes in the understanding of literacy and in how we teach it. We have moved from “telling the world to showing the world”<sup>3</sup> (p. 140). Though children still need to learn to read and write alphabetic print – an important component of multimodal communications – literacy no longer stops with the printed word. Learning the ABCs is now a portal to a wider and more complex selection of literate communications.<sup>4</sup> Digital networks connect dynamic multimodal communication using images, speech, animations, sound effects and links to other texts alongside alphabetic print.<sup>5</sup>

Literacy instruction is under pressure, being pushed towards screen-based, digitally networked environments, while simultaneously adhering to print-based reading and writing practices. High-stakes standardized tests, such

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as those developed by the EQAO, rely on paper and pencil literacies and are administered according to strict guidelines, though assistive technologies are approved for students with special needs.<sup>6</sup> Teachers are pulled in opposing directions as literacy is applied to an expanding grey area of evolving texts that do not fit comfortably within conventional school curricular expectations and assessments. How can teachers change their literacy teaching practices to incorporate integrated pedagogical approaches while still ensuring student success?

## Literacy has changed ...

“Teachers are pulled in opposing directions as literacy is applied to an expanding grey area of evolving texts that do not fit comfortably within conventional school curricular expectations and assessments.”

## Knowledge Sharing, Collaboration and Communication

Research shows that teachers working together to support children’s learning is an effective means of teacher professional development.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Professional learning communities (PLCs) facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration – often with experts in the area – to support teacher professional learning.<sup>10</sup> Features of effective PLCs include job-embedded learning, group meetings held during the workweek and use of technology.<sup>11</sup>

## Creating a PLC at Joyce Public School

In the early 2000s, we developed a PLC at Joyce Public School dedicated to learning how to teach evolving digital multimodal multiliteracies.<sup>2,12</sup> In pilot workshops, teachers began by asking children to rewrite *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The Grade 2 children used a variety of programs, including *Hyperstudio*, *Wiggleworks* and *Storybook Weaver*, to write their own versions of the story for the kindergarten children. Our pilot showed convincingly that the children engaged in narrative analysis and creative imagination when given the opportunity to collaboratively retell a traditional story using new and traditional media.<sup>13</sup>

To improve and update literacy instruction at the school, we continued to build our professional learning community. Including teachers, university researchers and school community members, we drew upon and developed the “shared learning and interests” (p. 4)<sup>14</sup> of the group. Our half-day workshops, held during school hours, were based on a three-part design:

- 1. Learning** – Researchers, teachers, and invited speakers share ideas, theories, or technological processes.
- 2. Planning** – Groups of teachers and researchers plan, discuss, develop and scaffold collaborative projects.
- 3. Sharing** – Teachers share their progress and problems in implementing project ideas.

During workshops, we collaboratively developed multimodal literacy projects to be implemented over the course of the year. The narrative base in the primary grades focused on creatively retelling traditional stories, while the projects were more complex in the junior grades, involving chapter books and non-narrative curricular orientations. All projects synthesized and restructured traditional texts as multimodal texts.

Each project required teachers to sign a contract specifying curriculum links, community language involvement, media requirements and roles for team members. The choice of team members and subject matter for the collaborative projects rested with teachers based on curricular needs for the period of time involved.

## An Example: *The (Respectful) Three Billy Goats Gruff*

The idea of a cross-age multiliteracies project came from the success of a school-wide math project which paired older students with younger ones. While older students in this project took on leadership roles, displayed responsibility and were often able to consolidate their own learning by explaining their thinking to younger students, younger students benefited as well by having ready assistance and good role models to follow.

The multiliteracies project brought together children in Grade 2 and kindergarten as learning buddies, pairing them on the basis of home language, when possible. Children were introduced to *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* through successive readings of different versions. This familiarized the children not only with the characters and events of the story, but also with what a story is. The Grade 2 children helped their kindergarten buddies design finger puppets of the characters and worked in pairs to do oral retells. The children relied on their own language competence to do this, facilitated by onomatopoeic storytelling devices like the *trip trap trip trap TRIP TRAP* sounds made by different-sized goats crossing the bridge. The Grade 2 children then wrote and illustrated individual versions of the story.

*The Three Billy Goats Gruff* can be interpreted as a tale of bullying. In this vein, the Grade 2 class examined character traits, distinguishing them from physical appearance. They wrote letters to the troll, noting what they liked about him and what they did not like. This led to discussions of amending not only the troll's behaviour but the other characters as well. If the characters had acted in a different way, would the story have evolved differently? Perhaps, if the goats had been more polite, the troll would not have been so mean? The children revised the dialogue so the goats said *please* and *thank you*.

The characters' enhanced politeness resulted in new versions of the story. Groups were formed around shared home language, such as Cantonese or Turkish. In this way, translations (with the help of school and community members) were included in each group's revised story. In these cross-grade, language-based groups, the children acted out their story in playscapes which they, too, had designed, made and photographed (see Figure 1). The groups used these pictures to produce books that were personalized in terms of both images and language. The kindergarten children became so familiar with the story that they were able to orally retell it.

The stories were completed during a parent night. After teachers read a traditional version of the story, the children retold the story to their families using their puppets. The semi-finished, illustrated bilingual storybooks were then distributed and read to family members. The books were completed collaboratively with parents and grandparents (see Figure 2), who helped to develop denouement solutions in both their home languages and in English.

This primary grade narrative project involved cross-age and intergenerational literacy learning, English language development and home language support, learning about character education and working out a pro-social strategy to recast bullying demands through polite and respectful requests. Finished books were multilingual, including languages from around the world, alongside children's developing English (see Figure 3).

## Taking Action for Multiliteracies Development

Our professional learning community has become part of the culture of the school. By creatively rescheduling timetables to pool preparation periods as collaborative workshops, teachers have found a way to sustain the PLC.



Figure 1 Children performing their *Three Respectful Billy Goats* narratives.



Figure 2 Co-writing on family night



Figure 3 A sample of the children's completed storybooks

To develop a learning community for multiliteracies development, schools (and teachers) may find these steps helpful:

## Learn More about LNS Resources ...

Online:

[www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/publications.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/publications.html)

Call:

416-325-2929  
1-800-387-5514

Email:

[LNS@ontario.ca](mailto:LNS@ontario.ca)

### 1. Identify ...

- teachers who are interested in co-operatively developing a project that responds to curricular aims, bridges the relevant subjects in a project base, brings in the languages of the school community and experiments with different text types using traditional and digital media
- curricular issues amenable to narrative learning and stories embodying those issues
- media and resources (digital cameras, basic hardware, software, books, materials) that are available in the school and collaboratively maintained
- the cultural and linguistic nature of the school community, noting that parents can be welcomed into the school with language assets for learning in a global era

### 2. Contact ...

- researchers, consultants and teachers who may wish to collaborate in the PLC as regular participants or guest speakers

### 3. Arrange ...

- time for collaborative workshops by pooling preparation times or arranging professional development afternoons or
- extra funding through grants for supply teachers, to give teachers time to hold monthly, half-day planning and discussion workshops for the development of multimodal literacies projects

## In Sum

Invitational professional learning communities, developed in relation to teachers' job-embedded needs, can be particularly effective in promoting both teacher development and children's multiliteracies learning. Inclusion of family members with language assets not only provides expert knowledge needed for dual language texts but also promotes stronger home-school relations. In this way, schools can generate a learning community for developing socially responsive, multimodal literacies pedagogies.

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