

2009
ONTARIO EDUCATION
RESEARCH
SYMPOSIUM

"CLOSING GAPS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT"



SUMMARY REPORT
2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

The fourth annual Ontario Education Research Symposium (OERS), held February 4-6, 2009, in Toronto, focused on the theme, “Closing Gaps in Student Achievement.” The theme was timely as it was, and continues to be, one of the ministry’s three priority goals.

The symposium opened with an inspirational address by Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne. Assistant Deputy Minister David Fulford, who was Master of Ceremonies for the event, introduced Minister Wynne, who praised the assembled participants for their often unacknowledged and “behind the scenes” work in providing the evidence on which provincial education policies are based.

Deputy Minister Ben Levin – who launched the ministry’s education research agenda, and the first OERS in 2006 – echoed the Minister’s comments, remarking on how much progress has been made to date, and how the annual symposium has been instrumental in creating effective research partnerships and in encouraging an exchange of ideas.

Participants heard from Carol Campbell, Ontario’s Chief Research Officer, who provided a detailed update on the Education Research and Evaluation Strategy, and from Doris McWhorter and Mario Lajoie, 2008-09 co-chairs of the Ontario Education Research Panel, who outlined the Panel’s progress in supporting knowledge exchange and being a catalyst for research across the province.

The 2009 symposium revolved around five key sub-groups: Aboriginal students; gender gaps (particularly boys’ literacy); students living in poverty; English-/French-language learners; and students identified as having special education needs. Discussion papers were prepared on each sub-group and, during the symposium, plenary sessions featured an overview presentation based on the discussion paper, followed by two presentations of collaborative applied research on the same sub-group.

Each plenary session was then followed by breakout discussions focused on “implications for action coming out of the research”. Some of the discussions were organized by topic, others by region (with a focus on building and reinforcing partnerships at the local level).

Professor Doug Willms, from the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP) at the University of New Brunswick, provided the keynote address at dinner on the Thursday evening, tying together many of the strands from the other presentations and encouraging a five-stage approach to “raising and levelling the learning bar” in Ontario.

A new feature at the 2009 OERS was a ‘Research Fair’ that ran throughout the symposium. Fifteen research partnerships from across the province were invited to present displays of their research or evaluation projects related to closing gaps in student achievement. The fair enabled participants to share and discuss research and evaluation activities and make connections with others pursuing similar work.

To wrap up the symposium, the outgoing and incoming OERP co-chairs provided a top-level summary of the breakout discussions. Carol Campbell closed the 2009 Ontario Education Research Symposium by thanking the participants for their hard work at the event, and encouraging their ongoing input to advancing the province’s research and evaluation agenda through the coming year.



*Hon. Kathleen Wynne,
Minister of Education*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ontario Ministry of Education thanks the following organizations for supporting the 2009 Ontario Education Research Symposium.

- Ontario Education Research Panel
- Council of Ontario Directors of Education
- Ontario Association of Deans of Education
- Association of Educational Researchers of Ontario
- Ministry of Education Research Coordination Team
- Ontario Education Research Symposium Core Planning Group

THE ONTARIO EDUCATION RESEARCH PANEL (OERP)

Members of the OERP attended the 2009 symposium, participating in the plenary and breakout sessions to hear the presentations and discussions first-hand. The panel was established by the Ministry of Education in 2006 as part of its overall Research and Evaluation Strategy. Its members are drawn from the broader education community and include university faculty, school board researchers, and researchers from other education organizations. The mission of the OERP is to promote education research networks and partnerships that support knowledge exchange and its application to education practice in Ontario from Junior Kindergarten–Grade 12.



Ontario Education Research Panel

2009-10 OERP Members:

Joan Green – Co-Chair
Doris McWhorter – Co-Chair
Kathryn Bennett
Christopher Conley (incoming)
Christa Freiler (incoming)
Carl James
Don Klinger (incoming)

Pat McAdie
Jacqueline Moore Daigle
Luis Radford (incoming)
Joanne Robinson
Erica Van Roosmalen (incoming)
Kathy Short (incoming)
Louis Volante (incoming)

Six outgoing members of the OERP are: co-chair Mario Lajoie, Serge Demers, Paul Favaro, Ben Levin, Yves Herry and Sandra Sangster.

BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS

SUMMARY: OVERARCHING THEMES

- Foster effective and contextually relevant **instruction** to reduce achievement gaps
- A positive student **self-identity** is integral to success
- Reposition **the school-community** relationship as one of reciprocity
- The issues are **complex** but not intractable

Instruction

- Several groups said, “good instruction is good instruction, regardless of gender”
- “Effective instruction is a powerful tool and has the capacity to mitigate the negative effects of poverty”
- Same message came out of each session...effective and contextually relevant instruction, targeted at individual student learning needs, has the potential to help students overcome the barriers they face

Self-Concept – Self-Identity

- Importance of a positive self-identity was underscored in several presentations/discussions, as was the positive impact of effective instruction on student self-perceptions

School/Community

- Schools cannot do it alone – we need to strengthen relationships among schools, communities, families, neighbourhoods
- Essential for all partners to negotiate and build relationships, based on caring and belief that more is possible
- One group talked about schools as a place of “rigorous care”

Complexity and Urgency

- “Social class doesn’t tell the whole story” (same for gender, aboriginal status, first language or special needs)
- What we “know” (our tacit and experiential knowledge) may be overly simplistic or superficial
- Patterns of achievement look much different once you dig deeper
- Complex issues can be addressed:
 - Through deep understanding, knowledge and collective action
 - There is a lot of knowledge (theory, research, practice) about how to reduce the gaps
 - We need to disentangle/disaggregate the data in order to understand complexities and implement effective interventions
 - There is greater variation within sub-groups than across sub-groups
- Without the right interventions, these students will fall further and further behind
- With the right interventions, achievement gaps can be reduced or eliminated

COMPILATION OF TABLE DISCUSSIONS

CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

Sense of seriousness and urgency

Implications for action

- Students (respect their voices and help them find their own identities; teachers need to know their students)
- Families (engage parents; use common, accessible language)
- Teachers (certify and hire more Aboriginal teachers; educate all pre- and in-service teachers about aboriginal history and culture; develop their ability to teach vulnerable children; re-focus instructional practices around knowledge-based frameworks, tools and strategies for building relationships)
- Policy (implement the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework; develop and implement curriculum to incorporate Aboriginal history, beliefs, culture, etc. for all students; move from single assessments to more appropriate and complicated assessments)

Research questions

- Do we need an approach to assessment that is more congruent with Aboriginal worldview and experience?
- One group suggested a think tank re: appropriateness of our assessment practices for Aboriginal students
- Overall sense of urgency... need for action to avert tragedy; what is the priority for action?
- Education is only one part of the solution, but an important part; how do we work with the others?
- Ontario is not the only province with these challenges – what can we learn from other jurisdictions?

CLOSING GENDER GAPS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Questioning the nature and extent of the gender gap (specifically around boys' literacy)

Implications for action

- Synthesize 'state of knowledge' on gender gap, and make that information accessible to teachers, administrators and policy makers
- Put in place better quality teacher education programs, with more practicum time, more mentoring and modeling
- Provide more ongoing professional development for teachers around reflective practice and how to apply research knowledge
- Good instruction is key... effective instruction that addresses student learning needs, regardless of their gender, is the key to increasing achievement and reducing gaps
- Encourage differentiated instruction, which considers individual needs rather than gender differences
- Do more relevant research on "within group" variations; draw on research methodology from other human services domains
- Have smaller classes at transition points (e.g., elementary to secondary school)
- Revisit assessment ... are we assessing in a way that students of both genders can demonstrate what they have learned? (echoes theme in Aboriginal discussion); need both

quantitative and qualitative assessment, not one at the exclusion of the other; need to talk to boys and girls and understand why some students are falling behind

- Revisit what literacy entails, and how we define success
- Increase our understanding of the complexity of the multiple influences on gender achievement - encourage a more reflective and contextual stance

Research questions

- What other factors are embedded within gender disparities in achievement?
- How do we bring both quantitative and qualitative dimensions into assessments?
- How do notions of masculinity and femininity affect instructional practice?
- Is the gender gap socially constructed in literacy? What is the real nature of the gap? One group talked about greater variation within gender groups than between groups and asked “is literacy defined appropriately?”
- How do our instructional and assessment practices influence the gender gap? Are cultural groups more important than gender in determining outcomes?
- Does it matter? Which boys, which girls? What is the potential impact of closing the gap?

POVERTY AND EDUCATION: CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Importance of community partnerships

Implications for action

- Integrate the school into the community by building reciprocal relationships to:
 - Engage parents/families, broader community, and teachers
 - Encourage teacher participation in the community (give them cultural orientation?)
- Emphasize to teachers the importance of effective instruction; it has the capacity to mitigate the negative impacts of poverty
- Foster teacher collaboration and professional development (especially around their capacity to use evidence-based interventions)
- Let teachers know about supports in the community
- Teachers need to understand the lived realities of the students, ‘know’ the neighbourhood
- Teaching staff needs to reflect the diversity of the student population
- Early years initiatives through school-based and community-based centres are needed, and have the potential to be great equalizers
- Work collaboratively and holistically with other ministries and agencies like the United Way (look at other jurisdictions that do this well; explore ‘schools as community hubs’ further)
- Build bridges between schools and existing community organizations
- Ensure the required services and community supports are in place for disadvantaged students to enable them to participate effectively in school
- Require community partnerships in ministry-sponsored research and evaluation
- Encourage school board research departments to address poverty in their work
- Disaggregate the poverty data to be more precise about where help is needed

Research questions

- How can we deepen our understanding of complex factors, i.e. social justice, systemic racism, cultural understanding?
- How can we mobilize what is known about engaging families and communities?
- How do we mobilize people to action?

- How do we level the bar for students in poverty?

CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS: ENGLISH-/FRENCH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Early identification and intervention is key

Implications for action

- Ensure effective instructional practices are in place; integrate literacy instruction throughout all subjects
- Train all teachers to work with a diversity of students
- Identify language learners so that there is resource support/funding, but don't over-label
- Improve professional development for teachers so they feel better-prepared to teach English or French-language learners
- Facilitate better communication and collaboration between teachers, breaking down silos; emphasize coordination, as opposed to competition
- Recognize that not all language learners are the same (culturally, first-language skills, etc.)
- Promote volunteer and service activities in the community, for language learners; this 'service learning' builds self-concept and helps decrease their sense of isolation
- Re-design schools as community hubs with integrated services for families and students
- Provide opportunities for earning a credit for English-/French-language learning
- Give language learners more than resource supports; give them a voice and equity
- Provide focused and deliberate entry programs for incoming students
- Allow for more local autonomy around decision-making, professional development, resource use, because language learners' needs vary widely

Research questions

- Need to disaggregate data to understand situation
- Question the utility of categories
- Explore further the notion of "give them an extra year" (of language learning)
- What is the role of technology in working with language learners?
- Is there something beyond 'just good teaching' that impacts on the learning needs of language learners?

CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS: STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Importance of collaboration between teachers and researchers

Implications for action

- Place knowledge brokers in school boards i.e., someone to transfer research into practice
- Position a mental health worker on school site, along with other supports
- Ensure there are caring adults in schools (not necessarily teachers), who focus on one child at a time and who listen to students' own voices
- Provide effective early interventions but be cautious with labelling
- Encourage parents to advocate for the needs of their children (without obstructing)
- Pay attention to the cost-effectiveness of programs and treatments
- Keep sustainability of programs top of mind
- Use Community Planning Tables, which include teachers, child-youth worker, social worker, etc., to create an interdisciplinary approach, an integrated model of intervention

- Support a community liaison person
- Hire project managers to assist with implementation of special needs projects in schools
- Provide teachers with professional development to create an awareness of children's needs; empower teachers to understand mental health
- Ensure better instructional practice is in place
- Encourage collaboration and team teaching; change structures so this is allowed
- Give teachers the opportunity to be more engaged in in-class research projects, alongside researchers
- Make education assistants and principals aware of mental health issues
- Align the Parent Engagement Strategy with mental health needs; some mental health issues could be reduced through parent information
- Stabilize funding; find the resources that already exist
- Coordinate and support students/schools/teachers in the North for accessing agency support

Research questions

- How consistent are our identification systems?
- Need for research on reducing rotary classes, at least in elementary schools
- What are some special needs interventions that are evidence-based?
- Need more data about how students are improving with the supports being given, including more long-term data
- Look at use of language to mediate social problems
- Is it better to put resources into pre-school or the early years of school?
- Early identification is important but what about 'issues' that manifest in adolescence?
- Why are there more boys with IEPs than girls?
- What can we do for the 80% of students with mental health issues who do not currently get help?
- How can differentiated instruction help us avoid the special needs stigma?
- Compare and contrast universal programming and individual interventions
- What do we mean by successful/good outcomes for students?

‘RESEARCH FAIR’ PROJECTS
PROJETS – SALON DE LA RECHERCHE

PROJECTS	PRESENTERS	PARTNERS
<i>Girl’s Conference – Intervention strategies to support student achievement in a rural school</i>	John Cho Karleen Pendleton-Jimenez	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trent University • Kawartha-Haliburton Children’s Aid Services • School counselor • Community police officer
<i>Teachers’ written feedback to 6th Grade authors: influence of gender and genre</i>	Shelley Stagg Peterson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Institute for Studies in Education • 20 district school boards
<i>Poverty and Education in Ontario Elementary Schools: A Research Collaboration</i>	Joe Flessa Darlene Ciuffetelli-Parker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario • Ontario Institute for Studies in Education • Brock University
<i>The Effect of Soccer Texts on Adolescent Boys’ Motivation and Achievement</i>	Daniela Koppeser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Windsor-Essex Catholic DSB • University of Windsor • Ministry of Education
<i>Collaborative Action Research</i>	Jenni Donohoo Sharon Johnson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Essex DSB • Wilfrid Laurier University
<i>The Early Years: A Community-Based Research and Action Collaborative</i>	Sumbal Malik Aimee Wolanski Paul Favaro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peel DSB • Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB • Human Resources and Social Development Canada • Malton Community Guiding Collaborative
<i>Étude des facteurs explicatifs de l’écart entre les résultats en littératie des filles et des garçons de la 3e à la 6e année</i>	Claire Maltais Yves Herry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L’Office de la qualité et de la responsabilité en éducation • 4 Conseils scolaires de district
<i>Fast-Track Language Learning</i>	Kara Smith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lews Castle College, UK • Lambton-Kent DSB

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<i>Research Supporting Practice in Education</i>	Amanda Cooper Shalini Mascarenhas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Institute for Studies in Education • Various others, including Canadian Education Association and district school boards
<i>An Evaluation of the Impact of Coaches and Demonstration Classes</i>	Sandra Sangster Laura Mills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barrie Region MISA PNC • Simcoe County DSB
<i>Math Connection: A TLLP Project</i>	Nicole Walter Rowan Joy Petrick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lakehead University • Lakehead DSB • Mathematics in the City & New Perspectives on Learning, New York
<i>Principals' Perceptions of Inclusionary Practices</i>	Ann Marie Borthwick Leanne Foster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Principals Council • Toronto DSB • Branksome Hall
<i>Applying ICT in School-University partnerships: Supporting teachers to become and act as agents of change</i>	Dragana Martinovic Timothy Pugh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Windsor • Grand Erie DSB • Nipissing University
<i>Sharing the journey: Investigating routes of access to postsecondary education for Aboriginal people</i>	Jean-Paul Restoule Christine Smillie-Adjarkwa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
<i>Empower Reading Program: A collaborative approach to the implementation of an empirically-supported reading intervention in schools</i>	Trisha Woehrle Edie Edwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hamilton-Wentworth DSB (E-BEST) • Hospital for Sick Children (Toronto)

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