Collaborative inquiry to accelerate literacy progress

Flaxmere College (TLIF 1-074)

For the Ministry of Education
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Project title:
Collaborative inquiry to accelerate literacy progress

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Summary

Flaxmere College’s teacher-led initiative was focused on improving teacher classroom practice and student literacy achievement through collaborative inquiry, utilising the teaching as an inquiry cycle. In line with the school’s strategic goal of improving student achievement outcomes, an important objective of the work was to “widen the spread of effective literacy practices across all learning areas and at all year levels”. Teacher collaboration was an important mechanism for progress, with weekly Professional Learning Groups (PLGs) featuring as an important strategy.

Key questions guiding the PLGs:

- How effective were the collaborative PLG inquiry groups in utilizing the teaching as inquiry cycle in supporting teacher inquiries?
- How effective were they in facilitating teacher inquiries that improved classroom practice and improved the teaching and learning of literacy?

Key questions guiding teacher inquiries:

- What impact have I had on student achievement? (How do I know?)
- What is my explanation of this? What have I noticed as a result of what I am doing?
- How effective has what I have learned and done been in promoting our students’ learning? (How do I know? Including student voice?).
- What should I keep going and what should I stop? What should I change or refine?
- What new challenges have become evident?
- What are my next learning steps?

Inquiry Team

Project Leader: Louise Anaru (principal).

The other members of the project team were: Mary Libby, Jim May-Mackenzie, Shelley Arnold, Beth Te Kiri, Lisa Coleman, Kevin Gill, and Damir Petravich.
External advisor: Dr. Mary Libby provided advice on the focus for the study and the direction for the project. She supplied the school with literacy reading and helped to develop the inquiry tools for the teachers. She had an in-depth understanding of the literacy data and provided possible next steps for the school. Dr. Libby also provided help on the methodology and report writing process.

**Background**

The rationale for the inquiry was to increase student literacy achievement by widening the spread of effective literacy practices across all learning areas and at all year levels through the implementation of effective teacher-led inquiry groups.

**The inquiry**

**Approach**

The inquiry approach was a practitioner research inquiry. Teachers collaborated in Professional Learning Groups (PLGs) to improve teaching practice and achievement. PLGs met on Friday mornings to discuss their inquiries. Teachers all focused on different aspects of classroom practice and used a variety of teaching as inquiry tools for their literacy focus. The discussions at the PLGs were dynamic. They were based on the various members' teaching as inquiry questions, and collected evidence of teacher practice.

**Monitoring and evaluation**

Measures of Learning/practice and student learning and literacy achievement that were relevant to teachers’ individual inquiries were collected. Where appropriate, digital devices were used by teachers to record and store evidence of the impact of their practice on student learning, including structured class observations and daily teacher reflections. In addition to the weekly meetings, PLGs shared their discursive analysis of data across groups. A range of both quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analysed.
Student outcome data included:

- e-asTTle reading and writing for Year 7-10 for 2015 and 2016. This included Beginning of Year, Middle of Year and End of Year data. Analysis to determine student literacy achievement was made from e-asTTle data, to evaluate shifts in achievement and next steps for literacy progress.

- NCEA Level 1-3 data for 2015 and 2016 including Level 1 NCEA literacy. The data was analysed by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and then by content specific staff who provided feedback to themselves and other staff regarding next steps for the school.

- Student surveys. There were several student surveys carried out over the two years. In 2015, Leaders of Learning carried out their own curriculum area surveys. After the review of the curriculum area surveys, consistent survey questions were created for Year 9 to 10 students. The surveys focussed on engagement, teaching and learning in class. In 2015, the school conducted a New Zealand Centre for Education Research (NZCER) survey on student wellbeing. The data was analysed by SLT and staff. In 2016, the Kia Eke Panuku survey was carried out. The information was analysed by SLT and staff.

Teacher Practice data included:

- Teacher surveys. In 2015 and 2016, a teacher perception survey was conducted on the teaching as inquiry cycle and PLGs.

- Teacher inquiries: teachers carried out their own teaching as inquiries focused on literacy. The teachers inquiries used a mix of qualitative data (such as student feedback, interviews) and quantitative (achievement data, classroom observations). This became part of the teachers' evaluation. Through staff consultation, a variety of tools were created and used for the individual inquiry. The teacher/PLG collaborative inquiries were also analysed by our external expert, Dr. Mary Libby. Analysis and feedback from Dr. Libby was provided to SLT and then to staff.
• Observations: All teachers were observed using the Flaxmere Way observation tool. Feedback and feed-forward was provided to the teachers. An analysis was also made of all the observations in the school for Term 2 and Term 4 each year. Additionally, the frequency of the teachers meeting the different criteria of the observation tool was collated. In 2016, literacy criteria were also added to the observation tool.

**Key findings**

**Impacts on teaching**

• There is clear evidence that teacher practice improved between 2015 and 2016. Teachers considered that the teaching inquiry cycle improved their practice and student achievement and individual inquiries showed that teachers were able to integrate new strategies into their practice. Across all inquiries, the teachers had used their inquiries in such a way that they changed their teaching practices and strategies to meet the identified needs of their students.

For example: An English teacher used a range of new strategies based on e-asTTle analysis at the beginning of the year. The teacher worked with an individual student to find readings that were of interest to the student. Summarising and annotating strategies were used to meet the learning needs of the student.

Another example: This teacher worked with the PE/Health PLG in 2016. The teacher’s inquiry focused on writing and reading for meaning. The target student was a Year 13 PE student. The teacher planned and implemented a range of literacy support for the student (including word banks, graphic organisers and writing frames).
Impacts on students

- There was a marked shift in achievement for writing for the target students. For Year 9 students the effect size of educational impact was 0.544; for Year 10 writing the effect size was 0.696, showing a medium and large educational impact respectively. For 2016, Year 10 writing effect size was 0.611. However, Year 9 writing progress saw a moderate effect size of 0.457. According to 2015 e-asTTle data, the effect size of Year 9 reading growth was 0.270; for Year 10 it was 0.477.

Impacts on the school

- PLGs increased collegiality amongst staff. Teachers also enjoyed sharing their practice and seeing positive effects of their inquiry on students.

Key implications

This project reinforced for leaders the importance of having clear measurable goals and of following the inquiry process. In the future, objectives will be limited to a single goal which will be evaluated at the end of each term. Teachers will record and evaluate similar data to strengthen the robustness of learning conversations in their groups.

The collaborative teaching as inquiry approach will be continued at Flaxmere College as it has led a change to teaching practice in the school and is linked to positive student achievement. The next step for the school is to strengthen the process in the school.

Plans for sharing the findings

The findings of the report will be shared with other organisations. The report will be shared with Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated, as the project aligns with the iwi strategic plan of the iwi. This year, Flaxmere College has joined the recently formed Flaxmere Community of Learning (CoL). A strategic aim for the CoL will be improving achievement outcomes for students.
The Flaxmere College inquiry project will be shared with the CoL, showing a possible blueprint for improvement. The project could also be shared with schools of similar contexts.

Reference List


**For further information**

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