

IMPLEMENTING A STRUCTURED LITERACY APPROACH:

A COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

by

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Abstract

This study examined ways in which members of a collaborative inquiry group (CIG) worked together for the purpose of improving students' reading skills in the early primary grades. The CIG specifically focused on using aspects of a structured literacy approach in the classroom. Data was collected through written reflections, observations, and interviews. As this was an action research study, the principal investigator was also a part of the study.

The three themes that emerged from the data were teacher efficacy, professional growth, and collaborative inquiry. The results of this study confirm that there are many benefits to participating in a CIG. Particularly, teachers appreciated being active contributors to their own learning, and being treated as experts in their field. The study confirms that teachers place value on working collectively to solve problems related to meeting the diverse needs of their students. While the results pointed to the benefits of implementing a structured literacy approach, there remains a need for further research to evaluate the impact of this approach on student learning.

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Dedication

This paper was written in loving memory of my father, John Emil Tibolt, who sadly passed away before the completion of my capstone project. My dad was one of my biggest cheerleaders. He modelled a strong work ethic and was meticulous in everything he did. He was a great role model. My dad was an educator first and foremost, in the traditional and non-traditional sense. He was excited about this new learning journey I was embarking on in my education, and I know he would have been proud of my accomplishment in completing my Master of Education.

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Glossary, or acronyms and symbols

- i. **CIG** – collaborative inquiry group
- ii. **PLC** – professional learning community
- iii. **CFG** – Critical Friends Group

Introduction

Ever since my days as a young teacher candidate I have been passionate about doing what is best for my students in order to shape an environment that supports learning. I would regularly reflect on my teaching practice, and I would question myself as to whether my instruction could be improved, and if I could more effectively engage my students. In fact, the term ‘reflective practitioner’ was written on all of my teaching reports by my mentors. I believed then, and continue to believe, that all students deserve the best that we can give. I also believe that the use of self-reflection is necessary in order to achieve this. After reflecting on our beliefs and practices, it is important to examine the corresponding impact on student learning and well-being (MacKinnon, 2018).

In my over twenty years in teaching, I have taught at the grade two and three level, and I have worked as an Early Intervention teacher of reading. I have also taken on a variety of leadership roles within schools and within my school district. One of these roles included being a lead teacher who modeled small group guided reading for teachers and teacher candidates within the school district. As an early primary teacher, I have felt a special responsibility in the task of teaching reading to students and ensuring that our ‘at-risk’ learners are receiving high quality instruction. For the past two years, I have been a member of the Teacher Leadership group in my school district. I have enjoyed working collaboratively with teachers and administrators to discuss and problem solve how to better meet the needs of our students.

This graduate journey I have embarked on has stemmed from my continued passion for building excellence in instructional practice, and a desire to learn more about how we can collectively work towards achieving success for all our students. If the knowledge about best

teaching practice is available, I believe we should do what we can to encourage others to ‘up their game’ and join in on the journey toward achieving success for our students. As Rosalynn Carter, former First Lady, said, “A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don’t necessarily want to go, but ought to be” (Gallagher et al., 2018, p. 1). I want to be that leader.

Purpose

Over the past nine years at my current school, I have seen many initiatives come and go; many embraced, and many not. I have known several teachers who initially said they were open to improving their teaching practice and wanted to learn newer, better ways of teaching; but, when it came down to doing something about it, they often bowed out or seemed to be fearful of letting go of their longtime ‘tried and true’ practices. Many teachers claim they have no time to engage in reflection and meaningful collaboration. I am curious as to how this mindset can be changed. It is beneficial for educators to embrace an explorer’s mindset and be open to new learning rather than continue with the same familiar practices (Gallagher, 2010). I do not believe it is acceptable to do the ‘same old’ thing day after day if students are not actively engaged in their learning or achieving success.

In my experience, some teachers say that they want to collaborate and engage in reflective practice, but they are either not comfortable with this idea yet, or they do not fully realize that they must first open themselves up to being vulnerable so that true, authentic learning can happen. Vulnerability can be a significant barrier to mustering the courage needed to learn and grow (Brown, 2018). Teachers need to be courageous when reflecting on their own practice in the company of others, and the development of strong trusting relationships is a first important step to fostering open and fluent communication within a professional community. Although

relationship building can be a slow process, it is a vital one. Educators are more motivated to collaborate and be open to new learning when they are in a collegial climate of trust (Adams et al., 2019). And, when we feel valued and appreciated, we are more likely to be willing to take risks. Teachers will appreciate and value collaboration when they have a voice in what is happening at their school (Clausen, Aquino, & Wideman, 2009; DeLuca, Bolden, & Chan, 2017; Kuh, 2016). Otherwise, they may disengage from the practice of reflection and collaboration with other teachers.

Although the collaborative process for the purpose of enhancing professional learning has many challenges, I have had many meaningful and inspiring experiences when engaging in collaborative learning with other educators. I have had the pleasure of working with numerous teachers over the years who are as passionate as I am about learning new ideas and taking risks. According to Gonzalez (2013), “by finding the positive, supportive, energetic teachers in your school and sticking close to them, you can improve your job satisfaction more than with any other strategy.” I believe that by having one or more like-minded educators to work with, it may be possible that together we can support other teachers along their learning journeys. By implementing a collaborative structure within a school, it could encourage more teacher participation; this is my overall hope and vision as an educational leader.

Therefore, the overall purpose of this study is to explore the nature of collaboration and reflective practice within a learning community of educators. In this paper, I will examine how to lead for improvement and change by building an organizational culture in which collaboration and reflection are welcomed and embedded in daily practice.

“It is increasingly recognized that if schools are to achieve better results with their

students, it must be a collective endeavor rather than a collection of individual efforts”
(Danielson, 2006, p. 15).

By implementing a collaborative inquiry group (CIG) within my school, I hope to promote professional growth and build capacity in our teaching staff. It is a most worthwhile endeavor to continually examine the extent to which our instructional practice supports the learning of our students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). The overall goal is to achieve a greater impact on our students; their needs should be at the forefront of everything we do as educators.

Research Inquiry

Many questions are arising for me in relation to this inquiry. For instance, I am hoping to learn how leaders can empower others to work together collaboratively. As a leader, how do I model authentic communication so that others feel that their voices matter? How do I ensure that my own assumptions and biases do not enter learning conversations? I hope to learn how a staff of educators can have open, honest dialogue, where people have their say, and hear others’ perspectives. In this way, we can collectively move forward in our planning, problem solving, and decision making.

Two other questions arise in relation to this: (1) How can I, as a school leader, encourage our school-based collaboration groups to become more focused on professional learning that is centered around meeting the diverse needs of our students? And (2) how can consistently reflecting on one’s teaching practices impact both teacher and student learning? Specifically, I am wondering how the practice of reflection can become a part of teachers’ continual learning,

and how collaboration with others can support this. How can regular dialogue be a part of reflective practice, and how can this influence educators' professional growth?

As a leader, my goal is to foster professional growth and improvement in others. By understanding students' needs and also by reflecting on their practice, teachers and school leaders will be able to engage in "inquiry guided research into their own practice" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 141). But, how do we cultivate teachers as researchers of their own practice? I believe that ongoing collaborative inquiry can help, and should be imbedded into the culture of the school. The challenge is in finding ways to motivate teachers, and to sustain their interest in maintaining a collaborative environment that nurtures reflective practice. Thus, my research study question is: "How can a collaborative inquiry group (CIG) support the implementation of a structured literacy approach in the early primary grades?"

Scholarly Significance

My research has led me to further explore the role that a CIG can play in schools. My core beliefs about teachers and their desire to serve students is the starting point for my inquiry into the benefits of collaboration and reflection to encourage growth in instructional practice. As a leader, I feel it is important to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect and examine their practice to further develop their professional growth. This will hopefully affect the learning and overall success of the students they are working with. I am wondering about the actual effect that professional learning has on students' success in school. A successful CIG could promote the implementation of future CIGs within the same school, and within the school district. If successful, teachers being critically responsive to the needs and concerns of their students will become common practice (Brookfield, 1995). In this study, teachers will hopefully learn

valuable strategies in how to better teach students in the area of literacy, and specifically in reading.

Literature Review

The trends in teacher learning and teacher collaboration over the past several decades have highlighted the importance of the evolution of professional learning in a variety of ways. As such, within this literature review I will explore the key concepts associated with two main areas of research: collaborative inquiry and reflective practice. These concepts include such ideas as professional learning communities, the cycle of inquiry, collaborative dialogue, and building a culture of trust. This literature review also includes a discussion of current and historical research and concludes with the barriers to the successful implementation of a CIG. The resulting analyses serves to present a reasonable argument for further study into the impact that collaboration and reflection have in improving teachers' instructional practice.

The Evolution of Learning Communities

The literature on the evolution of professional learning presents a history of the development of collaborative learning communities. Initially, there were a variety of definitions for professional learning communities (PLCs). "Though first named by Shirley Hord in 1997, basic ideas about PLCs were already circulating under the various banners of deliberately designed collaborative cultures, communities of practice, learning organizations, and professional communities involving reflective dialogue about practice" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. 89). Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) discuss three generations of thought in their description of a PLC. The first-generation describes PLCs as:

1. Communities where educators are committed to sharing a vision for student and teacher learning,
2. Learning communities where student and teacher learning improves, and collectively teachers learn to solve problems together, and
3. Professional learning communities where teachers' ideas are shared and valued, and dialogue and feedback are used to improve professional practice (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. 90).

In the second generation, in addition to the earlier conception, DuFour (2004) added his interpretation that a PLC should include goals for student learning, collaborative teams, action plans, and a focus on student achievement results. With the third generation there is a shift to making PLC strategies more long term and teacher led, thereby creating sustained and systemic cultures of collaborative inquiry which lead to a wider range of data and test scores (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This is the thought state for where we currently are.

Reynolds (2016) shares similar insights to DuFour regarding PLCs. She lists five key characteristics for creating effective PLCs that have student achievement as the main goal. These characteristics include collaboration, building a learning culture of trust, having both a goal-oriented plan and a trustworthy leader, and all members maintaining a committed focus on student achievement. DuFour, who was interviewed by Theirs (2016) about collaboration and the current pressures on the teaching profession, states that “the way we’re going to improve schools is by creating a culture in which teams of teachers are helping one another get better” (p. 12). By taking collective responsibility in achieving goals, teachers work as teams to improve learning for all. Stoll et al. (2006) describe PLCs as “a group of people sharing and critically

interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (as cited in Kelly and Cherkowski, 2015, p. 3). In this way, the learning becomes driven by teachers.

Collaborative Inquiry

As PLCs evolved, they began to include teacher inquiry as an integral component of their professional learning groups. Some researchers concluded that, “Inquiry is not a project, an ‘initiative’, or an ‘innovation’, but a professional way of being” (Timperley et al., 2014, as cited in Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018, p. 100). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) describe teacher inquiry as “systematic intentional studies by teachers of their own practice” (p. 2). According to the research, teachers working together can be an effective way to bring about change for continuous improvement (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018; Kaser & Halbert, 2014). Many researchers view collaborative inquiry as a means to develop this collaboration and reflective practice among educators (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016, DeLuca et al., 2017; Donohoo & Velasco, 2018; Ermeling, 2009; Kaser & Halbert; Kuh, 2016) where “collaborative inquiry engages teachers to jointly inquire into a shared problem of practice” (DeLuca et. al, 2015, p. 67).

The literature discusses the benefits of using a collaborative inquiry model to improve teaching and learning, for both educators and students. DeLuca et al. (2017) discuss the importance of acknowledging teachers as experts; that it is important to recognize the collective knowledge that teachers already bring with them. Research suggests there is more motivation for teachers to belong to a PLC when they feel a sense of ownership about their learning and are provided with the opportunities to be a leader in their own learning process (Clausen et al., 2009; DeLuca et al., 2017; Kuh, 2016; Reynolds, 2016, Theirs, 2016).

Kaser and Halbert (2014) conducted research on how inquiry learning networks deepened professional learning in British Columbia, Canada. These authors suggest six key design factors to support inquiry networks to transform whole systems:

1. Clarity of purpose through a shared focus on important goals.
2. Collaborative inquiry that stimulates evidence-informed learning conversations
3. Trusting relationships that build social capital
4. Persistent leadership for learning
5. Active evidence-seeking regarding impact directly linked to an ongoing theory of action
6. An interdependent connection between the learning communities of the individual schools and the network as a whole (p. 207-208).

Dewey (1998), in the form of a five-step model, offers a different and equally plausible, framework (as cited in Adams et al., 2019). These five steps include:

1. Identifying curiosities;
2. Intellectualizing the context;
3. Hypothesizing strategies;
4. Reasoning through possible explanations;
5. Testing through action (p. 142).

While both of these models include the identification of a purpose or question to guide the CIG, Dewey's (1998) five-step model appears to be more action-oriented and more cyclical in approach. This is significant when we consider how educators engage in their own cycle of

inquiry that involves determining a course of action after learning about new and different instructional approaches, and then testing these approaches with the students they teach.

The Cycle of Inquiry

Several authors suggest that teacher inquiry groups are predicated on the notion of cyclical or spiral inquiry. In education, professional learning is not a singular event. Multiple cycles of questioning, deconstructing, reconstructing, and actualizing practices happen in a time frame that varies with each individual (Adams et. al, 2019). A spiral of inquiry consists of these stages: question, plan, engage in new learning, implement the new learning, assess the effectiveness of this learning, and then consider what comes next (Kaser & Halbert, 2014). Questioning and reflection are key to being successful throughout the inquiry process (Kaser & Halbert, 2014). As teachers learn new instructional practices and put these into implementation, the collaborative inquiry team considers the impact on student learning before taking the next steps to refine their practice; this is meant to be an ongoing process (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016). Teams of teachers may cycle back a number of times as they experiment with different approaches in order to determine the professional learning to address students' needs (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016).

The cycle of inquiry process is often used by teachers in their professional growth plans and has been adopted by many school districts within British Columbia (Kaser & Halbert, 2014). Research has shown that some educators have been observed to demonstrate impressive gains in overall growth of practice when using inquiry-based growth plans (Adams et. al, 2019). The spiral of inquiry model developed by Kaser and Halbert (2014) includes scanning, focusing, developing a hunch, new professional learning, taking action, and checking (the evidence). This particular inquiry was designed for networks of schools in British Columbia.

Ciampa and Gallagher's (2016) study examining the effects of collaborative inquiry and vertical team teaching on literacy instruction resonated with me. Their findings reveal that teacher collaborative inquiry fosters ongoing dialogue within a four-stage cyclical process (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016). This process involves planning (identifying a need, selecting a learning focus, determining the professional learning to meet the focus), acting (implementing evidence-based strategies), evaluating the outcomes, and reflecting on the results (p. 154). In this case, the teachers involved found that collaboration was associated with changes in literacy instructional practices and improvements in teachers' self-efficacy (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016). Similarly, Kelly and Cherkowski (2015) noted how teachers' professional learning experiences were transferring to shifts in their literacy teaching practices as they learned different strategies from collaborating with their colleagues.

Collaborative Dialogue

The literature reveals that collaborative learning communities place significant value on collaborative dialogue. Kelly and Cherkowski's (2015) case study examine the effects of a PLC in changing literacy instructional practice for teachers. They found that PLCs provided a structure for engaging in collegial dialogue. This dialogue focused on what was learned through reflective practice with regards to teaching and student learning. It seems that talking about their teaching practices encouraged many teachers to confront assumptions they had about teaching (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015). According to Kelly and Cherkowski (2015), "PLCs should be places where focused conversations and inquiries lead to improvements" (p. 7). These authors further explain that conversations need to be centered on teaching and learning, and not just provide an opportunity for teachers to engage in random talk. Ultimately, the study reveals that collaborative dialogue within the PLC turned into an overall positive experience (Kelly &

Cherkowski, 2015). In this case, meaningful conversations in PLC sessions led to ongoing, informal conversations in schools after the study ended. Similar findings were found in a case study examining teachers' collaboration and reflective practice (Kuh, 2016). According to Kuh (2016), the Critical Friends Group (CFG) model was successful in large part due to the use of generative dialogue in their new job-embedded professional development that happened on-site through regularly scheduled conversations with teachers, and literacy coaches in the CFG program.

Studies show the importance in identifying the goals and overall intention of the work in order to make the best use of the collaboration time, and to ensure these goals are directed toward improving instructional practice and student learning (Ciampa & Gallagher; 2016; Ermeling, 2009; Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015; Kuh, 2016). "As the collaborative inquiry process unfolds, one of the first steps is for teams to identify a focus for their work" (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016, p.33). Much of the literature suggests using protocols to guide conversations within a CIG. According to Easton (2009), "protocols are processes that help groups achieve deep understanding through dialogue", and "provide guidelines for conversation based on norms that everyone agrees upon in order to make the dialogue safe and effective" (p. 1). Easton (2009) further explains that protocols help educators build collaborative communities. Kuh (2016) agrees, stating: "protocol-based experiences embody a model of reflective practice in which teachers can anchor their work" (p. 307). The educators in the CFG case study found the use of protocols at each meeting to be highly beneficial in keeping them on track and focused on their learning targets (Kuh, 2016).

Culture of Trust

A significant theme that emerged throughout the literature reviewed was the importance of building a culture of trust and respect among educators within a CIG. “Trust is the glue that holds teams and organizations together” (Brown, 2018, p. 222). “Trust is built through respectful listening to diverse points of view, a process which requires honesty and courage” (Kaser & Halbert, 2014, p. 213). When educators have mutual respect for one another, feeling that their thoughts and opinions matter, they are more likely to open up, engage in self-reflection, and take risks with their professional learning (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016; Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015). By establishing mutual acceptable norms for functioning in a team, group members felt more of a willingness to engage in the inquiry process and work toward improving their professional learning for the benefit of students (Clausen et al., 2009; Kuh, 2016). Clausen et al. (2009) found that following these established norms helped to create positive and caring relationships among teachers, administrators, and other support staff. Some researchers reported that teachers appreciated and felt respected when asked to share their thoughts; subsequently, they felt a willingness to engage further within their CIGs. “When the trust is in place, the collaborative learning is more powerful” (DeLuca et al., 2017, p. 72). Thus, trust is necessary in order to support teachers to begin the process of reflecting on their practice.

Reflective Practice

A recurring theme in the literature on CIGs was the importance of reflective practice. Schön (1983) defines reflective practice as the idea that educators and other professionals engage in continual inquiry into the impact of their practice (as cited in Adams et al., 2019). They reflect on practice, while engaged in practice, and after they have engaged in practice. Cochran-Smith

and Lytle (2004) suggest that teachers construct knowledge about teaching and learning by reflecting in and on classroom practice.

Brookfield (1995) proposes four lenses that teachers can engage with for the purposes of critical reflection: the autobiographical, the students' eyes, our colleagues' experiences, and theoretical literature. Brookfield (1995) purports that, "viewing what we do through these different lenses alerts us to distorted or incomplete aspects of our assumptions that need further investigation" (p. 29). When teachers are able to look at their practice from multiple viewpoints, they are more able to see things in a different way. Brookfield (1995), when describing using colleagues' experiences, states that, "by engaging in critical conversations with them, we can notice aspects of our practice that are normally hidden from us...and we see our practice in a new light" (p. 30). Additionally, he said, "Analyzing our autobiographies as learners has important implications for how we teach" (p. 31). There is significant value to critical self-reflection, and reflection through the approach of learning conversations within a CIG. "Talking to colleagues about what we do unravels the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 35).

Several authors suggest that collaborative learning communities are successful when reflective practice is encouraged and sustained by the educators within the groups (Clausen et al., 2009; Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016; Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015; Kaser & Halbert, 2014; Kuh, 2016). "Reflective practice is a challenging, demanding, and often trying process that is most successful when supported as a collaborative rather than an isolated activity" (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016). Likewise, in the study involving CFGs, Kuh's (2016) research suggests that "reflective practice as an activity does not simply exist in isolation but is dependent upon socially constructed contexts in order to develop and thrive" (p. 295). Ciampa and Gallagher

(2016) concluded that by participating in reflective practice, teachers engaged in dialogue with colleagues around their own instructional practices.

Kelly and Cherkowski (2015) conducted a case study about a professional development initiative called Changing Results for Young Readers in British Columbia. This study investigated the effects of implementing collaboration and reflective practice to further develop teachers' instructional capacity to teach literacy. The findings in this study reveal that besides engaging in reflection through dialogue, educators also made use of interviews and written reflective journals as part of this process (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015).

Barriers to the Implementation of a CIG

While the literature on teacher professional learning has generated a vast knowledge base on its many successes and benefits, there are limitations and barriers that have emerged as well. A major barrier is the need for dedicated time for teachers to engage in reflective practice. A perceived lack of time to co-plan and participate in reflective practice outside of instructional time was a common complaint among teachers (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016; DeLuca et al., 2017). This time is necessary in order for teachers to develop a reflective practice that is truly focused on what students do, think, say, and shift their instructional practices accordingly to meet student needs (Kuh, 2016).

The lack of ability to transfer professional learning into teaching practice was a barrier that was also reported in some studies. Though many teachers were pleased with their newfound professional learning, some did not apply their newly learned instructional practices into the classroom setting (DeLuca et al., 2017). Some teachers reported not feeling comfortable or confident enough to try new instructional practices in the classroom, and some teachers reverted back to their 'old ways' (Kuh, 2016).

Reynolds (2016) acknowledges that working collaboratively can be a barrier when teachers do not share the same values about learning together. Likewise, Ciampa and Gallagher (2016), conclude that perceptions around collaboration are more positive when those involved hold similar beliefs about teaching and learning. Forming shared opinions and beliefs is not an easy task as it means teachers must face previously held biases and judgments around their own instructional practices (Ciampa and Gallagher, 2016). “Key factors to sustaining a collaborative inquiry and partnership are teacher input regarding what and how they will learn, as well as teacher choice regarding professional learning pace and direction” (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016, p. 168). In some case studies, teachers reported feeling frustrated when others involved in the collaborative inquiry would not listen to their ideas (DeLuca et al., 2017). Many teachers felt vulnerable and were fearful that if they participated in a CIG they would be exposed for their own lack of knowledge or experience (DeLuca et al., 2017).

As discussed above, there are potential barriers related to implementing a CIG such as the time needed to meet, and the complexities involved in working collaboratively. However, the CIG process offers opportunities to reduce these barriers. For example, the time factor can be addressed by creative scheduling where time is built into the daily schedule for teachers to meet. As well, bringing a diverse group together will always have challenges, but as Mitchell and Sackney (2009) put, “Collaborative work opportunities can be a way to breathe new life and energy into teaching and learning” (as cited in Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015, p. 4). The aim of this research study is to uncover the value of how the CIG process can promote collaboration and reflective practices between educators for the benefit of student learning.

Conceptual Framework

As a teacher who has previously participated in collaborative inquiry and is keenly interested in reflective practice, these two processes are the conceptual framework that will guide this research study. This framework is underpinned by using an action-research approach to generate new learning. Action research encourages educators to work collaboratively and rethink the ways they evaluate their teaching and student learning (Hendricks, 2017). Thus, action-research fits this research study “in its capacity to help individuals, small groups, or even entire school faculties increase their understanding and improve their practice” (Allen and Calhoun, 1998, as cited in Hendricks, 2017, p. 3). For the focus of this study, I chose this conceptual framework to answer my inquiry question: "How can a collaborative inquiry group support the implementation of a structured literacy approach in the early primary grades?"

Methodology

For over a decade I have taught grade two and three at a large semi-rural elementary school in the Fraser Valley. Overall, the primary teachers at this school have built up a solid professional learning community environment. These teachers are friendly and supportive of each other, and often collaborate on various aspects of their daily classroom learning activities. However, the meetings often lack a clear focus or direction, and the use of reflective practice is not commonplace. As such, I wondered how we could improve our own teaching practices if we were able to come together in a more structured CIG. “In collaborative inquiry, teachers routinely explore problems, issues, or differences of practice together in order to improve or transform what they are doing” (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018, p. 111).

In the area of literacy, a few of the early primary teachers, myself included, wondered why some of our students were not meeting expectations in reading. A ‘newer’, more structured approach to literacy instruction was suggested by one of the teachers earlier in the year. I wondered if there were benefits to this approach that would help some of our struggling readers. This led me to my inquiry question: “In what ways can a collaborative inquiry group support the implementation of a structured literacy approach in the early primary grades?”

Though I am passionate about being a reflective practitioner in all areas of education, for the purpose of this study I focused on how a small CIG, consisting of six teachers, could work together with the overall goal of improving students’ reading skills. My hope was that this inquiry-based professional development would lead to positive changes in our teaching practices. My area of inquiry fits into the constructivist paradigm as members of the CIG actively constructed their own knowledge based on their own experiences in the teaching of reading to early primary grade students. My ontological assumptions include the notion that people see the world in different ways, and so, each teacher in the CIG might have different perspectives about the most effective way to teach reading based on their own experiences. These perspectives could change over time as we continued to work together to explore better ways to meet the needs of struggling readers.

My epistemological assumption is that because I am invested in this process as an early primary teacher, I needed to be an active participant within this CIG at the school with my colleagues. I was subjective in my interpretation of the data as I was embedded in this context along with the participants. Since I was participating in the CIG with the other participants in the study, I needed to be conscious of my own assumptions, biases, and perceptions.

The methodology I used was qualitative. I chose this methodology as the nature of this study was to learn through the richness of conversation, and to be able to use a variety of sources to learn more detailed information about an issue. The open-ended questions used in qualitative methodology allows for the participants' thoughts and feelings to be heard and accounted for. Initially, quantitative data from *PM Benchmark Reading Assessments* was intended to be used as well at the onset of the study in order to provide information regarding potential targeted teaching practices for specific students. However, these assessments were not used as the CIG participants chose to focus solely on learning through conversation and sharing ideas amongst each other. Reflections and written responses to open-ended questions were also used to track our learning throughout this study.

Method

Action research was the method I used as the participants in the CIG were also co-researchers alongside me. Stringer (2014) defines action research as “a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to the problems that confront their everyday lives” (p. 1). This method appealed to me due to the relevance of the study and the immediate application to the classroom. As Sagor (2000) states, in action research “relevance is guaranteed because the focus of each research project is determined by the researchers, who are also the primary consumers of the findings” (p. 1). It was important to me that all teachers in the CIG felt that their thoughts and ideas were listened to and valued. Not only would this research have a direct impact on our students, but it should further develop teachers' professional capacity through critical reflection (James et al., 2008). Reflective practice is at the heart of action research and is why I felt most drawn to this method. Hendricks (2017) states that “the principle of systematic inquiry is based on ongoing reflection” (p.1).

The role of reflection on personal experiences played a large part in the collection of qualitative data. Hendricks (2017) describes the action research process as “a series of steps in which the action researcher reflects, acts, and evaluates” (p. 1). Sagor (2000) defines action research as a cyclical seven step process. These seven steps, which become an endless cycle for the inquiring teachers, are the following:

1. Selecting a focus
2. Clarifying theories
3. Identifying research questions
4. Collecting data
5. Analyzing data
6. Reporting results
7. Taking informed action (p.2).

My goal for this CIG, was that, through the process of critical reflection teachers would identify the focus (improving students’ reading skills), propose solutions (implementing various teaching methods in a structured literacy approach), evaluate the effectiveness of the solution, and then act again in adjusting instruction as needed. “Results inform practice. Through action research, educators reflect and act, continually improving their practice” (Hendricks, 2017, p. 11).

Data Sources

Context. This study was conducted after attaining ethics approval (see Appendix A). It took place in a large semi-rural elementary school in the Fraser Valley region of British Columbia with a population of 420 students from kindergarten to grade five. The school was

organized into three wings: early primary, middle grades, and upper intermediate. The majority of the population is of European descent.

This research study was conducted during a global pandemic. Covid-19 altered regular school life as of spring of 2020. New safety protocols and procedures were in place so that in-class learning continued. Classes in the school were organized into learning cohorts for the purpose of minimizing the potential mixing of the student population. Recess and lunch outside play times were staggered for this reason as well. It should be noted that within the context of this pandemic, my research results could have been potentially affected as educators continued to cope with constraints around the ability to hold meetings, maintain physical distancing, and increased stress levels. Fortunately, meetings with staff and teaching were able to continue in-person throughout this study.

Participants. The participants were a purposeful sample of educators who taught the early primary grades. These grades included kindergarten, grade one, and grade two. Prior to recruitment of participants for this study, four teachers expressed interest in experimenting with a ‘newer’ approach to teaching reading. This structured literacy approach, or science of reading as it is also referred to, is largely based on the teaching of phonics in reading instruction. Many advocates of this approach promote the idea that students need explicit teaching of the essential skills of phonological awareness and phonics in the early stages of reading development. This approach is best suited to young learners in the early primary grades and was the reason for my purposeful sampling. In this school district teachers were offered the option to participate in afterschool collaboration professional development sessions. Participation in these afterschool sessions equated to three days off in lieu of a regularly scheduled professional development day. Six sessions typically happened from the fall to the spring, and occurred monthly. However, due

to the pandemic, the sessions were reduced to three and did not begin until January 2021. It was the intent of many of the early primary teachers at this school to use these optional afterschool professional development sessions to learn more about the structured literacy approach to teaching reading.

In January, prior to the first session of our professional development collaboration meetings, I delivered the invitation to participate letter to the teachers who expressed interest and were currently beginning to work with this structured literacy approach. There were six participants interested in this study. I explained the letter to them and then gave interested participants the letter of consent. Interested participants were asked to sign the letter of consent and return it to me, the principal investigator, either in person, or by scanning and emailing the signed form. This letter of consent outlined the purpose, objectives, and procedures for the study. This letter also detailed the study's potential benefits, potential harms/risks, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and how the results were to be disseminated. Information regarding withdrawal from the study was explained, and contact information was given to the participants should they have further questions or concerns. Six participants gave their consent in writing.

Data Tools. As the premise of this study was to determine how a CIG could support the implementation of effective reading instruction, it was important to first examine our own thoughts and ideas around reading instruction. Open-ended questions (Appendix B) were asked to engage the participants in meaningful reflection around their reading instruction before and after implementation of the structured literacy approach. These questions were asked formally via email prior to the first CIG meeting, and then again via email after the last CIG meeting in the study. Participants gave their responses by email. Sample questions included:

- What do you think about when I say reading instruction?

- Describe your instructional practice in regard to reading. What do you think is important? Why? What has worked well, and what are you wondering about?

Observational data in the form of field notes was recorded by me in a double entry journal as the CIG participated in discourse around the topic. Field notes were kept throughout the study to make note of information about the structured literacy implementation, participant questions, responses, and surprises that arose for the participants during the conversations. As recommended, notes were entered into a journal regularly (Hendricks, 2017). Finally, my own thoughts were recorded later as well since I was an active participant in the study.

In-depth interviews were used to gather data from the participants as they shared their perspectives about the inquiry research process. Each participant was interviewed once during the course of the six-week study. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed with all identifying information removed. The information was anonymized, and confidentiality was preserved as much as possible. However, due to the nature of the CIG the confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Some of the sample interview questions included:

- Can you tell me about your experience with implementing this structured literacy approach? Could you share a story about any of your experiences?
- Tell me your thoughts in participating in the collaborative inquiry group. What do you feel is successful or challenging?

(See Appendix B.)

To ensure reliability, the data was shared and examined by participants so that they had a chance to authenticate what was represented as their thoughts and ideas. Some participants opted to change the wording from the data so that it more accurately represented their ideas. Ideally, after analyzing and reporting the results, all members of the CIG would be able to determine the

action to be taken (instructional practice to implement) or begin the cyclical research process again as ‘insider researchers’ investigating their own practices. This process was in the beginning stages at the end of the research study.

Data Analyses

For the purposes of time management and in order to help understand the participants’ perspectives, data was typically analyzed as it was gathered. As is the nature of action research, “a researcher continually reflects on what is occurring during the study and makes changes to the research plan as necessary” (Hendricks, 2017, p. 67). Hendricks (2017) described the process for analyzing qualitative forms of data using a five-phase cycle presented by Yin (2015) that follows the process of analyzing and interpreting the data. I have used these five phases to explain the steps in data analyses for my study (p. 123).

1. **Compiling:** All qualitative data was compiled and sorted in text format.

Data gathered from the written reflections, interview audio recordings, and observations during the CIG meetings were assembled. A double-entry journal was used to keep track of observations in the form of field notes. Member checks took place to ensure participants’ actions and responses were accurately represented. This increased credibility as the member checks involved discussing the data with the participants of the study in order to determine if participants’ thoughts and ideas were fairly captured (Hendricks, 2017).

2. **Disassembling:** Data was sorted into categories through a coding process.

Descriptive coding was used to determine the categories (Saldana, 2011). “This coding approach is particularly useful when you have different types of data gathered for one study, such as interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents [written reflections]” (p.104). Topics that showed up repeatedly in the data were coded using key words gleaned from the participants

through discourse. These codes (primarily nouns) were highlighted in the written data collected, and notes were made in the margins of the pages of the transcripts. With the double-entry journal kept by the researcher, the left page was used for field notes and the right page was used to make note of codes that came up, including participants' quotes within the text that illustrated the codes. Different coloured highlighters were used to keep track of both the codes and all summarized ideas that emerged from the data. Codes were highlighted in the double entry journal for the field notes, on the interview transcripts, and on the written reflections. Further notes (observations, questions, surprises) from the interview and reflection data were kept in the researcher journal. Powerful quotes from participants were recorded in the researcher journal as examples for each of the various codes. Corresponding quotes and codes from the written response and CIG data were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to prepare for the next step of analysis. (See appendix C for an example of this Excel spreadsheet.) Additionally, a three-column table was used in a Word document to record initial and final codes for the interview data.

3. Reassembling: Coded data was reassembled into themes by organizing them into categories.

“For initial analysis, descriptive codes are clustered into similar categories to detect such patterns as frequency, interrelationship, and initial work for grounded theory development” (Saldana, 2011, p.104). As such, a collection of codes was organized into themes in relation to the research question and my specific learning objectives. The clustering technique was used to sort coded data into categories and themes that emerged (Miles et al., 2014). Themes summarized the meaning of the data. I organized the themes so that they were sequential and

showed a connection to each other. The Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and three-column Word document were used to enter the themes after grouping collections of codes together.

4. Interpreting: Reassembled data was represented in order to tell the story revealed in the data.

Saldana (2011) explains that summative statements are generated from an interpretive review of the data corpus and then supported and illustrated through narrative or reconstructed stories. In my study I learned from the data collected through fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and written reflections. Sagor (2000) offers two important questions to think about when data is reassembled: “What is the story told by the data? Why did the story play itself out that way” (p. 4)? This ‘story’ revealed participants’ thoughts about the CIG, their reflections about the implementation of a structured literacy approach to reading, and how they perceived their current and future reading instruction.

5. Concluding: Conclusions were drawn from the interpretation of the data.

Findings from the study addressed the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of the research being investigated (Miles et al., 2014). With help from the participants, who member checked most of the data, I was able to draw some conclusions about how a CIG encouraged reflective practice among teachers. I was also able to determine that the implementation of a structured literacy approach was considered effective by many participants in teaching reading to students in the early primary grades.

Managing Bias. At the onset of the study, I disclosed to the participants that I planned to be an active member of the CIG throughout the course of the study. To my mind, I was a co-researcher along with the participants. Hendricks (2017) explains that action research is not only about gathering information on others but also about learning about yourself. I feel that I learned

just as much in this study as my participants. Before the study began, I engaged in reflexive inquiry where one “considers past experiences and actions in order to understand how they affect present and future actions and thoughts” (Hendricks, 2017, p. 16). I used reflexive inquiry to consider how I taught reading in the early primary grades. I acknowledged my strong feelings about the importance of using authentic texts to teach reading, and that I currently engaged in minimal phonics instruction with my students. I was honest with the participants about my current assumptions and pre-conceived ideas around reading instruction. Though I could not remove my own bias, I was transparent.

Since I was participating in the CIG with the other participants in the study, I needed to be conscious of my own assumptions, biases, and perceptions. In addition to using the double entry journal for recording observational data, I used this journal to record my ideas, assumptions, questions, surprises, and biases. Hendricks (2017) states, “Referring to these biases as you collect and analyze data will help keep biases in check” (p. 66). When analyzing the results for this study I was able to examine how I dealt with my biases by using written evidence from this journal. These journal observations and reflections also served as documentation for different examples of codes, categories, and themes discovered from the research data.

Collecting multiple sources of data encouraged close examination of the integrity of the data (Miles et al., 2014). I used triangulation to further establish the credibility of the research findings. Hendricks (2017) defines triangulation as “a method in which multiple forms of data are collected and compared to enhance the validity and credibility of a research study” (p. 71). The three data sources I used were written reflections, observations, and interviews. Using different sources enhanced the trustworthiness of the data and helped me to avoid omitting, selecting, or distorting the data (Miles et al., 2014). As such, I did not rely on only one source to

‘tell the story’. Triangulation provided another avenue for demonstrating credibility where “corroborating data sources support[ed] results from one data source with results from another data source” (Hendricks, 2017, p. 135).

The use of feedback from participants and my research supervisor was used throughout the study. Miles et al. (2014) claims that “one of the most logical sources of corroboration is the people you have talked with and watched” (p. 309). At the beginning of the study, I wanted to ensure that I was fully understanding the responses given by the participants. I requested feedback via email from the participants before each CIG meeting. Early feedback also provided useful information about the direction that the CIG wished to take in regard to discussions around reading instruction. As the principal investigator, I needed to be prepared for negative feedback as well. This did come up once in one of the interviews. My research supervisor from the university was able to provide useful feedback by reading over some of the data, themes, and summaries of my findings. He was able to provide a different perspective as an outside external source.

Results

Reviewing the data from the three data sources (written reflections, CIG observations, interviews), I was cognizant of information that directly related to my research question. The data I gathered reflected how each person experienced the collaborative inquiry process while examining the potential value of implementing a structured literacy approach. I discovered that critical reflection and the collaboration process unearthed new insights and benefits beyond the focus of the intended structured literacy approach.

Data Sources

Written Reflections

Participants were asked to complete written reflections based on open-ended questions about their reading instruction. These written reflections took place before the first CIG meeting and after the third, and final CIG meeting. Participants submitted their responses in writing via email, so we did not squander any of our valuable CIG meeting time. Upon review of the data, I noticed that there was little new information in the post-study reflections. Most participants gave such a comprehensive description of their literacy practices in the first written reflection that there was little to no new information to add in the final written reflection. The open-endedness of the questions may have been the reason why in the first written reflections the teachers gave detailed descriptions of their whole literacy program and their rationale behind many of their daily literacy activities.

CIG Meetings

During the CIG meetings, I was able to observe and take fieldnotes focused on the dialogue between the participants as they discussed the implementation of a variety of different teaching strategies to improve their reading instruction. In our first meeting, to make efficient use of time and to engage fully in collaborative inquiry, I employed an open-ended protocol that included sharing my research inquiry question and learning outcome for the CIG sessions. I told the participants that I was hoping to learn how a CIG promotes critical reflection when teachers examine their own instructional practice. I then asked for the six participants to share their own goals for their learning in these sessions. These goals were agreed upon, written out on chart paper, and then referred to in the remaining two CIG sessions. Data gleaned from these meetings focused mainly on these goals:

- Exchange ideas and work together to better meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classes.
- Work toward closing the learning gaps (from grade to grade) and set students up for success in their learning.
- Learn how to support each other with ideas and resources in reading instruction (and in literacy overall).
- Appreciate the different perspectives that each of us bring to the CIG.

In addition to regularly reviewing these learning goals, I also created a meeting agenda that was emailed to participants a week prior to the CIG meetings, in order to get their feedback and solidify a plan for our meetings. I encouraged participants to offer ideas and suggestions of their own.

Interviews

Five of the six participants participated in an interview before or after our last CIG meeting, depending on what worked for their schedules. Most of the participants chose to give their interviews a week prior to the third CIG session. The interview questions were related to their experiences during the implementation of a structured literacy approach, their reflections around their reading instruction, and their thoughts on the impact of participating in a CIG.

I explored and found common themes emerging from the analysis of the three data sources mentioned above. The corroboration from different sources enhanced the trustworthiness of my analysis. The three themes that emerged were teacher efficacy, professional growth, and collaborative inquiry. My triangulation across three data sources strengthened the validity of the themes that were generated.

Table 1 shows the initial codes generated from the research data. Figure 1 displays themes that were generated from the categorization of these codes.

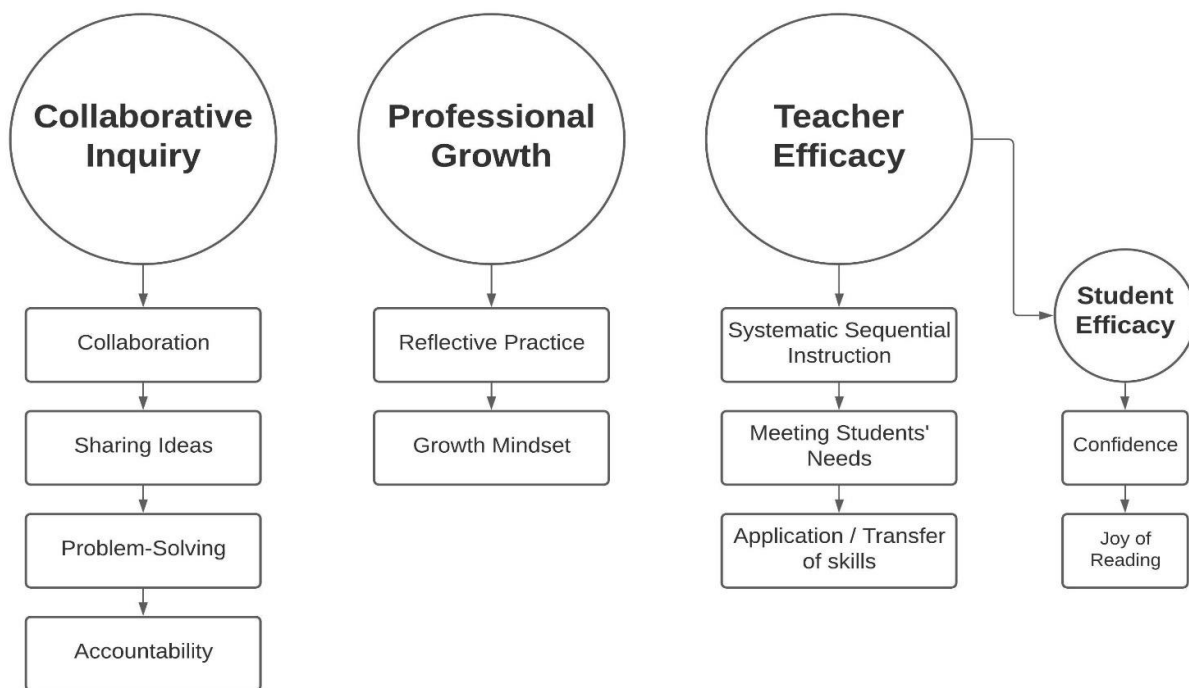
Table 1:

Initial categories for codes

Collaboration	Teacher Efficacy
Reflective practitioner	Systematic sequential instruction
Lifelong learner	Application/transfer of skills
Sharing ideas	Diverse needs of students
Problem-solving	Student confidence/engagement
Accountability	Joy of reading

Figure 1

Themes generated from categories and codes



Teacher Efficacy

According to Bandura (1997), teacher self-efficacy is a teacher's belief that they have the ability to influence student learning. He claims that, "teachers who believe strongly in their ability to promote learning create mastery experiences for their students" (p. 241). The data revealed that most of the participants who were either already implementing pieces of the structured literacy approach, or were newly experimenting with this approach felt a renewed sense of confidence in their teaching abilities. 'Tatiana' said, "I'm feeling more effective", and 'Sophie' similarly remarked, "I felt like I was floundering before and now I feel empowered [in my teaching]."

Systematic Sequential Instruction

Many of the participants placed a great deal of value on how the structured literacy approach involved teaching in a systematic and sequential manner. The teachers seemed to feel more confident in their literacy instruction when they were able to carefully follow a plan that guided their teaching of phonemic/phonological awareness and/or phonics skills to the whole class. Sophie gave a detailed explanation of some of the benefits she had experienced with the structured literacy approach. She explained,

I'm feeling more confident. I'm feeling like I have a plan to follow so I'm not just teaching the phonics skills incidentally, and the kids feel more empowered in their spelling and in their writing because they have been taught it explicitly. It's important to give students systematic and sequential instruction with phonics and spelling in order to give them the foundation they need to decode new and unfamiliar words. I am enjoying having a plan to follow and that I don't feel like I'm missing steps. I can spend more time

with the kids who need more time on it but at least everybody has been taught it, so there's not going to be those missing gaps later on.

'Annalise' discussed successes she had thus far when using some of the resources from the structured literacy approach,

The Heggerty program is going really well. There are predictable routines we do daily that are targeted on phonemic awareness skills. Students like the consistency of it. I'm thinking more carefully about how all the pieces come together and the step-by-step process for acquiring reading skills, the skills to build the ability to read.

Similarly, Tatiana added,

I want [my reading instruction] to be structured. I want it to be sequential. I'm finding it easier to teach this way because I'm much more systematic in what I'm doing. I'm following a plan of what needs to be done to make sure that they all get all their letters [names and sounds] and to make sure that we're reviewing enough to make sure they're getting enough practice. I have to be consistent and thoughtful in my planning about what I'm doing and in moving from one step to the next.

However, Tatiana did point out a drawback of a sequential approach. "Because we're looking at doing a systematic instructional approach, poor attendance makes it very difficult to successfully move forward with it." The challenges experienced by the pandemic may have made attendance more of an issue than in previous years.

Diverse Needs of Students

Participants expressed feeling more confident in their teaching when they were able to successfully meet the needs of their students. Sophie stated, "You need to be responsive to the needs of students." Tatiana described the success her students experienced academically and

said, “I know that I’m on the right track since, for the first time ever, all students in my class are meeting expectations in literacy.” Likewise, Annalise said, “I feel like now with these new strategies, when students come in that are struggling and are weaker, we really have a way to help support those kids and give them a better start.”

‘Lucy’ discussed how she was focused on determining the needs of each of her students, and making sure these needs are addressed. She said, “My teaching is based on attempting to understand each child as an individual learner. By doing [phonics/phonemic awareness activities] daily you can sort of see which kids are getting it and which kids need a little more attention.”

Application/Transfer of Skills

Most participants felt it was important for students to apply or transfer their new knowledge of phonics/phonemic awareness skills to all facets of reading, and into other curricular areas. There seemed to be agreement between the participants that these skills would have more of a profound effect when they were applied in other areas of literacy, especially in students’ writing and spelling. Lucy explained how the application of newly acquired literacy skills by students impacted her daily teaching routines. “I draw attention to reading strategies throughout the day so students can see decoding and comprehension strategies in practice in reading new math, science, or socials vocabulary and/or content.” Similarly, ‘Katie’ stated, “I think it’s important for students to read ‘real’ books and apply their knowledge to rich text.” Annalise shared, “Reading instruction can’t be taught in isolation. It needs to be connected to writing instruction and practice.”

Sophie discussed how and why she used decodable books with the students in her class. She explained,

Decodable books are like training wheels. They need to apply what they're learning in phonics. Students are applying phonics skills in new situations. We want them to continue this practice. [In my teaching] I feel more empowered and know where my kids are at. I've never before had such transference from their reading to their writing and spelling.

Student Efficacy

Student Confidence. When sharing stories and experiences about the implementation of a structured literacy approach in their classes, some participants noted that they saw an improvement in their students' overall confidence in their reading abilities. 'Madeline' stated, "I'm seeing more confidence in my students. I believe it [the structured literacy approach] allows those beginning readers to access text." She further added,

I have one student who has significant struggles with her learning and even she is feeling confident about her reading abilities, not as confident as the others, but she can see growth in herself. She sees herself as a reader.

Similarly, Sophie said, "Each time my struggling student gets a new decodable text he gets excited because he knows when he sees one of those books that he'll be able to read it with practice." Tatiana summarized her thoughts on using the structured literacy approach and said proudly,

I find it [the structured literacy approach] fabulous for my kids and their confidence in what they're doing. They are feeling and acting like readers and writers already. They [the students] are much more confident and capable than I've ever had before.

Joy of Reading. Stemming from one of the Big Ideas in the BC English Language Arts curriculum is the goal to develop a sense of creativity and joy through the use of language and

story. This goal emerged in some of the data, especially in the written reflections. Sophie stated, “My goal is to instill joy and confidence in my students, so they enjoy reading at home and at school.” Likewise, Annalise said, “I try hard to make learning the concepts fun and engaging.” Katie agreed and explained,

I want kids to be engaged and have joy as they learn. Some of the literacy games that reinforce phonics skills and phonemic awareness are highly engaging. I want students to enjoy reading and see what fun it can be. I want to reinforce the pleasure of reading. It’s really important for students to see the relevance in what they are doing and make things meaningful.

Professional Growth

Reflective Practice

In examining the data from the written reflections and the observations from discussions in the CIG meetings, most participants readily engaged in self-reflection around their own instructional practices. Katie wondered, “How I can better help certain students,....and how does this fit into what I’m teaching?” She explained her wonderings and said, “I am always thinking about how I can help the students more as they learn how to read, and how I can pass on the love for reading.”

Annalise reflected upon the recent changes in her own instructional practice:

I’m thinking more carefully about my instruction, in a more structured way – the kind of approach to take and specific areas that need to be targeted if students are struggling. It is important to me to make sure I’m using the best instructional practices possible to teach my students.

Lucy, thinking about the subtle changes she had begun to make with her literacy instruction, stated, “I think it [the structured literacy approach] is just enhancing my practice. I’m learning little tips and tricks of how to implement things, such as how I approach teaching sight words.”

Two participants reflected on how and why they had completely changed their literacy practices by implementing the structured literacy approach. Madeline explained:

It’s been a steep learning curve for sure [learning the structured literacy approach]. I understand that when we know better, we do better. I wasn’t really giving students the skills they needed to be successful. But I feel like I know so much more now, about how to help kids learn how to read.

Similarly confident, Tatiana also justified her reasons for completely changing her teaching practice in literacy, “I’m finding it easier to teach this way. I’m finding it amazing actually. There’s no new information. The difference is in how I’m presenting the information, just doing it in a different way.”

Growth Mindset

Much of the data revealed how the participants were keen to continue their own professional learning and determine how their new learning might fit into their current teaching practice. In reviewing the data, I discovered that the participants used the terms ‘learning’ and ‘growth’ synonymously, and determined that having a growth mindset inferred that one is open and willing to accept new ideas and work toward improvement. Tatiana talked about furthering her learning around the structured literacy approach and declared that she planned to take webinars over the next few weeks. “I want to have a better understanding of the English

language. It can only help my students if their teacher becomes more competent. Now is as good a time as any to work towards bettering my practice.”

Lucy summarized her thoughts around the value of having a growth mindset:

I’m always open to learning new ways to engage students and improve their reading by adding tools to my teaching toolkit. I’m always wanting to do more and do better. I think if you stop wondering, I think that’s kind of a problem. I think there’s so much to learn about in reading instruction, about different approaches to teach kids because each kid learns in such a different way. I’m always open to new ideas and looking for new ways to add to my instruction.

Lucy also shared an example of how her learning had grown throughout our CIG meetings. She said, “I feel I’m learning as I go through the collaborative inquiry. So far, I’ve learned to take more of a phonetic approach in looking at phonemic awareness. I’ve implemented a daily routine using the Heggerty book.”

Collaborative Inquiry

Though some of the data regarding collaborative inquiry came out in our discourse during the CIG sessions, for the most part the data came from the interview question: What are your thoughts in participating in the collaborative inquiry group? Four out of the five participants claimed they valued the CIG sessions and would definitely be interested in continuing them further. Lucy’s response to this question was, “I enjoy collaborating with colleagues because it’s interesting to get new ideas, see what other people are doing, remind you of ideas that maybe you’ve put ‘on the back shelf’ and forgot about after.” Similarly, Sophie commented, “I’ve learned something every time [the CIG meets] from other people, even if it’s not something big.” Additionally, Madeline said, “I think when you are trying something new that not everybody is

doing, then it's even more helpful to be part of an inquiry group." Tatiana was one of the participants who was quite far along in implementing the structured literacy approach in her class, prior to this research study. She stated, "This is the first collab group I've been in that most people aren't at the same level of knowledge. It's different enough from the norm [previous groups] that it feels a little conflicted and not as useful for me."

Collaboration

During the first two CIG meetings, Madeline and Lucy stated that they "liked to collaborate and be part of a group." Annalise agreed saying, "I've been enjoying that lots of us have been collaborating." She further noted that, "with multi-grades [of teachers in the group] comes multi-perspectives." It seemed that some of the participants appreciated hearing the thoughts and ideas from teachers who taught at a different grade level than they did. Madeline stated very matter-of-factly, "I love being part of a collaborative group." The feelings of acceptance, admiration, and overall respect for each other as colleagues were evident in the CIG meetings and in the interviews.

Sharing Ideas

The sharing of ideas was an integral part of the CIG meetings. The participants appeared to value listening to and sharing ideas with each other for the purpose of improving their own instructional practice. "After a CIG meeting," Madeline commented, "I try new things that other people have told me about or suggested to me." Likewise, Lucy stated, "I like being able to share ideas with each other and learn new ideas that I can practice in my classroom right away." In her interview, Annalise described how the CIG meetings provided her with a window into the literacy practices of other teachers at the same and at different grade levels. A new confidence in her own teaching abilities seemed to emerge because of this new understanding. She reflected:

I actually love hearing what different grade levels are doing, and even the same grade level. It's just about getting ideas from each other about what we're doing and what works. After hearing the grade one teachers talk, I feel now like if I ever had to go teach grade one then I could do it. Prior to the collab group, I always kind of felt like I didn't have the knowledge base or a place to start with grade one in particular.

Problem-Solving

At times throughout the CIG sessions, participants became very engaged and passionate about helping one another with issues that came up with individual students or with their classes as a whole. Madeline summarized this idea well:

I think the sharing of ideas and the problem solving makes the CIG successful. I have this student and I don't know, I've tried this and this and I don't know where to go from here...and we access the brainpower of others in the group.

Annalise shared how she valued discussing "specific strategies for students that aren't getting it with what we're doing,...and brainstorming....what else can we do to support them?" The value of teamwork was something that came up frequently. Sophie's comments reflected this:

I like participating in the collaborative inquiry group, having other people who are working on and struggling through the same things just encourages me to keep reading and researching. And when I figure out something that works well for me I enjoy sharing it with other people because if I've gone through the hard work for myself I would rather just share it with other people and get them to try it out, and get their feedback to see what they think. Often, I found out that people are struggling with the same thing so it's nice to work together.

Accountability

I found the data around the topic of accountability to be quite interesting. There were different viewpoints from different participants. Lucy, Sophie, and Annalise valued having a structured time set aside for the CIG meetings. Lucy stated:

I love chatting with colleagues, so having a formal time to do that is nice because you're forced in a way, in a good way, to sit down and discuss ideas. Otherwise, it kind of happens 'off the cuff' and in the hallway but it's not as structured where you can actually dive in and start digging through some curricular concepts.

Sophie again cited the importance of teamwork:

When you feel like you're not the only one doing something, it just feels like there's a bit more validity in it. If I was wanting to do this and everybody around me thought it was useless, then it would just feel a little isolating. So, it's like great teamwork.... I want to change this too, and we can have conversations around that.

Sophie further discussed how she felt that accountability was important and valuable:

When you know somebody is going to be asking you what you've been doing and how you've been doing it, it encourages you to keep going with it. You don't want to be that person who shows up and says, Yeah, I kind of just decided not to bother doing anything since the last [meeting]. The accountability piece and the sharing [within the CIG] has been really good.

Interestingly, both Tatiana and Annalise expressed some concerns around accountability in the CIG meetings. Tatiana was concerned that some participants were not experimenting enough with the structured literacy approach and said, "I'm hoping that somebody will have read

something new or done something new or tried something [before the last meeting].” Annalise worried that she was perhaps not contributing enough to the CIG. She shared:

The collab group has been really positive. I feel like maybe other people have taken the lead more and I feel like I’m not contributing as much, and so I don’t feel like I’m doing my part. So, then I feel bad about that, but I don’t really feel like I’m expert enough to really offer significant contributions. I guess as I learn more, I’ll be able to share more, but I feel like I’m sort of in the absorbing and learning mode.

In my observations, all of the participants were open and welcoming to each other’s thoughts, ideas, and questions. The idea of accountability might be helpful for some teachers so that they commit themselves to working collaboratively with each other. When valuable time is set aside, I would hope that educators would use that time to reflect on their instructional practices and work together to help students achieve success.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the impact that collaborative inquiry has on the reflective practice of teachers, and how a CIG can support the implementation of a structured literacy approach in early primary grades. Reflective practice is at the heart of action research and is why I felt most drawn to this method. Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) “notion of inquiry as stance is consistent in a general way with the action research’s continual cycle of questioning, observing, and acting” (p. 122). I was hopeful that there would be benefits to this structured literacy approach that would help some of the struggling readers at the school. This study revealed teachers’ thoughts about the CIG, their reflections about the implementation of a structured literacy approach to reading, and how they

perceived their current and future reading instruction. There are three key findings in this research; teacher efficacy, the value of critical reflection; and, the importance of collaboration. Each will be discussed in detail.

First, all teachers in the study exhibited some form of teacher efficacy. These results are consistent with Bandura's (1997) work around teacher self-efficacy, describing it as a teacher's belief that they have the ability to influence student learning. In this study, a variety of factors contributed to teacher efficacy. Through the implementation of the structured literacy approach teachers appreciated how the literacy lessons were organized in a systematic and sequential manner which teachers felt made their whole class instruction more effective. Due to what they perceived as highly effective instruction, teachers subsequently reported that they were better able to meet the needs of the diverse learners in their classes. Some teachers felt that the new literacy strategies from the structured literacy approach were better supporting their students and setting them up for success at an early age. They saw an application of the reading skills being taught in other areas of literacy such as spelling and writing. Teachers also noticed a transfer of newly learned literacy skills in other subject areas. In addition, the observations that students were displaying more confidence in themselves as readers seemed to further strengthen teachers' efficacy. I was pleasantly surprised that instilling a joy of reading was also a goal for the teachers, and not just the application of the strategies and skills involved in the implementation of the structured literacy approach.

Second, the results of this study generated through written reflections, observations, and interviews provided credible support for learning through critical reflection. Brookfield (1995) describes critical reflection as when, "our practice as a whole becomes the object of systematic inquiry" (p. 39). Listening to the teachers reflect on their practice, I was pleased at how all of

them displayed a passion for using best teaching practices and were motivated to meet the needs of their students. The results are consistent with Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2004) theory that suggests teachers construct knowledge about teaching and learning by reflecting in and on classroom practice. When the teachers met together in the CIG they engaged in critical reflection through dialogue with colleagues. As teachers took the time to talk, think about, and question their students' reading successes and challenges, their professional learning grew. As Brookfield (1995) states, "Just knowing that we're not alone in our struggles is profoundly reassuring. Although critical reflection often begins alone, it is ultimately a collective endeavor" (p.36).

Third, teachers appreciated the collaboration, sharing of ideas, and collective problem solving they engaged in as members of a CIG. The results of this research provide supporting evidence that the teachers valued being able to learn and share ideas with each other for the purpose of immediate practical application in the classroom. This finding can be explained by the idea that practitioners who are deeply engaged in the work of teaching and learning are highly knowledgeable about their practice and have the capacity to critique knowledge collectively with others for the purpose of improving practice and student learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Furthermore, this CIG, for a short time, was able to harness the collective intellectual capacity of its practitioners – teachers as researchers of their own practice. Many teachers wondered how they could better help their students in their reading development, and how this approach would fit into their current teaching practice. Madeline's comment about "accessing the brainpower of others in the group" illustrates the benefit of acknowledging teachers as experts in their own field, recognizing the collective knowledge that teachers already bring with them (DeLuca et al., 2017). By sharing their own ideas and experiences with each other, the teachers had a way to view their own practice, through the multiple perspectives of the

other teachers. Many teachers saw the benefits in being able to collectively problem solve with colleagues who were struggling with the same issues. This finding is supported by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) who explain that in a learning community, teachers learn to solve problems together collectively as their ideas are shared and valued, and dialogue and feedback are used to improve professional practice. The idea of learning throughout the collaborative inquiry process is further supported by Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) concept of inquiry as stance where "practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning of students" (p. 123).

Reflections

At the onset of the study, I quickly learned that the short six-week duration of the study would require the CIG meetings to be as efficient as possible if we were going to truly delve into the inquiry set out in my action research plan. While it is important to engage in conversation, time was often of the essence and our attention needed to be focused on teaching and student learning. In the initial stages of planning for the CIG meetings, there was no thought of implementing an open-ended protocol or a protocol of any kind for that matter. This is something that I added in prior to the beginning of the study as I became increasingly aware of the need to be efficient with our time. A few of the participants were leery about giving up their time for the interviews and fitting in one extra CIG meeting in back-to-back weeks to accommodate the set time frame of the study. I found it advantageous to begin the CIG meetings by reviewing the agreed-upon learning goals and then discussing the meeting's proposed agenda. With this protocol set, there seemed to be more of a learning focus and less chance of going off topic. I would recommend the use of a protocol in similar CIG meetings in the future.

The researcher journal I kept served me well as I continually documented my thoughts, questions, and new learning throughout the study. This journal was especially helpful when reflecting on the data collected after the CIG meetings. The participants in this research study were colleagues of mine that I knew quite well; this was beneficial as I did not feel I needed to take extra time to develop trusting relationships prior to the study. Had they been strangers, it would have been an essential first step. However, I wonder if there would have been different results had I collected data from teachers who I did not have well-formed relationships with, or who were new to teaching or to the school. Perhaps they would have been more or even less forthcoming with their personal reflections and sharing of ideas. It would be interesting to conduct this action research study concurrently at different school sites and compare the results.

A welcome discovery for me was that despite the teachers being at different stages in their knowledge of the structured literacy approach, they all seemed enthusiastic about gathering to talk with their peers on a single topic - in the case of this study, reading. They found significant value in having a focused time set aside to collaborate and learn from each other. Perhaps during a time when there is a global pandemic, gathering as a group was just what teachers needed, an extra support system to get them through these challenging times.

Limitations

Although the present results clearly illustrate that teachers value being part of a CIG, it is appropriate to recognize potential limitations. One such limitation was the varying degrees of experience that the teachers in the CIG had with implementing the structured literacy approach. Half of the teachers were already well on their way to implementing this approach in their classroom, while the other half of the teachers were at the beginning of their learning around this

approach. Consequently, the baseline of experience was not equal and some of the answers to the interview questions around this approach may have been skewed. It would have been interesting to complete all the interviews after the three CIG meetings, and after a period of a few months of implementation; the learning reflections might have been deeper, and there may have been more of a variety of responses within those reflections, including possible drawbacks to the structured literacy approach. However, the six-week time constraint to complete the study did not allow for this.

A second potential limitation was the sampling of participants. All of the teachers in the study had at least ten years of teaching experience as well as five or more years of experience in being a part of a collaborative learning group of some kind. As mentioned in the previous section, it would have been interesting to see if the results would differ if the participants were less familiar with the collaborative inquiry process and/or new to the teaching profession in general. A broader sampling of teachers from different schools could have addressed this issue, had there not been the time constraint and were the opportunity available.

Implications for Practice

The research on collaborative inquiry and reflective practice with regards to reading instruction is of benefit to me and the teachers and students at the school. I am hopeful that this small action research study becomes the catalyst for a more in-depth, long-term CIG at my school. The next step as part of the collaborative inquiry cycle would be to make use of student data, as was the original intention at the onset of this study. The collaborative inquiry team needs to consider the impact on student learning before taking the next steps to refining their practice, as this is meant to be an ongoing process (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016). Essentially, student

learning needs to be the driving force behind our teaching. Therefore, by making use of the reading data gathered from *PM Benchmark Reading Assessments* and other school district literacy assessments, teachers will be provided with more of a direction in meeting the individual needs of all their students. Additionally, as part of the inquiry process, the formative and summative literacy assessments will provide useful information in determining the impact made by the structured literacy approach.

Implications for Further Research

Many of the findings from this study are consistent with the notion that teachers appreciate and feel respected when they are asked to share their thoughts and ideas. Recognizing the collective knowledge teachers bring with them to such situations is valuable and makes for an effective collaborative inquiry experience (DeLuca et al., 2017). The overall goal of a CIG is to draw upon the perspectives of colleagues to enhance their teaching and their students' learning. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest, it is powerful to recognize and use the collective intellectual capacity of practitioners. I believe further research needs to be done on how best to harness the knowledge of those already engaged in the practice of teaching reading. A research study of only six weeks hints at the benefits of collaborative inquiry, but it is merely the 'tip of the iceberg'. There is substantially more valuable professional learning yet to be explored and discovered.

The power of using an action research approach is that it is based on the principle of systematic inquiry through ongoing reflection (Hendricks, 2017). Since the process consists of reflection, action, and evaluation, it was perfect for this study as the premise was to learn how teachers were working to improve their literacy practice through collaboration and reflection. As

mentioned previously, the length of this study was not long enough to fully engage in the actual cycle of inquiry; however, many of the teachers reflected how they were already working through their own cycles of inquiry as they experimented with new teaching strategies, determined their success, and then adapted these strategies as needed. Much work needs to be done before a more fulsome understanding of the extent of learning through a CIG is established. What are the future implications? How is such a group meaningfully sustained? And what impact does professional learning in a CIG have on student learning? These questions involve deeper research into teacher and student learning.

A Final Thought

My greatest learning in this action research study is that educators generally want to do what is best for their students. I learned that most teachers strive to be critically responsive to the needs of their students; and, that being able to collaborate with others helps them to achieve this goal. If we engage in critical reflection and collaborate more deeply with our colleagues, then we should be able to achieve a greater impact on our students. The needs of the students need to be at the forefront of everything we do as educators. As a teacher-leader, I will continue to promote the use collaborative inquiry and reflective practice to affect change and encourage professional growth in instructional practice.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval

From: UFVRomeoAdmin@ufv.ca [mailto:UFVRomeoAdmin@ufv.ca]

Sent: December-16-20 7:53 PM

To: Padgham Monica(Principal Investigator) <monica.padgham@student.ufv.ca>; Luigi DeMarzo <Luigi.DeMarzo@ufv.ca>

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Subject: HREB Final Approval #100562-Padgham

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Human Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 100562

Principal Investigator: Mrs. Monica Padgham

Team Members: Mrs. Monica Padgham (Principal Investigator)

Mr. Luigi DeMarzo (Supervisor)

Dr. Sheryl MacMath (Course Instructor)

Title: Implementing A Structured Literacy Approach: A Collaborative Inquiry

Department: Faculty of Professional Studies\Teacher Education

Effective: December 16, 2020

Expiry: December 15, 2021

The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) has reviewed and approved the ethics of the above research. The HREB is constituted and operated in accordance with the requirements of the UFV Policy on Human Research Ethics and the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

The approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
 2. Approval is for one year. A Request for Renewal must be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
 3. Modifications to the approved research must be submitted as an Amendment to be reviewed and approved by the HREB before the changes can be implemented. If the changes are substantial, a new request for approval must be sought. *An exception can be made where the change is necessary to eliminate an immediate risk to participant(s) (TPCS2 Article 6.15). Such changes may be implemented but must be reported to the HREB within 5 business days.
 4. If an adverse incident occurs, an Adverse Incident Event form must be completed and submitted.
 5. During the project period, the HREB must be notified of any issues that may have ethical implications.
- *NEW** 6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.

****Please submit your Research Continuity Plan to REGS@ufv.ca before beginning your research. The plan can be found here: <https://www.ufv.ca/research/>**

Thank you, and all the best with your research.

UFV Human Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

Written Reflection Prompts & Interview Questions

Implementing A Structured Literacy Approach: A Collaborative Inquiry

Possible Written Reflection Prompts

- What do you think about when I say reading instruction?
- How would you describe your teaching of reading?
- Describe your instructional practice in regard to reading.
 - What do you think is important? Why?
 - What has worked well, and what are you wondering about?

Possible Interview Questions

- Can you tell me about your experience with implementing this structured literacy approach? Could you share a story about any of these experiences?
 - What are you noticing?
 - In your teaching?
 - With your students?
- How are things going for you in regard to your reading instruction?
 - What have you noticed?
 - What are you curious about?
- Tell me about your thoughts in participating in the collaborative inquiry group.
 - What successes or challenges are you experiencing?
- What impact, if any, has this collaborative inquiry group had on your instructional practice? Could you see this group continuing in the future? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Sample Excel Spreadsheet to organize data

These are the headings I used to organize the data. The text consisted of direct quotes from the participants. The teacher numbers were assigned to the participants' pseudonyms. The data source was either the written reflection, interview, or observation. The page number was in reference to the page in the double entry journal or the page in the interview transcript. The codes and themes were discovered during the data analyses process.

[illegible]