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Fall 2018

The official magazine of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents

Literacy – Literacies



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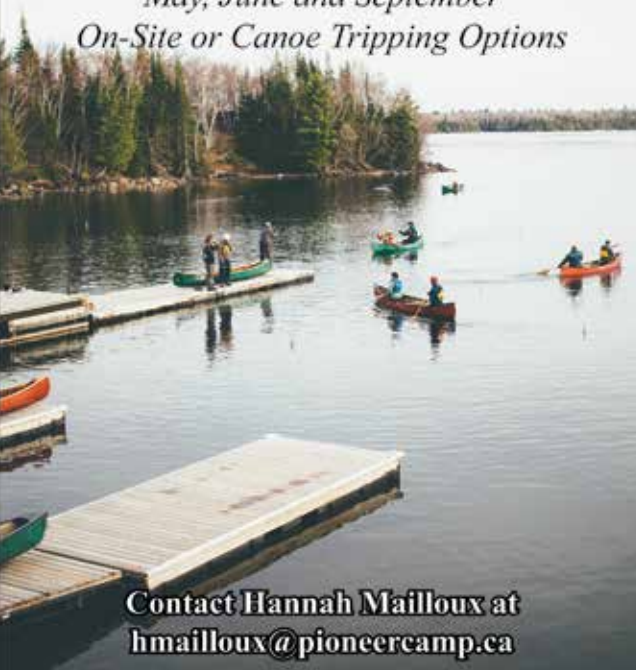

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 Principal of Ecole Provencher

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MASS Journal

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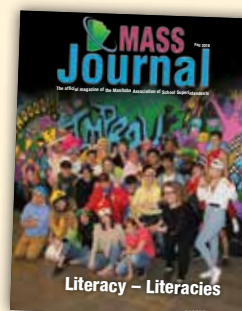
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On the cover: Margo Kehler's improvisational theatre class at Institut collégial Vincent Massey Collegiate focuses on creative endeavours that augment experiential learning so that students develop their expression, share their voices, and become equipped with the ability to be literate beyond words. Learn more starting on page 29. Photo by Alexandra Kozub.





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Through these articles it is evident that our schools are developing student talents by viewing literacy in a broad sense, be it visual literacy, eco-literacy, cultural literacy, digital literacy or traditional reading and writing.



Ces articles montrent clairement que nos écoles développent les talents des élèves en abordant la littératie au sens large, qu'il s'agisse de littératie visuelle, d'éco-littératie, de littératie culturelle, de littératie numérique, ou encore de lecture et d'écriture traditionnelles.

The concept of literacy is difficult to define. It evokes both a simplistic and a complex interpretation and understanding. To ancient Greek scholars, being literate meant to be "familiar with literature" or more generally, being well educated, being learned.

For some, the concept of literacy and being literate simply refers to the ability to read and write text. Paulo Freire states, "Every reading of the word is preceded by the reading of the world," (*Pedagogy of the City*, 1993). He purports that the most important approach to literacy learning is linking it to our knowledge of the world; that literacy education requires critical perception, interpretation and creativity. He viewed literacy as a skill or a set of skills that enable us to know, understand and engage in our world.

As President of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), I am proud to present our Fall 2018 edition of the *MASS Journal*. This edition supports Freire's comprehensive concept of literacy. Each article emphasizes the critical importance of extracting, digesting and transmitting information through receptive and expressive communication skills; using these skills to interpret, reflect on, theorize, investigate, explore, probe, question and create.

You will read of classrooms and schools where curiosity, inquisitiveness and deep learning develop through exploration. These explorations involve novelty and complexity, and a focus on lessons where greater autonomy of learning and student choice is prevalent. They highlight lessons where students are encouraged to ask questions and probe interests; lessons are focused on taking risks and lessons that sometimes fail. What each of the narratives share is a focus on learning.

Through these articles it is evident that our schools are developing student talents by viewing literacy in a broad sense, be it visual literacy, eco-literacy, cultural literacy, digital literacy or traditional reading and writing. Enjoy.

Cyndy Kutzner

President of MASS

Assistant Superintendent, Western School Division

Le concept de littératie est difficile à définir. Il évoque une interprétation et une compréhension à la fois simples et complexes. Pour les érudits grecs de l'Antiquité, être alphabétisé signifiait connaître la littérature, ou de façon plus générale, avoir une bonne éducation.

Pour certains, le concept de littératie et d'être alphabétisé renvoie simplement à la capacité à lire et écrire un texte. Selon Paulo Freire : « La lecture du monde précède la lecture du mot. » (*Pedagogy of the City*, 1993). Il soutenait que l'approche la plus importante en matière de littératie consiste à la relier à notre connaissance du monde, et aussi que la littératie exige une perception, une interprétation et une créativité critiques. Il considérerait la littératie comme une compétence ou un ensemble de compétences nous permettant de connaître le monde, de le comprendre et de nous y engager.

En tant que présidente de la Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), je suis fière de vous présenter le numéro d'automne 2018 de la revue *MASS Journal*, qui traite du concept de littératie de Freire. Chaque article souligne l'extrême importance de l'extraction, de la digestion et de la transmission d'informations au moyen d'aptitudes pour la communication à la fois réceptive et expressives, et de l'utilisation de ces aptitudes pour interpréter, réfléchir, théoriser, examiner, explorer, sonder, questionner et créer.

Dans ce numéro, vous découvrirez des classes et des écoles où la curiosité et l'apprentissage se développent au moyen d'explorations. Ces explorations impliquent la nouveauté et la complexité; elles mettent l'accent sur des leçons offrant des choix pour les élèves ainsi qu'une plus grande autonomie d'apprentissage, et elles encouragent les élèves à poser des questions et à sonder leurs intérêts. Les leçons sont axées sur la prise de risques, ce qui peut amener les élèves à échouer. Chacun des récits met l'accent sur l'apprentissage.

Ces articles montrent clairement que nos écoles développent les talents des élèves en abordant la littératie au sens large, qu'il s'agisse de littératie visuelle, d'éco-littératie, de littératie culturelle, de littératie numérique, ou encore de lecture et d'écriture traditionnelles.

Bonne lecture!

Cyndy Kutzner

Présidente du MASS

Directrice adjointe, Western School Division



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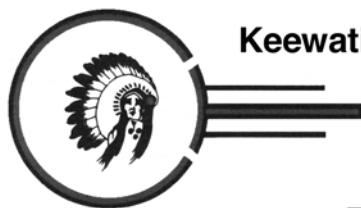
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No individual, school, institution or organization can address the complex challenges of improving literacy. Working together with MASS and other stakeholders, we can harness our collective strength to be successful.



Aucune personne, école, institution ou organisation ne peut, toute seule, relever les défis auxquels on fait face pour l'amélioration de la littératie. En travaillant ensemble avec la MASS et d'autres intervenants, nous pouvons mettre à profit notre force collective et atteindre nos objectifs.

I am pleased to bring greetings to the members of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) in my new role as Minister of Education and Training. Since assuming this portfolio in August, I have had an opportunity to meet with parents and some stakeholders on our challenges and opportunities in public education. Part of the strength of our K-12 system is the important and committed role played by key organizations within it. I would therefore like to express appreciation to the members of MASS for your leadership and dedication to our provincial education community.

I commend you for choosing literacy as the focus in this edition. Literacy is fundamental to all learning across our entire lives, from early childhood to adulthood. Literacy enables us to understand, interpret, create, communicate, and interact with ideas, other people and the world around us.

Our government is committed to improving literacy outcomes for all Manitobans. We know that Manitobans will need strong literacy skills to participate fully in society and the economy. We know it is among the essential skills adults need to succeed in the workplace and to be active citizens, and that literacy is foundational to positive health and social outcomes and to all other learning.

Demands for literacy are evolving and accelerating with the changing economy. No individual, school, institution or organization can address the complex challenges of improving literacy. Working together with MASS and other stakeholders, we can harness our collective strength to be successful.

My department staff and I value our collaboration with MASS members, knowing our ultimate success will be the result of a complete team effort. Thank you for your continuing contribution to education excellence.

Honourable Kelvin Goertzen, Minister
Manitoba Education and Training

Je suis heureux de présenter mes salutations aux membres de la Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) dans mon nouveau rôle de ministre de l'Éducation et de la Formation du Manitoba. Depuis que j'ai pris en charge ce portefeuille en août, j'ai eu l'occasion de rencontrer des parents et des intervenants au sujet des défis et des possibilités de l'éducation publique. Une partie des points forts de notre système d'éducation de la maternelle à la 12^e année réside dans le rôle important et d'engagement que jouent les organismes dans le système. J'aimerais par conséquent adresser mes félicitations aux membres de la MASS pour leur leadership et leurs efforts soutenus dans le milieu de l'éducation de notre province.

Je vous félicite également d'avoir choisi de consacrer cette édition à la littératie. La littératie est essentielle à tout apprentissage tout au long de notre vie, de la petite enfance à l'âge adulte. Elle nous permet de comprendre, d'interpréter, de créer, de communiquer et d'interagir, qu'il s'agisse d'idées, d'autres personnes ou du monde qui nous entoure.

Notre gouvernement s'est engagé à améliorer les résultats en littératie pour tous les Manitobains. Nous savons que les Manitobains ont besoin de compétences solides en littératie pour participer pleinement à l'économie et à la vie de la société. Nous savons également que la littératie fait partie des compétences essentielles dont les adultes ont besoin pour réussir dans le monde du travail et avoir une participation citoyenne active et qu'elle est fondamentale à l'obtention des résultats positifs sur le plan social, dans le domaine de la santé et dans tout autre apprentissage.

Les exigences en matière de littératie changent et s'accroissent compte tenu de l'évolution de l'économie. Aucune personne, école, institution ou organisation ne peut, toute seule, relever les défis auxquels on fait face pour l'amélioration de la littératie. En travaillant ensemble avec la MASS et d'autres intervenants, nous pouvons mettre à profit notre force collective et atteindre nos objectifs.

Le personnel de mon ministère et moi apprécions la collaboration que nous avons avec les membres de la MASS, sachant que notre réussite finale sera le résultat d'un travail d'équipe. Je vous remercie pour votre contribution soutenue à l'excellence en éducation.

Kelvin Goertzen

Ministre de l'Éducation et de la Formation du Manitoba





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- St James - Assiniboia**
- Tuxedo, River Heights and Fort Rouge**

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- Connect to community and government services
- Assist newcomers to engage in the community

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Family DYNAMICS



Mission:

MASS provides leadership for public education by advocating in the best interests of learners and supports its members through professional services.

MASS believes that our mandate is to be leaders of learning, in our local school systems and in the broader domains of provincial, national and global public education. MASS believes a quality education empowers the whole child to constructively participate in global society.

We model learning that is:

- Active and visible;
- Based on robust research;
- Tested through purposeful application in the field; and
- Evaluated using a wide range of meaningful data.

We take responsibility for our own continuous learning and the learning of everyone we lead:

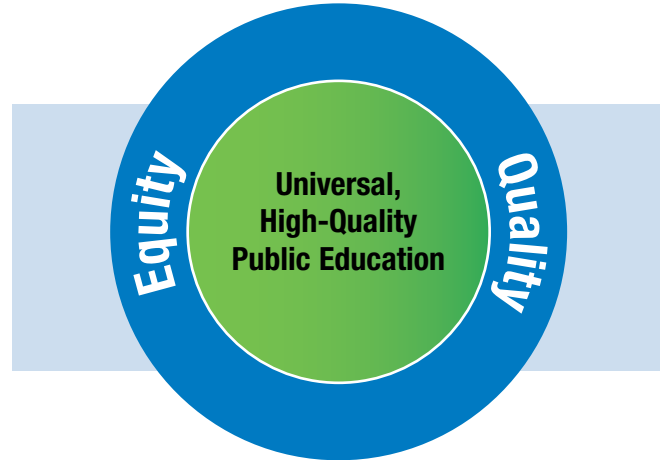
- Creating and fostering safe, supportive, inclusive and challenging environments;
- Ensuring essential learning for each and every child; and
- Preparing others to go beyond our own learning.

We are guided by our learning in shaping policy and practice to achieve what is best for the children in our care.

MASS believes that improved achievement and well-being for all of our students requires a shared commitment to raising both equity and quality.

- A conscious and persistent commitment to equity, system-wide and across sectors, leads to poverty reduction, greater inclusion and an appreciation for the riches that diversity brings.
- A purposeful and sustained commitment to quality education for every student increases the capacity for teaching, learning and leading throughout the system.
- A strong grounding in literacy and numeracy and a rich learning experience involving inquiry, curiosity, creativity and artistic expression enables all students to achieve success and to flourish in life, academics and career.
- A respect for and openness to authentic youth voices and support for meaningful student action are critical for building capacity and self-efficacy in our students.

MASS actively works towards equity and quality throughout the public education system, with a special focus on three action areas:



The **Early Learning Committee** will take leadership to ensure that MASS:

- Advocates for full implementation of the Calls to Action in the MASS position paper on Early Childhood Education.
- Participates actively on the Provincial Educaring Committee.

The **Indigenous Education Committee** will take leadership to ensure that MASS:

- Builds capacity in MASS and school divisions to address the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action.
- Promotes ever increasing academic achievement, graduation, school completion and positive life outcomes for Indigenous students, informed by collective inquiry into evidence
- Actively supports the teaching of Indigenous perspectives, corrective history and culture and the use of Indigenous languages.

The **Mental Health and Well-Being Committee** will take leadership to ensure that MASS:

- Advocates for an implementation of a comprehensive provincial Children and Youth Mental Health Strategy.
- Collaborates with The Education for Sustainable Well-Being Research Group at the University of Manitoba and Manitoba Education and Training to develop tools and indicators for assessing the well-being and well-becoming of students in schools.
- Pursues inter-sectoral liaisons with public and mental health organizations and agencies.
- Contributes to a national voice on mental health through CASSA and through input into the Canadian Mental Health Strategy.
- Promotes Mental Health Literacy in mental health for all educators and pre-service educators.
- Renewing MASS Mental Health position paper and calls to action.

Leadership and Literacies:



Preparing Students for Active Participation

By Karen Boyd, River East Transcona School Division

If Starbucks is your place of choice for your morning coffee, you would be able to order a tall half-skinny half one per cent extra hot split quad shot latte with whip, and be confident that your order would be understood and filled correctly. If you tried to use the same language at Tim Hortons, where ordering is as simple as saying “large double double,” you would be laughed out of the drive thru line (and don’t even think about getting a timbit and a cake pop confused!).

Over the course of the day, we adjust our language to match the context or discourse community that we are in. Each community has its own way of thinking, speaking, knowing and doing. The better that we understand those ways, the better we are able to participate fully as members of those communities.

Living in a global society has drastically

increased the number of communities that we can be engaged with. At one point in history, being able to read and write one’s name was enough to be considered literate. Those skills allowed for full participation in society. The 21st century world that exists today requires a diverse set of literacies for similar participation.

Literacy/literacies

UNESCO notes: At first glance, literacy “would seem to be a term that everyone understands. But at the same time, literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways. People’s notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values, and personal experiences,” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 147).

Literacy is a highly political construct. It has been used to sort people into haves and have nots, powerful and powerless. As school and system leaders, we are striving for an inclusive environment where all people have the opportunity to reach their full potential with minimal barriers. The traditional call for schools to focus on the 3Rs—Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic—highlighted the societal belief that a minimal level of literacy was all that was needed for most of the population.

In 2018, our focus is on literacy and numeracy. The change in language to the broader terms of literacy and numeracy suggests a recognition that being able to decode and print alphabetic text, and perform mathematical operations, is no longer enough. To function in society, students will need to be critical thinkers who can communicate in a variety of modes and for a variety of purposes.

They will need to be creators as well as consumers of texts that represent a variety of ways of thinking, knowing, and doing.

Consider the day of an average high school student, they may change literacies multiple times over the day. Think of the different ways of participating and the variety of texts they would encounter as they move through French, history and pre-calculus classes in the morning, spend time in the hallways and cafeteria, attend ELA and band class in the afternoon, and then go to hockey practice, a shift at their part time job, and end the day with some time relaxing while playing video games.

Considering literacy as a monolithic concept lends itself to a narrow focus on traditional print texts and a single way of working with those texts. Shanahan and Shanahan (2012) refer to disciplinary literacies as an “emphasis on the knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within the discipline,” (p.8). Without these literacies, “students may be relegated to the position of reading and writing about what others are doing, rather than participating in the activities of creation, inquiry, expression, and problem solving,” (Draper et al., 2010, p. 2).

Literacies and a quality education

The MASS Student Learning Committee has worked over the past two years on developing a statement on quality education. The exercise itself, of bringing together diverse experiences and backgrounds to agree on a common statement, has demonstrated the complexity of literacy. Each word comes with its own baggage and the experiences of people influence the interpretation of the word.

Words like “skills” “empower” and “equip” were viewed as clear or ambiguous, negative or positive by people with, by all accounts, a fairly consistent view of the world. After many discussions within the committee, the draft was presented to the full MASS membership for feedback. Opening the discussion to more people, meant more interpretation, and more discussions.

In the end, the committee acknowledged that the statement needed to include the essence of our beliefs as system leaders while leaving it open enough for all our diverse and unique contexts to see their own work reflected. MASS also acknowledges that we are in an evolving field and we must have a statement that is responsive to that evolution. The power of language is demonstrated in the use of only 13 words to

capture that essence: *A quality education empowers the whole child to constructively participate in global society.*

As participation is a key component of this statement, we must commit to literacies that are flexible, multidimensional, and grounded in the ability to communicate deeply and effectively in multi modes. Participating in a global society requires us to, “be able to approach others with generosity, alert to the differences in language use and in assumptions about what constitutes appropriate communication in any context. We need to be good at recognizing the range of strategies others use

in communicating, and at figuring out how to open and carry on conversations (in the appropriate medium) with others,” (Anne Wysocki).

Our work towards this goal is supported by the provincial English Language Arts curriculum, which is designed to develop English Language Arts practices and enable each student to, “increase the complexity and sophistication in the ways that they make sense of language, understand language as a system, use language to explore and design, while being aware of the power of language. Through comprehending, communicating, and critical thinking, learners develop and

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deepen competency in using language to meet personal and academic goals,” (ELA Maple).

Literacies in our schools

The commitment to literacies is not new. As differentiated instruction became common practice, teachers became more aware of the different ways that information could be presented to students. Video, image and audio have all become texts that students engage with at all grades. What is different is the recognition that all literacies need to be equally valued and explicitly taught. While some students have had opportunities and experiences that allow them to engage with different literacies in a way that appears to be innate or “natural,” other students rely on the experiences in schools to provide them with these opportunities.

An equitable and inclusive school system that believes in empowering the whole child to constructively participate in global society must take responsibility to apprentice students in all the ways that they will need to think, know, and do.

The articles in this journal highlight our schools’ work in engaging students with a range of literacies, including:

- The importance of early literacy, not just to build skills but to build self-identity as literacy learners.
- The need to recognize, value, and teach the literacies of Indigenous people in a way that both empowers students to understand each other better, and provides multiple interpretations of the world.
- The recognition that newcomer youth are not just learning the literacy of English, but also the literacy to participate in a new culture.
- The ways of knowing, doing and thinking that we engage with in the arts both transfers and enriches our other literacies, while being a literacy in and of itself. Dance, visual arts, and theatre provide rich texts and ways to participate and communicate.

If, as stated, “people’s notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values, and personal experiences,” then school and system leaders have a responsibility to be conscious of those influences and ensure that our focus on literacies aligns with our

commitment to provide a quality education for all students. ■

Karen Boyd is Assistant Superintendent: Education Programming, for the River East Transcona School Division.

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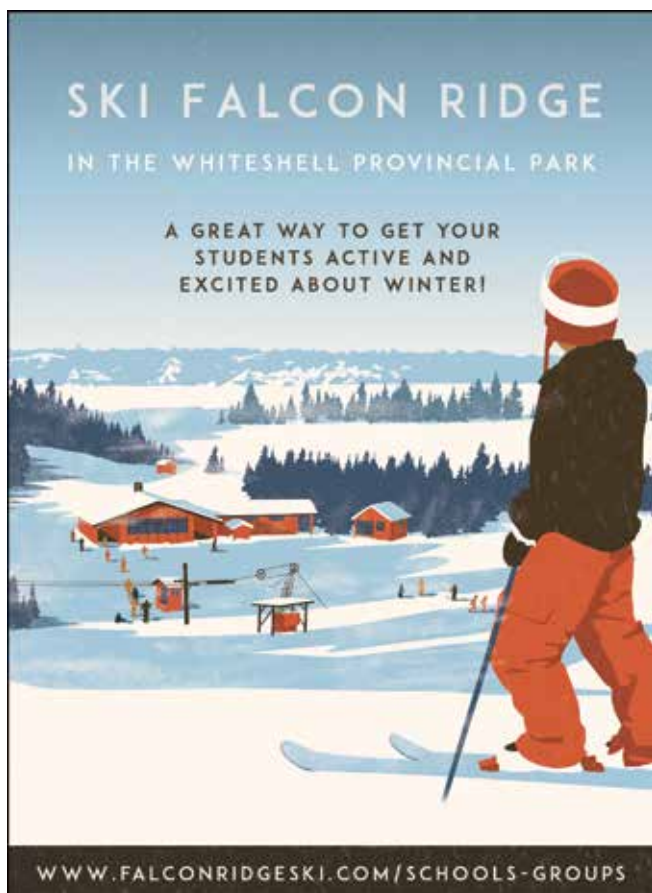
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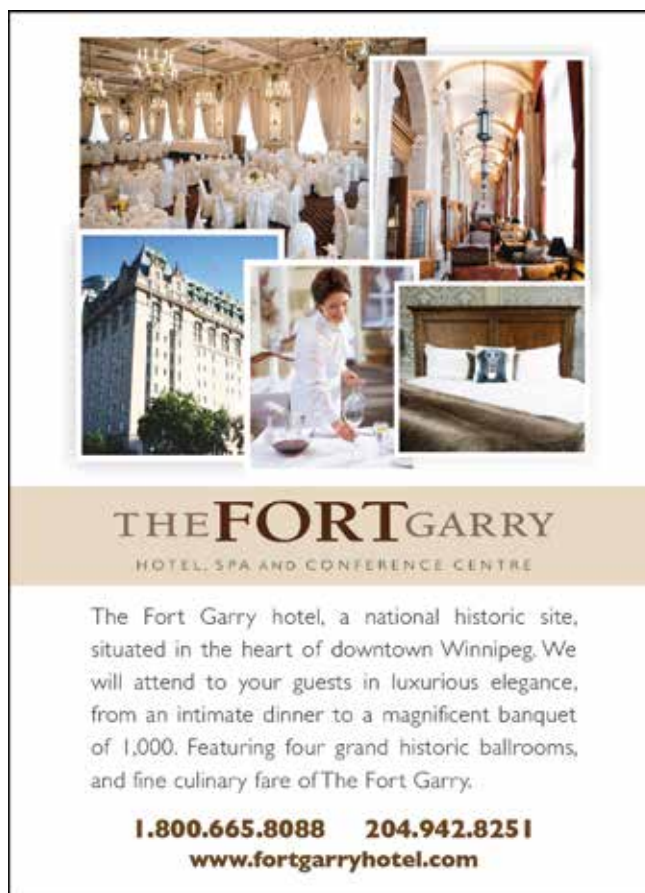
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25 Years of Reading Recovery in Manitoba: The Influence of an Innovation

By Jennifer Flight, River East Transcona School Division, and Allyson Matczuk, Manitoba Education and Training

Readings Recovery, designed by internationally recognized academic, Dame Marie Clay of New Zealand, is an early literacy intervention that supports students' development in reading, writing, and talking. For most children, learning to read and write happens easily in the first years of school. For some though, learning to read and write is a struggle.

At the heart of Reading Recovery is a short-term, research-based, and data-driven early intervention designed to drastically reduce the number of children who face such a struggle. It is based on a literacy processing theory grounded in developmental psychology. Reading Recovery is inclusive and designed to serve the lowest achieving readers and writers in a Grade 1 classroom, with all its diverse needs. It is designed to work alongside the classroom program.

Reading Recovery provides the “*something extra*” that some children need in order to experience success in literacy. “For most children having difficulty, Reading Recovery is like a master key and a safe staircase that takes them from any classroom program and returns them to competence in that program,” (Clay, 2014, p. 228).

Students included in Reading Recovery are the most vulnerable literacy learners in the classroom and are challenging learners

for teachers. Thus, high quality teaching and professional development that maintain quality experiences are critical. Quality assurance of the implementation of Reading Recovery occurs in multiple ways and is intended as a support to school systems.

First, the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery published a set of standards and guidelines for teaching, implementing, and evaluating the intervention and grants a royalty-free trademark license to users. Second, the intensive yearlong training for all levels of Reading Recovery professionals, followed by intensive, ongoing professional development and support from teacher leaders and trainers, is in place at no cost to Manitoba school divisions. Third, the lesson format is standard, however, within the format teachers make decisions about each child. Fourth, an annual evaluation of outcomes for every child in Reading Recovery is conducted, and finally, data analysis is done by trainers who work with training centres to ensure fidelity to the design of implementation.

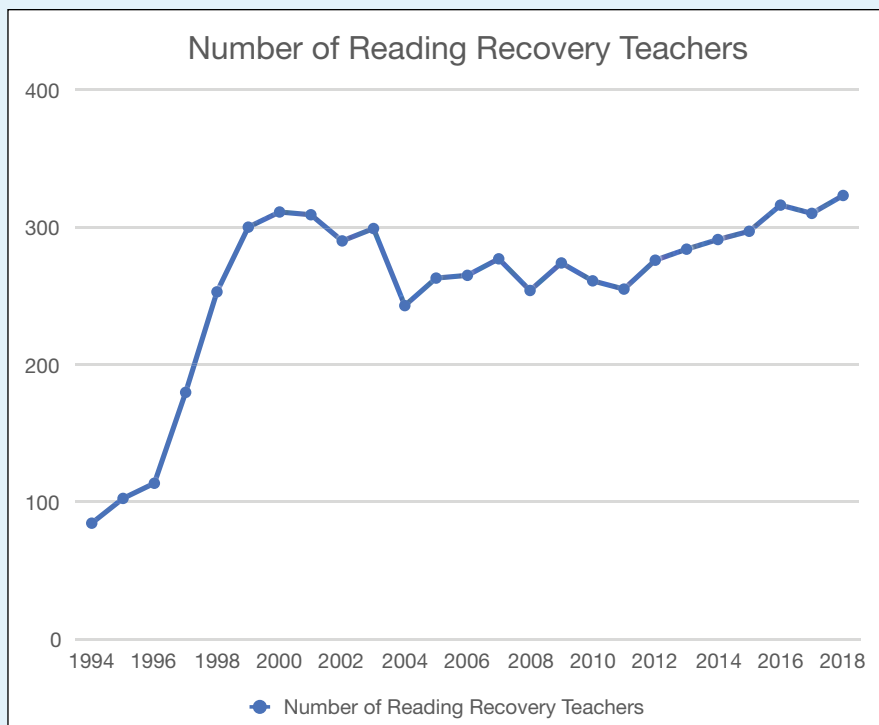
Schools in Manitoba have had the opportunity to implement Reading Recovery since 1994, making this school year the 25th for Reading Recovery in the province. Detailed data on every student included in the Reading Recovery intervention has been gathered since 1995.

Impact on teaching practice

To measure the size and impact of the Reading Recovery implementation in Manitoba, we could look at annual numbers of the 29 school divisions, or the 270 schools, or the 310 teachers currently working in Reading Recovery. However, the numbers of teachers working each year, with approximately one third of the group cycling out as new teachers come in to take their place, represents a significant number (approximately 2,400) of professionals in our province who work in a multitude of education roles.

Reading Recovery is teacher professional development. Specially trained teachers, with the support of Manitoba's expert 13 Teacher Leaders, are challenged to consider new perspectives about learning opportunities that build on individual children's strengths, and link theory with practice.

Reading Recovery training changes teachers' thinking. The strength of Reading Recovery has been the purposeful training of teachers to understand research, apply their learning in context to the students and school where they work, while continuously reflecting on student growth and progress in reading and writing. In addition, teacher colleagues observe the Reading Recovery process to help the teacher identify strategies being used and to help them question the “why” behind a



teaching decision. In doing so, the teacher leaders guide teachers to consider areas that could take the individual student's learning further.

What they learn about literacy processing with children in a lesson series also influences all other parts of their pedagogy. But, most importantly, it has been the gift of literacy over 51,000 Grade 1 students in Manitoba since 1994, who initially struggled to participate in the regular classroom program. One hundred percent of these students made progress, for most, exceptional progress. For others, progress was made and it was also determined very early in the students learning career, that they would need some longer term or specialist support. What we know is that while becoming literate is not a promise of academic success, not being literate is a guarantee of a life time of challenges.

School administrators value Reading Recovery professional development as a change agent. One administrator shares, "Reading Recovery has certainly impacted targeted student progress but has also built a stronger capacity in our teachers around sound literacy instruction. The Reading Recovery teacher has taken on a leadership role in our building and helped to facilitate rich conversations around literacy. As a result, the impact has helped to support students school wide."

Part of a balanced literacy plan

Reading Recovery is the "something extra" that allows young children a second chance; a fresh start in their journey from emergent to early literacy learners. Young children present numerous challenges to the teacher when they are put into small groups—they require engaging activities that they can succeed with and

enjoy, but they all have different needs. This is why, for some children, we need to plan for and adapt our teaching practices to suit their individual literacy development profiles. In Manitoba, Reading Recovery provides individualized support to students typically over a 12 to 20-week period. Students received, on average, 77 daily, 30-minute lessons, which is equivalent to just seven to nine school days.

Multiple research studies (Rowe, 1995; Hattie, 2012) have clearly demonstrated that classroom teachers that have worked in Reading Recovery either simultaneously or at a previous time in their careers bring a strong understanding of a literacy processing theory to their classroom work. They understand literacy acquisition, learning progressions, and student needs as they work with classrooms full of students with individual needs. Reading Recovery has strengthened the safety net of the classroom teacher and the school's comprehensive literacy plan.

Schools with full implementation (that is, every student who needed Reading Recovery received it) proudly show that they have no student who has been in their school since the Grade 1 year leaving Grade 1 as a non-reader or a non-writer. As well, those students do well on assessments done in Grade 2, and on the provincial Grade 3 assessment.

Early literacy assessment: A valid and reliable tool

The identification of students in need of something extra in literacy instruction involves a common assessment throughout Manitoba. The measurement of early literacy behaviors is complex and requires a commitment to careful and systematic observation. *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013) provides a systematic way of capturing early reading and writing behaviours of children, ages five to eight, and is the primary assessment tool used in Reading Recovery.

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All of the tasks were developed in research studies to assess emergent literacy in young children. A set of Canadian Norms has been developed for the assessment of Canadian students and was included in the 2013 edition of the book. The training of Reading Recovery teachers in the use of this assessment is only part of the picture. There has been an effort made throughout the province to train as many Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers as possible so that instruction in early years classrooms matches the strengths and needs of the students as much as possible.

Taking records of reading continuous texts: running records

The belief that the classroom teacher must, over time, carefully and systematically record and analyze the reading behaviours of students learning to read was an important concept for Manitoba teachers. Taking records of children as they read continuous texts (Running Records) is a powerful way to inform the teaching of all students. This practice is widely used in schools throughout Manitoba for classroom instruction and for the instruction of students who teachers find challenging. It is a common assessment language that school team members can use in informative ways to tailor and differentiate instruction, as well as, providing ways of discussing evidence to support students' transitions between teachers.

The importance of early writing

Manitoba teachers have come to understand the contribution of early writing in literacy development. Previously, teachers did not expect children to write until they were reading, and as a result, they were not given the opportunity to write. "This created a narrow funneling of emergent literacy expertise," (McNaughton, 1999, p. 11) in which the activities provided for children were restricted by the beliefs and attitudes held by teachers.

Reading Recovery teachers initiated the shift. Reading and writing are like two sides of the same coin; reading and writing are concurrent sources of learning about print. Students learn that what they know about writing can be of service in their reading, and vice versa. Learning to write their own little stories, helps children who are finding it hard to learn about print to begin to attend to print in a detailed way, (Clay, 2015. P. 18). Reading Recovery provides writing instruction as well as reading



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instruction, supporting students through the reciprocal nature of the two processes.

Raising expectations

Twenty-five years ago, it was accepted practice to either reduce the amount of content the low-achieving student had to

learn or extend the amount of time required to master the tasks. This resulted in lower expectations for students and ensured they would not catch up with their peers. As well, these students often completed skill-based worksheets rather than reading and writing texts. Reading Recovery has taught us to

expect accelerated progress for the lowest achieving students.

"It has been one of the surprises of Reading Recovery that all kinds of children with difficulties can be included, can learn, and can reach average band performance for their class in both reading and writing achievement," (Clay, 2004, p. 8). Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers observe changes in the students' achievement, confidence, and independence.

Parents see the changes, too. "Reading Recovery is an excellent opportunity for any child who needs help with reading and writing," commented one parent. "It was so rewarding to watch our son progress through each stage. I initially thought it would be a negative experience because he was identified as a child who required Reading Recovery. But I was quickly mistaken as the extra time and wonderful teacher helped improve his reading and writing skills immensely. And he loved it!"

Conclusion

Over the last 25 years, Reading Recovery has been implemented in more than 380 Manitoba schools, and teachers have tussled with Clay's ideas. Learning and discussing these theories and linking them directly to practice has led to improved learning opportunities for many students in Reading Recovery and in the classroom. A school system's literacy strategy targets all learners, supports development, and improves achievement.

Clay always asked, "What is possible?". The literacy future for our students holds great potential. We challenge you to read and discuss Clay's research and published works, and to consider what is possible for the children and the teachers in your school system. ■

Note to readers: The National Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Conference and 25th Anniversary Celebration will be held in Winnipeg, April 4 to 6, 2019 at the Victoria Inn. For further information and to register please visit the website www.rrcanada.org.

For further information about the Canadian implementation of Reading Recovery, see www.rrcanada.org. A full list of additional learning tools, and references for this article, can be obtained by emailing ssavory@matrixgroupinc.net.

Jennifer Flight, River East Transcona School Division, and Allyson Matczuk, Manitoba Education and Training, are both Reading Recovery trainers.



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A Reading Instruction Journey

By Reg Klassen, Frontier School Division

Frontier School Division (FSD) consists of 40 schools spread over 485,000 square kilometres, making it unique in Canada. Many of our community schools are located in isolated communities. Because of its massive expanse, the division is divided into five areas, each with an area office, area superintendent, and a support team that includes a literacy coach. This is helpful for the schools in each area but makes it more challenging for division-wide initiatives to gain traction.

We are proud of our diversity as a division and celebrate it often. Over 85 per cent of our students are Indigenous and the reacquisition of language and culture is of prime importance for many of our communities. Our challenges are great; we have high rates of student absenteeism as well as a higher than normal absenteeism rate for teachers and support staff, with very few qualified substitute teachers available. The ongoing challenge of chronically low achievement in literacy and numeracy has been our reality and continues to be a struggle. And more recently, we have encountered a shortage of teachers in some of our schools where students have been without qualified teachers for the first weeks of school.

Three years ago, when we again saw our less than stellar results (below the provincial average) in literacy, those earlier realities were cited as the main reasons for the bad results. The Board of Trustees, along with senior administrators, recognized the challenges and understood that they are likely to always impact student achievement. However, in spite of them, they were convinced that our teachers and students could achieve better results.

The first step the Board took was to hire an Assistant Superintendent of Academic Programs and Curriculum, with a focus on improving literacy outcomes for students. Previously, this had been the responsibility of each Area Superintendent. The Board wanted a more coordinated approach, someone whose full-time responsibility would be to ensure our students received the best instruction and that our teachers were trained to provide it.

During the first year, an inventory of reading instruction was taken, involving a visit to



Students in Black River, Manitoba (located 138 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg) practice their reading skills.

almost every school, meeting with teachers, administrators, and instructional coaches to determine resource and teacher professional development requirements. A Strategic Plan was developed by the Board and senior administration during that year. As part of the plan, a literacy expert, Dr. Joe Stouffer, was hired to work with our literacy coaches in preparation for the following year when the plan would be fully implemented. Dr. Stouffer and the coaches focused on developing teachers' skills in reading instruction.

We came to realize that our teachers really wanted to improve their skills for teaching reading and literacy in general. We recognized that building teacher capacity would be our most effective strategy to improving our student literacy levels. We redesigned our professional development plan with a focus on literacy across the division. Vital to this would be the involvement of our five literacy coaches, but that too, required a shift from what had occurred previously in the division.

Years earlier, the division redefined the role of our coaches, changing it from consultant to coach, a transition that continues to evolve. The mandate of our literacy coaches is to work alongside teachers by demonstrating lessons, co-teaching, working with grade groups, and leading professional development. With many schools a half to a full day of travel away from local offices, coaches often need to remain in the community for several days so they have a deeper and more lasting impact on teachers' growth in their capacity to teach reading. This means more overnights away from family. The alternative, a single day visit to a school,

involving more travel time, does not bring about as impactful an improvement on our teacher capacity and ultimately student results.

Our literacy goal in its first iteration stated our students would improve by five per cent every year. We shifted that focus in our second year to simply state that, "all students in Grades 1 to 6 will develop the foundational reading skills appropriate for their age/grade level."

The first strategy to accomplish this outcome was to mandate that all Grades 1 to 3 students must have a minimum of 100 minutes of reading instruction per day, and Grades 4 to 6

students must have a minimum of 90 minutes per day. This modification to the timetable in each elementary school has been more difficult than anticipated. It has meant a substantial change to timetables for teaching staff. We have also worked to change the culture of how we view class time, so that it is regarded as sacred and therefore should not be interrupted with visits to the classroom or announcements.

Our second major strategy is to engage teachers in comprehensive reading instruction with a focus on individual and/or small group instruction, including regular and frequent assessment. In order to support this strategy, we focus our large group professional development in each of our five areas on division expectations, foundations, basic competencies, and data collection as related to reading instruction. We also set up grade group/school group meetings that meet two to three times per year. Leadership for these meetings is to be provided by coaches with school literacy leaders to collaborate, review, and refine reading instruction skills.

Our expectation is that all teachers of students in Grades 1 to 8, and all Resource and Literary intervention teachers, will become skilled in reading instruction through regular and comprehensive professional development. Another key element is the expectation that principals and vice-principals learn alongside teachers. Our plan also outlines additional ways that coaches, principals and vice-principals, and superintendents are expected to provide support and these can be viewed on our website.

At our recent August gathering, where we met with all our principals and vice-principals before the school year began, we had a number of teachers share the successes they had experienced this past school year in the implementation of the strategic plan. One teacher, who is in a multi-age classroom, said she had "totally changed the way she taught." She spent a great deal more time using data to help her focus on the needs of her students. Working with students in small groups has caused her to change her instructional strategies, and as a result, her students are encountering successes they have not experienced before.

One of our elementary schools shared that their new student reading data wall had changed the conversation among their teachers. Meetings are now held at the data wall where they discuss student progress. Teachers are now sharing with their colleagues the strategies they are using to teach reading at a level never experienced before in the school.



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Another elementary school shared that, as a school of 90 students, they have embraced the division reading instruction plan and found as the year went along, their success only increased as their capacity for teaching reading grew. In the last assessment of the year their students had gone up "one hundred levels" from the most recent reading level assessment. The principal said, "We shared the news of how great our students have been doing at the assembly yesterday. The cheering was amazing. We purchased 'Level Up' cakes for each classroom to celebrate after the assembly. What a great day we had celebrating student literacy success!"

One of our Kindergarten teachers shared the story that her students asked if they could bring in their own books to read. She quickly realized they were referring to the books they had been receiving each month at home since birth. The Board of Trustees had often wondered if these books were having an impact and, anecdotally, this story indicates they are.

In 2014, the Board of Frontier School Division began a partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Canada. It is a free book gifting organization devoted to inspiring a love of reading. Parents living in communities can register their newborn, who will then receive a free book each month until their fifth birthday during their Kindergarten start year. Our Division has borne a significant cost for these books, but the Board is convinced these high-quality books, mailed to each registered pre-school age child each

month, are very worthwhile in supporting our literacy initiatives. Since the program began, more than 1,200 children in 36 communities in Frontier School Division are enrolled, with a further 1,614 children having graduated from the program. To date, more than 72,500 books have been mailed to children in Frontier School Division.

After the first year of implementation of our focus on reading instruction, our data indicates that we still have a ways to go in ensuring students are meeting grade level expectations. However, as our stories indicate, we are inspired by pockets of success that

hold promise as more classroom teachers and schools continue to grow in their capacity to deliver effective reading instruction.

We have taken some good first steps, but our work continues. We need to move forward with all of our initiatives and grow our reading instruction capacity among all of our teaching staff. Our journey has just begun. ■

Reg Klassen is Chief Superintendent for the Frontier School Division. He is also serving as the current President of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA).



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the mathematics curriculum, however, does not help constitute the practice that teachers want or students need. Equally, infusion of problem-based learning into the mathematics curriculum does not help with the transformations we want to see in our classrooms. What we need are a set of tools that, along with good problems, can build thinking classrooms. In this presentation, **Dr. Peter Liljedahl** looks at a series of such tools, emerging from research, that can help to build an environment conducive to problem-based learning. He will unpack his research that has demonstrated that a problem-based learning environment and culture can quickly be established, even in classrooms where students resist change.



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MIND THE GAP:



Understanding the Multidimensional Needs of Newcomer Students

By Abdikheir Ahmed and Noëlle DePape, Newcomer Education Coalition

As community development practitioners who have spent our careers working to support newly-arrived refugee families, we are not experts in teaching literacy or literacy theory. However, what we do know is that with the proper foundations and supports, newcomer

students will have a higher chance of developing literacy in English and benefiting from their education in Canada.

To support students with low literacy, we must not focus solely on literacy, but rather, we must address all of the barriers that prevent students from achieving their full potential. Newcomer students need the trust, relationships, parental connections, feeling of belonging, culturally-sensitive mental health supports, and teachers who both understand their needs and who have the specialized skills to teach them effectively. With this all-inclusive formula, we can provide refugee students with the right conditions and foundation from which they can fully learn and launch.

Context: A shift in demographics

As conflict around the world continues to spiral, Canada plays an important role in providing a safe haven for refugees. Most recently, we have seen waves of refugees from Syria and Iraq (Yazidi), adding to the on-going groups from Somalia, Eritrea, Congo, and other protracted conflict areas.

In Manitoba, we have seen a shift in demographics with over 16,000 immigrants arriving in our province each year, approximately 10 per cent of whom are from refugee backgrounds. In 2014 alone, Manitoba “received the highest number of refugees in its history and the highest number of refugees per capita in Canada,” (Manitoba Labour & Immigration, 2015). Unfortunately, “this

increase has generally not been accompanied by appropriate educational and other specialized support specifically targeted to assist the... school success of students who are from war-affected, disrupted schooling backgrounds,” (Kanu 2008).

The children from these families populate and diversify our schools. While some have formal educational backgrounds and a grasp of the English language, many refugee students struggle with a myriad of issues during their initial years in Canada, including trauma and specific challenges related to their education. These include academic gaps due to disrupted schooling, limited English language proficiency, a lack of academic support at home, grade placement based on age and English language assessment tests rather than academic ability, separation from family and acculturation stress.

Newcomer Education Coalition: Who we are and why we exist

In 2014, community advocates working on the frontlines supporting the reception, settlement, and integration of refugee families saw the need to bring together allies to work collaboratively to ensure that the education system was responding to the needs of our refugee students and their families. The Newcomer Education Coalition was created as a vehicle to promote culturally and socially inclusive learning environments for immigrant and refugee students, with



The Newcomer Education Coalition and its allies.



The Newcomer Education Coalition presented at a recent MASS conference.

a focus on addressing the unique needs of newcomer K to 12 students in Manitoba.

NEC is a community-based coalition that draws its membership from various ethno-cultural communities, community development organizations, settlement agencies, academic institutions, school divisions, and government departments. Based on a number of consultations with community leaders, newcomer students and refugee parents, NEC developed four priority areas to focus on:

1. Teacher training;
2. Parental engagement;
3. Mental health supports; and
4. Appropriate models for older newcomer youth with interrupted schooling.

Teacher training

While Manitoba has many children with interrupted schooling, there is no certification for specialized English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers. It is not simply EAL teachers who work with EAL students—gym, art, music teachers, and subject matter experts also work with EAL students and do not always have the cultural context to support and empower the students as learners. Many of these teachers are continuing to work to find ways to connect with their students.

As Surafel Kuchem, a teacher who is part of the NEC says, “Some newcomer students have experienced either a lack of cultural understanding or direct racism from their teachers.” Many teachers do not have the necessary experience, skills, or cultural understanding to fully support refugee students and their diverse psychosocial and educational needs. Working to provide the necessary skills or adequate resources for teachers is critical.

A teacher with well-rounded training is better prepared to respond to the academic and social needs of refugee students. We continue to advocate for EAL to be a teachable subject in pre-service teacher training. It is one important building block in the wider “how to” of integrating newcomer youth in our education system, while simultaneously addressing the broader needs of the refugee student.

Engaging parents

In our work, we often hear that schools and teachers are finding it challenging to engage newcomer parents in school life, including attending parent teacher interviews, taking part in parent council, and connecting with teachers. We should know that it is not because newcomer parents are disinterested in

engaging with the schools, but rather due to a laundry list of cultural approaches and understandings of education.

For example, in many of the cultures our newcomer students come from, education is extremely highly valued. However, the parents of these students are often unfamiliar with the idea of engaging regularly with the school because educators are often very highly respected and seen as experts. When children go to school, it is considered the domain of the teacher and parents only go to the school when kids are in trouble.

Additional reasons for lack of engagement include language barriers for parents, a lack of recognition of traditional knowledge in Western countries, which lead to parents feeling uncomfortable, or, pragmatically, the fact that many refugee families are low-income and are often working multiple jobs, which allows them little time to interact with their child’s school. Parents may also see these children as adults and determine they are independent enough, without the parent needing to connect with schools.

School administrators, teachers, and political leadership in school divisions should be aware of these factors in order to find strategies to engage newcomer parents. Some best practices we have seen include hosting community gatherings or dinners where parents can meet teachers in a more social environment instead of traditional parent-teacher interviews, translating newsletters into key languages spoken by students, and engaging newcomer community leaders to assist with hiring new administrators.

Mental health supports

In our work, we have come across many refugee youth who have mental health issues and either dropped out of school or felt disengaged due to unaddressed trauma. Currently, there are no existing specialized mental health supports for war-affected kids in Manitoba. This is a major gap.

Existing mental health approaches can be isolating. Talk therapy, for example, is not effective with students who have limited English language skills. We encourage school counselors and clinicians to think and plan more creatively in how to respond. Some schools in Winnipeg have created arts-based support groups for newcomer students, allowing them to express their feelings without the need for common language. However, this issue needs to move beyond the scope of individual educators and must

be addressed at a policy level with resources and training allocated.

Additionally, stigma around mental health in the various cultures of many of our newcomer immigrants remains. Seeking professional assistance may be met with skepticism. For many newcomers, Western therapy is about fixing only people’s minds and can be perceived as contrary to the traditional ways of addressing mental health, which are more holistic and include a spiritual aspect.

Furthermore, youth with mental health issues tend to access the formal mental health system when they have reached rock bottom, such as a psychotic breakdown resulting in hospitalization. We need to be pro-active and respond with both preventative and on-going culturally-relevant practices and programs to better support our students and their families. This requires a conscious decision to invest in mental health supports in our schools, such as hiring staff in schools with the specialized skills to support students with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and providing professional development around culturally appropriate mental health supports.

Moreover, mental health work should not be an after-thought, but rather begin as soon as kids arrive in the school in the form of connection, cultural safety, and trust building. As emphasized by EAL teacher Tiffany Latour, “Our students need to feel that school is a secure place, free from danger, and that the adults who are working with them are safe, caring, and in-charge. We spend a great deal of instruction time delivering psycho-social emotional lessons creating that environment where learning can happen. Much of our literacy instruction happens because of the experiences we provide to our students. We incorporated literacy learning with experiential learning and vocabulary development, creating less-threatening situations for students to be learners.”

Appropriate models for older newcomer youth with interrupted schooling

Older newcomer youth (aged 16 to 22 years old) who have interrupted schooling or little formal education due to displacement and conflict face particular barriers to achieving academic success. For instance, youth who had to work at an early age in their home country or who were recruited as child soldiers, or who lived in under-resourced refugee camp settings for protracted periods, may not have basic literacy in their first language. This may

be coupled with other challenges due to mental health trauma.

These higher needs students, while well equipped with life skills beyond their years, often do not continue or drop out of school in Canada due to a lack of appropriate programming. They may leave high school before they acquire the necessary English language level or sufficient academic literacy that is required for post-secondary or additional training programs. In some cases, students graduate with “E” or “EAL” credits in Grade 12 math and English, limiting their ability

for educational advancement or entrance into gainful employment.

According to a presentation provided by the Manitoba Department of Education & Training, at a recent forum in 2017-2018, school divisions across the province reported over 3,000 high school students received EAL Student Support. While the province says the majority of these students were close to—or on par with—their Manitoba peers in terms of formal education, approximately 150 new students of high school age were behind their Manitoba peers by at least three years of schooling. Of these, 35 had no prior formal education.

This does not include newcomers between the ages of 18 and 24 who may have gone into adult programs, nor Grades 7 and 8 students with at least a three-year gap, who will still require significant supports to meet graduation requirements on time. This is a yearly pattern, accruing a substantial group of youth who lack the formal learning to achieve their educational and career goals.

It follows that these students require specialized and longer term supports, as well as flexible programming. Innovative solutions that require further exploration and investment include:

- Transitional schools with intensive English programming and wrap around supports;
- Apprenticeship and vocational programs;
- Learning programs that extend beyond the traditional school day/year; and
- Career bridging programs.

Conclusion

As refugee advocates and community builders, it is our perspective that one can possess all of the techniques in the world to teach literacy but if the students are not ready to learn and do not feel well-connected due to their experiences of trauma and disruptions in various aspects of their lives, they will have lower chances of moving forward in achieving literacy and literacies.

We strongly urge educational policy makers and educators to take into consideration the multitude of barriers and assets that our newcomer students and their families bring to our schools. Bringing together community, parents and educational systems, we can create truly inclusive, equitable, and welcoming schools where our newcomer students can reach their greatest potential. ■

Abdikheir Ahmed and Noëlle DePape are Co-Chairs of the Newcomer Education Coalition Advocacy Committee.

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Educating our Students Through **Visual Literacy**

By Ryan Loeppky, on behalf of the S.R.S.S. Art Department

Why is visual literacy so important to the development and growth of all students? Cave paintings give proof that humans have yearned to capture and understand the world around them; we have yearned in this way ever since, and we begin doing so at a very early age. I can still remember the drawings and paintings I made as a young child; this grew into trying to capture and understand the complex and sometimes scary world I encountered.

Of course, the visual arts are so much more than just pretty pictures. They are an expressive and universal language, and have the ability to communicate things we cannot say with words, including that which we might avoid otherwise. More than ever, our students live and learn in a visual world where they need the opportunity and space to safely imagine, explore, express, and create.

A voice for all

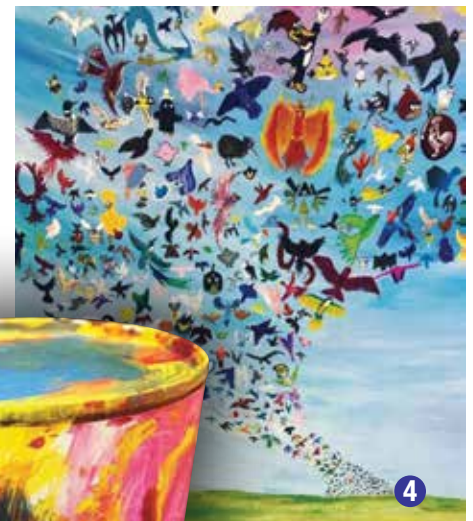
We have had the honour of teaching an incredible array of students of different skill levels and personal experiences at the Steinbach Regional Secondary School. Some of the more humbling and rewarding experiences have come from students with specific needs who are able to bring joy and positive energy into our classes through their art and their spirit.

My good buddy Karl (not his real name), for instance, has the ability to bring an infectious positive energy and a willingness to try new things. Once the students see his final works of art—a vast collection of cut-up paper, a painting on a pringles can—he opens a creative door for other students to enter. Although he does not speak many words, the choices he makes when creating his art speak volumes, on his good days as well as his challenging ones. He is living, daily proof of the level playing field that art creates between students.



Mental health and healing through the visual arts

One of the most misunderstood parts of life is the struggle with mental health. A broken wrist or sprained ankle are more easily diagnosed and repaired than inner injuries of the psyche, and the stigma that still follows mental illness only makes it harder. Art allows students the safety, privacy and security to explore, express, understand, and even help heal one's mental injuries.



1. "Making tracks" Acrylic paint on masonite
Student artist, 2018
Photo courtesy of Jennifer Lehman and the Steinbach Regional Secondary School
2. (Untitled) CNC stencil on ink and charcoal
Student artist, 2018
Photo courtesy of the Steinbach Regional Secondary School
3. "untitled", Acrylic Paint on Can
Student artist, 2018
Photo courtesy of Steinbach Regional Secondary School
4. "Birdnado", Acrylic on masonite
Collaborative work by Grades 9-12 students
Photo courtesy of Neil Klassen and the Steinbach Regional Secondary School
5. "Eating Disorder" (left) "Depression" (right)
Glazed Ceramics
Student artist, 2017
Photo courtesy of Steinbach Regional Secondary School

The collaboration between the six-month studio residency at Art Beat Studio and our classes, as an example, acts as a way to find healing through art. These students see that art can be made by anyone, and that one of its functions is good mental hygiene. While art class is never a substitution for medical care, cognitive therapy, or counselling, it is a way “in” to help express and discover what might be on the inside. All the arts—music, dance, drama, and the visual arts—can function as a map to explore the labyrinth of the injured spirit.

The artful human and developing skills in the 21st Century

Visual literacy is a part of any class for any student, and not restricted to those who happen to call themselves “artists.” We bring creativity and art into all facets of our lives. My students and I call each other not just “artists” but “artful humans”—this builds confidence even for those that may not want to explicitly pursue a career in the visual arts.

“Artful humans” develop problem solving skills, determination, self-confidence, and creativity for *any* career path. My colleagues and I in the Art Department foster a cross-curricular

approach with the school faculty at large. As examples, Jenn’s class explored colour and sculpture through candy making with the culinary arts teacher; and Neil has worked with the industrial arts teachers to use their CNC machine to build stage props for our upcoming production of *The Hobbit*.

Breaking down language barriers

Our nation leads the world in fostering multiculturalism; the many struggles new immigrant families face include language barriers which can be intimidating for new students and hinder their developing relationships in and out of school. Visual literacy allows students to express feelings, reflect on the past and present, and fosters relationship-building skills.

Art is able to build community in and out of the classroom for all students. For example, while the word “happy” is only known to English speakers, a happy face is instantly and universally understood. While this is a simple example, all the arts are powerful precisely because they express that which is impossible to put into words.

Art saves lives!

This is not a statement I take or say very lightly; it is a personal one for me and for many people who have discovered the power of self-expression in their lives. Growing up with little to no formal art education in grade school, I felt I did not have a voice; thankfully, we can offer the next generation the tools to find *their* voices. These deeper-learning experiences lead teachers and students to new understanding and life-changing connections.

I have been fortunate enough to find others like me in the world who have helped me find my voice in my art and my teaching practice. My hope for all students is that through their journey in school, they find their own voice; it is the only one they have, and it is more important than they will ever know.

It is an honour to work with my colleagues Neil Klassen and Jennifer Lehman at the S.R.S.S. Together, we are privileged to teach at a school and division that nurtures a culture of visual literacy and allows the unique voice—artistic and *human*—of each student be heard. ■

Ryan Loeppky is a husband, a father of three, and a professional artist. He is currently a Visual Arts Instructor at the Steinbach Regional Secondary School in Hanover School Division and President of the Manitoba Association for Art Education.

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Taking Comedy Seriously:



Improv Theatre in the Classroom

By Margo Kehler, Institut collégial Vincent Massey Collegiate

I stood there. Only weeks earlier, this man's wife, who had been like a second mother to me, had been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. We all hoped and prayed for a miracle. It never came. I was overwhelmed by emotion: sad for the loss, scared for the children, angry at the futility, and bewildered by the shock. I was to offer some comfort through condolences, yet I was verbally paralyzed. I could not find the words to express the immensity of the moment. I eventually mumbled "I am so sorry," but the words did not suffice; that phrase is what I would have used had I bumped him or arrived late. It did not begin to convey what my heart was feeling. It was that moment that I understood fully why we have art, dance, music, sculpture, etc. Sometimes, words fail us and we do not have the means to say what we feel. Art forms allow us to go beyond mere words—they can communicate deeper and more expressively.

When I think about the importance of the arts more globally and in our recent history, when the tragedy of 9/11 ambushed us, the artists were the first emotional responders, performing days later at Ground Zero in mournful splendour, trying to make sense of the anguish and confusion of it, and seeking that understanding through creativity. Looking back, the arts enhanced our ability, as a society, to communicate and to make meaning of something so seemingly meaningless. These artists spoke for us when we had no words for our global grief.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as the "ability to identify and understand, interpret, create [and] communicate."¹ While one may not immediately think of art as a means to develop and enhance literacy, the UNESCO definition of the term demonstrates clearly that art, at its core, is the literacy of life, and thus arts education is an incredible means to develop and promote literacy. In UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report, it states that, "Literacy helps people understand decontextualized information and language,



Margo Kehler (far right) guides over 100 students every Friday through improvisational theatre activities designed to help students take risks, discover their strengths and explore new ideas of literacy.



Students break into teams to "compete" in confidence-building activities, exploring themes such as gender, age, race, right and wrong.

verbal as well as written... [and] as such, it paves the way for further learning." The arts, at its core, helps people understand their world quite naturally.

The school where I teach, Institut collégial Vincent Massey Collegiate (ICVMC), is a proud UNESCO School, where the pillars and tenets of this organization guide our community. Literacy is not a concept to be left to Language Arts teachers. Literacy

imbues the entire educational experience at Massey.

As an arts educator, I have committed myself to the importance of equipping my students with skills to find and share their unique voice, with a view to develop well-rounded 21st century learners. This goal is not just my own, but one that is held by Vincent Massey and Pembina Trails School Division as a whole. Pembina Trails recognizes that creativity and

innovation are essential for our students to grow into adults who are not only capable, but whom will excel in the world.

In our arts programs, we promote authentic creation, rather than repetition. Creative endeavours augment experiential learning so that students develop their expression, share their voices, and equip them in their ability to be literate beyond words.

In order to develop creativity, cooperation, curiosity, and imagination are fostered. Art experiences offer students chances to gain courage, to learn about their unique strengths and abilities, to step out of their comfort zones to pursue ideas, and to collaborate. This requires risk, and risk requires comfort with failure. True creativity is often chaotic and messy due to the very nature of risk. We cannot predict the outcome. Improvisational Theatre (Improv) anticipates this by the very nature of the program.

If the point of literacy is to develop students who can fully communicate, they must be willing to risk new ways of undertaking communication. Success is not a guaranteed outcome and we may indeed fail. We need to be comfortable with this failure and understand that it is in the face of failure that we learn resilience—how to get back up and try again. Accomplishing this requires a safe community where calculated risk is taught and failure is not marked, for example, with a giant red “X”, but celebrated because it means experimentation is occurring. Experimentation changes the experimenter. Experimentation results in students who explore their curiosities, build on their strengths, identify weakness, and improve their critical and creative thinking. Experimentation develops openness as well as flexibility. Thus, experimentation forges and sharpens the skills needed for 21st century citizens.

It was Plato who said, “Do not train youth to learning by force and harshness,

but lead them to it by what amuses their minds so that you may discover the peculiar bent of the genius of each.” And so, in improv, we take comedy seriously. We know that through laughter, students can learn more. I have seen students accomplish much and flourish in the improv classroom where they struggled in more traditional academic classrooms. The students indeed discover the peculiar bent of their own genius. And, as a result, they have more confidence in their own ideas, and are more willing to collaborate as they build on and support the ideas of those around them.

In improv, the most reticent or anxiety riddled student participates. Time and time again, though unexpected of self-conscious teens, I have witnessed students develop a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable in front of their peers. In turn, I have watched their self-confidence grow. This occurs because they are asked to play characters very different from themselves. Students explore gender, age, race, and perspectives, and this allows students to appreciate new ideas, and, as a result, develop empathy. Students are comfortable with risk taking and understand error recovery because failure is honoured.

Not some arbitrary talent, improvisation is a skill that is essential for living—we all improvise every day of our lives. Students in the improv classroom develop a growth mindset, as they believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. They understand that their brains and talent are just starting points. This then creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. Improv is game-based learning. Improv has incredible real-life application; be it saying yes to new opportunities, being comfortable in taking a calculated risk, or thinking outside the box. In improv, there are rules. That said, we are also taught

that sometimes rules are meant to be broken as there are no fixed pre-planned ways to work.

For 20 years, ICVMC has recognized the value of the improvisation art form. Full credit improvisation classes are offered at every grade level. The advanced improv students coach beginning and intermediate students. Cross-graded in-house improv league teams “compete” once a week over the noon-hour in front of a packed student audience. Skills that have been taught in class are explored on stage in a relevant manner with creativity in the moment. Prior to each performance, the team captains deliver a teacher designed lesson plan or an approved plan of their own creation. At every event, much laughter ensues, but, more importantly, there is evidence of personal growth.

As I look to the future, I look forward to seeing former Pembina Trails – Vincent Massey improv students, standing in front, with hearts full of emotion, and equipped to communicate their ideas, their passions and their voices, in whatever way they choose, with clarity and confidence. ■

Margo Wilson Kebler has taught improv at Massey since 1997, having started one of the very first public school improv classes. She is currently serving her second term as President of Manitoba Drama Educators and is now interested in learning how the improv comedy toolbox can be further developed to include ways to reduce anxiety in students.

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Coding, Computational Thinking and Literacy

By Andrew Volk, M. Ed.
Seven Oaks School Division

When you stop to think about the impact of technology on our world, you probably think about the giant leaps—the advancements that have changed the way we live and interact with each other. The personal computer, the internet, mobile phones, and smart devices have all created a distinct life before/ life after phenomenon, in which the rules of the game are changed so significantly that our behaviours, interactions, and relationships in both public and private spaces are permanently affected.

Consider the process of applying for a job. Today, it is common to search and apply for a job on a website or app, possible to conduct an interview via video/web call, share a digital portfolio and maybe even be hired before ever meeting an employer face to face. Aside from traditional reference checks, the employer might look into an applicant's digital footprint to get a better idea of who they are. Meanwhile, fewer people are accessing opportunities through print classifieds or dropping off hard copies of their resumes. It's just one example of a



Students create a video game, animation, or interactive web content related to curricular learning and then share their creations at an "arcade" event.



The immediate obstacle to overcome was that our Grade 4 teachers had absolutely no coding experience. Fortunately, I was able to convince two of them that I knew enough about coding to guarantee the project would be successful ... the combination of bluffing and bribery was enough to get teachers on board.

life skill that requires a different set of prerequisite skills than it would have 20 years ago.

In education, we are faced with the complex challenge of determining what the term *literacy* means today, what it might mean in the future and how to develop it in students who will work in a changing and unpredictable world. Educators need to consider which skills will be most important and how students will best learn them and be able to transfer them to new contexts and experiences. Skills such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication are at the top of the list, and terms like *coding* and *computational thinking* (CT) are now emerging.

Some would argue that schools are already behind when it comes to teaching these skills. In the CanadaNext report from Ipsos (2017), only 26 per cent of respondents believe that the education system is doing a good job of preparing students for the jobs of the future—one more area in which we must work to address the public perception that schools aren't doing enough.

Small steps

At some point we've all heard someone say (or said ourselves) that, a) change happens slowly in education, and b) technology changes so fast that it's hard to keep up. Fortunately, many educational leaders and professionals have recognized that we can't impact significant change by jumping on bandwagons or forcing new tools and practices into classrooms before people are ready. Planning for success involves trial and error, incubation and amplification time, and purposeful implementation. In other words, the small steps make the giant leaps possible.

Coding Quest is one such initiative that has been growing in Manitoba for the last two years. The pilot project was initiated by The Learning Partnership and Pembina Trails School Division, and to date has also included Western School Division, Portage La Prairie School Division, Winnipeg School Division, and Lord Selkirk School Division, with others likely to come on board next year. It is an interdisciplinary project-based learning

experience in which students use an online program called "Scratch" (<https://scratch.mit.edu>) or a similar tool to learn the basics of coding. Students create a video game, animation, or interactive web content related to curricular learning and the experience culminates with an "arcade" event where students from participating schools get to meet and share their creations, which took place at MITT with facilitator Nancy Kelner this past May.

Reflecting on the Coding Quest experience

As a former principal in Western School Division, I was excited when I found out that our students would be participating in Coding Quest. Being somewhat familiar with Scratch and several other online coding tools, I knew it had the potential to be a highly engaging project. The immediate obstacle to overcome was that our Grade 4 teachers had absolutely no coding experience. Fortunately, I was able to convince two of them that I knew enough about coding to guarantee the project would be successful and that Western SD was committed to supplying laptops to participating classrooms. The combination of bluffing and bribery was enough to get teachers on board and approximately 40 of our students were on their way to becoming "coders."

Of course, there were many other supports in place through The Learning Partnership, who provided PD, school visits from a teacher facilitator, and online support documents and lesson plans to help classrooms integrate curricular outcomes into the project.

What followed was an authentic project-based learning experience for students, and I even got to make a couple of video games myself. From my perspective as an administrator and participant in the classroom learning, some of the highlights I noticed were:

Problem solving – Coding is still new most, so there is a lot to figure out. Every step brings up new questions: "What kind of game can I make?" "How do I make the characters move?" "Why doesn't this work the way I expected?" "How did someone else do it?"

Chantelle Yake, one of the teachers involved said, "students have learned many critical thinking skills for solving problems... such as the importance of breaking down big ideas to specific tasks." The problem solving is authentic because people (including the teacher) genuinely don't know the solution and it takes some work to figure it out.

Cooperation and collaboration – The project is designed to be collaborative. While students can do an individual project, partners or small groups are ideal. Chantelle also noted that, "students had to work together as a team and learned the benefits of collaboration and techniques for communicating new ideas while using the program." It allows students to work together based on common interests or to be grouped in a way that best leverages the different abilities in the classroom. It's also a great opportunity for co-teaching as teachers share successes, failures, resources and new ideas constantly throughout the process.

Productive struggle – The Scratch program uses basic "block coding," which means you drag and click blocks of code to create a script. The program also has built in tips and tutorials and it lets you examine the code that other users have written. It's challenging but there are enough supports built in that the learner will continue to make progress and feel successful. A student who had written code for an animated short story said that it was much different than just writing a story on paper; that "we kind of had to put more effort into it... [Our group] found it hard because some parts we couldn't just do right away." Despite the extra effort, she said that coding was something she wants to do again in the future.

Professional learning – Teachers who commit to the Coding Quest project will benefit from the professional learning. They won't only learn about coding and how to use the tools, they will gain a deeper appreciation of computational thinking and problem solving and benefit from the many resources designed to support differentiated, integrated lesson planning.

Leadership – Coding provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate strengths that might not always be visible in "traditional" learning models and you'll get to see many surprising and unexpected examples of leadership as these strengths emerge.

Lisa Victor, another Grade 4 teacher, observed, "I've seen students that I never would've predicted would have an interest in coding who love it. And all they had to do was



try it. I gave them the opportunity and they developed the courage and persistence to try something new and to not quit when it did not go as they had planned.”

As educators, we have the duty to join students in this learning so that we can provide them with appropriate opportunities and challenges.

Public perception – Parents see the value of learning to code. During a local arcade event at Maple Leaf School in Morden, a mother intently watched other children try her son’s video game. She said that he talked about the project at home a lot and that she saw the value in the skills he was learning. “I took a computer programming course in high school,” she said, “but it was really hard, so I was surprised that kids could do it at this age.”

Another parent said she didn’t know anything about coding but, “...you can see how this would give them some of the basics for a future in IT or programming.”

Coding and CT in the classroom: Implications for the future

It’s hard to say what coding will look like in schools 10, or even five years from now, but what seems to be certain is that it will eventually be part of every student’s learning experience and that it has a place under the umbrella of literacy. A growing list of websites and apps aimed at teaching kids to code are freely available and tools/toys like *Spheros* and *Lego* have incorporated elements of coding for some time. There are also many coding resources that don’t require a device or a screen, and focus instead on computational thinking, such as “Code and Go Robot Mice” which can be used by children of almost any age.

Computational thinking (CT) generally means thinking in terms that can be understood and interpreted by a computer. It can also be thought of as the four practices of *breaking apart*, *pattern matching*, *abstraction* and *algorithm*. Coding is an application of CT that gets students to apply logic while using set parameters, sequential steps, if/then statements and variables. It is easy to understand the importance of this kind of thinking when one considers the extent to which we already rely on ICT in our work and personal lives.

In *The Next Era of Human\Machine Partnerships*, a 2017 report by Dell Technologies and The Institute for The Future (ITF), amidst many compelling projections of what life may be like for individuals and organizations by 2030, is a quote by Thuc

Vu, CEO of OhmniLabs: “If you imagine this partnership [between humans and machines] transforming how we arrange and direct our lives ... it’s possible to imagine a future in which machines become extensions of ourselves. Today we have digital natives. In 10 years, we’ll have digital conductors.”

In the coming years, these “digital conductors” will be the teachers and students in our classrooms. Students in Manitoba are already coding, animating, drafting, 3D printing, and learning with virtual reality. This is an opportunity to ask ourselves: How will we define literacy in 2030? How will content be created

and consumed? What will learning environments and curriculum look like? The answers depend largely on the growing role of CT within our notions of literacy and the learning experiences we design. Today, we are taking many small steps—what giant leaps will they lead to? ■

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Lorne C. Keeper, Executive Director
Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc.

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