

Reflections on the SORT Project

Joan Oldford

In his remarks during the presentation of the President's Award for Exceptional Community Service for 2007, Dr. Axel Meisen commented that Project SORT (Significant Others as Reading Teachers) had been chosen as its first recipient primarily because of the "idea of it". What follows here is an attempt to explore the journey of SORT from emergent ideas to its implementation as a reality in an educational environment.

The Background

In the post-confederation Newfoundland and Labrador of the 1960's, an increasing emphasis on education, the creation of a Teacher Education Faculty within Memorial University, and provincially-provided incentives for managing the costs of university education, afforded men and women from rural communities an opportunity to participate in teacher education in a university setting. I was among those who participated and became a teacher.

Early teaching career experiences combined with life experiences outside my home community contributed to my growing curiosity about linguistic prejudices and literacy underachievements. To further explore language attitudes and learning, I enrolled in graduate studies work in psycho- and socio-linguistics at the Ohio State University. Among other perspectives the study revealed that literacy challenges and outcomes were interwoven in the social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts of our schools and classrooms.

Specifically, in our provincial context, approximately three in four of our communities lacked libraries, bookstores were rare, and most primary/elementary schools lacked books for young children (with the exception of provincially-prescribed texts). Our strong well-developed oral traditions were a powerful foundation for literacy learning, but without easy access to printed materials, literacy activities and models, many children were limited in their literacy achievements.

The Context

In September, 1983, I became a member of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and of the Language Arts Disciplinary Group in the Faculty of Education. My educational background included more than a decade of experience as a classroom teacher, reading specialist and language arts co-ordinator in various communities in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. As mentioned, such experiences had contributed to my decision to study language and reading education as a graduate student in Early and Middle Childhood Education at the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. Additionally, the legacy of a quantitative methodology in an agricultural state university ensured my approach to educational research was quantitative.

The Role

Like others in the Language Arts Disciplinary Group, my initial assignment for the beginning academic year included teaching six language arts courses for primary and elementary pre-service teachers with some expectation to teach graduate courses during ‘summer school’. As well, there was a service role to the Faculty and to the community, which I engaged in within the Publications’ Committee, the NLTA’s, Study of Dropouts and a Department of Education Evaluation Committee for the selection of provincial reading programs. Additionally, I encountered a demand for graduate thesis supervision in the literacy area, since all of our students were required to complete a thesis. Supervising seven or eight graduate students during an academic year was commonplace.

The Challenge

Early in my assignment I recognized the improbability of continuing a research program in experimental studies of print factors influencing early reading. Research funding which could provide release from teaching was difficult to accomplish and preparing proposals for funding was a time-consuming process in itself, although I constantly engaged in writing them.

Upon reflecting on what seemed to be an ever-expanding fragmentation of my work, I sought a vision for integrating my work aspects into some meaningful whole. A sabbatical leave afforded me the opportunity to synthesize research findings on emergent literacy as a basis for a text for preservice primary teachers. An ongoing issue of my concern as an educator was the improvement of literacy outcomes in our province, where many discrepancies were occurring both in literacy outcomes and availability of print resources. I possessed a strong commitment and sense of mission to contribute to literacy improvement for young children in our province.

The Emergence of SORT

While studying early literacy research findings, I confronted an unanticipated insight, i.e., that parents could be more influential in affecting young children’s reading achievement than could small-group classroom teaching. Reflection on this phenomenon led me to a change of audience for my writing. I imagined “suppose parents could be participants in teaching young children to read?” Although requiring an abrupt change in direction, I imagined that tying my disciplinary knowledge to a project that would include parents as teachers of reading could facilitate integrating research and community service into a meaningful project with the potential of transforming children’s reading achievement. The seed of SORT was sown.

With initial funding from the National Literacy Secretariat, we produced a video, Reading: A Gift of a Lifetime, featuring families and schools involved with reading to young children. The producer was Sharon Halfyard. As well, a series of booklets were produced for parents. Both the booklets and video were based on principles from the reading research and included the following:

Ten Principles of SORT

- Learning to read is a highly complex task.
 - As early as six months of age, children can engage with significant others in reading activities and read-alouds.
 - Significant growth in children's knowledge about reading can occur between the ages of three and five.
 - Most children learn to read over a period of four or more years.
- The purpose and value given to literacy activities in families and communities contribute to the significance children attribute to learning to read and write.
- The single most important activity for building children's knowledge about skill in reading is reading aloud to them.
- Messages that significant others give in their daily interactions with children, books and print, influence children's perceptions of themselves as readers.
- Children model the reading behaviors enjoyed and demonstrated by significant others, especially behaviors of the same-sex others.
- Children learn to enjoy story and book language when it is read aloud expressively by caring adults.
- Children who develop positive images of themselves as readers engage readily in reading play and activities.
- In listening to stories children try to understand the actions and feelings of characters in terms of their own experience.
- Children construct their own knowledge of reading. As they become capable, they need to be given more control over their reading activities.
- Children who have been read to in homes and communities enter school with longer attention spans, have greater knowledge of stories, vocabulary, books and print, and experience less difficulties in learning to read.

Essentially, the approach taken by SORT recognized that children learn literate attitudes, concepts and behaviors from people who are significant to them.

I continued to rewrite my initial text to be appropriate for parents as an audience, and self-published it as a book, Help Your Child Become a Reader. A second edition was republished by Grassroots Press, Alberta, Canada. The SORT program received its first promotion when the videotape received a National Award of Merit for educational effectiveness by AMTEC (Association of Media Technology in Education in Canada) in 1991.

Accompanied by a Shared Literature component of 100 copies for each of 40 titles of emergent reading literature, and a Facilitator's Guide for Program Sessions that we developed SORT was ready for implementation. The kits of children's books were supplied to SORT by Scholastic Inc. Canada at a cost of \$1.00 per text, provided they remained with the program and were lent free of cost to the parents.

With a lack of continuous funding, it became clear that tying the project to kindergarten children in a school setting with possibilities for parents' involvement was necessary. The program was

presented at two provincial curriculum conferences and a pilot school was selected when an enthusiastic invitation was received from a rural school, and a volunteer, a retired kindergarten teacher, Hannah Power, embraced the challenge of becoming SORT's first facilitator as well as research assistant to the program. All the parents of the kindergarten children attending that school were invited and more than 90% participated in the first year of its offering.

As Director of the SORT project, achieving funding for a longitudinal research program was my priority. Two additional stages of funding were provided by the National Literacy Secretariat. Constant communication with the pilot school and facilitator occurred. SORT provided graduate students interested in early literacy a setting for research studies. We were constantly aware of the give-and-take balance of our project and overall it was generously collaborative. The pilot project, in which both the parents and teachers taught kindergarten children, resulted in significant improvements in children's early reading ability and attitudes toward reading. The results showed significant improvement in scores that were below the average norms in September to above average performance according to the May norms in alphabetical, meaning, and knowledge of conventions in reading as measured by knowledge (Tests of Early Reading Ability [TERA]).

Conclusion

The SORT program successfully demonstrated that literacy achievement could be transformed with parental intervention and the SORT program. Our facilitator, Hannah Power, expanded the program to other settings in various rural communities for a period of 20 years. She was an outstanding and enthusiastic volunteer, who no doubt was an important aspect of the success of the program. She went about her monthly meeting with parents, demonstrating the practices and rationales for reading aloud to young children with great enthusiasm.

The research findings from the SORT program were woven into the course content of preservice reading and graduate courses. I developed a graduate course, 'Home and School Literacy' which was accepted into our graduate offerings. The research findings were presented to the pilot school and to National and International conferences. Despite the successful efforts at integrating the aspects of my role, there was insufficient time to publish all the findings that were produced in the project. Several papers were published in previous volumes of *The Morning Watch*. Qualitative evaluations from parents were positive and recommended that the program be expanded to preschool children, to French programs, and to other reading stages beyond kindergarten. Several graduate students completed Master's theses in the SORT setting and one student progressed to a completion of her Ph.D. in early literacy at another Canadian university from her involvement in the SORT research.

After 25 years of service in the Faculty of Education and upon retirement, I consider SORT to have been a rewarding educational project with significant potential for replication in other settings. It demonstrated successful collaboration between the University, communities, schools and families. Most significantly, with a focus on significant others reading children's books to students, significant improvement occurred in children's reading achievements and attitudes.

Much more could be written about SORT and the layers of meaning that accumulated from experiences within the project, but it is sufficient here to highlight the great satisfaction and meaning to be had in choosing to contribute to educational challenges presented by your context. As Jon Muth suggests in a children's book, The Three Questions, among the most important persons to direct your efforts in helping are those 'under your nose', both adults and children.