

## **The Hidden Curriculum Teaching Model/Learning Model**

**By: Priscilla Mochrie**

Mountain View Elementary School is nestled in the village of Stoney Creek, within Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board. The school welcomes about 350 students in grades junior kindergarten through Grade 8. Approximately 60 per cent of the student population is South Asian, creating a climate within the school that speaks to diversity.

I began as principal at Mountain View in the fall of 2008. At the time, demographics had been consistent for a number of years, and most of the staff had taught at the school for a number of years. The predominant style of instruction was teacher-directed, with students sitting in rows. Classroom management was effective, the school community strived for academic excellence, and staff and students appeared comfortable.

The role of teacher began to change during the past three years with the implementation of the School Effectiveness Framework. An ongoing Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway was also woven throughout the school year, ensuring that our program delivery reflected continuous growth. The teacher's role is now one of facilitator, as teachers strive to increase student engagement, ultimately increasing student success.

Classroom control and management must be handled differently when delivering a comprehensive literacy program in which students have the opportunity to work in groups, collaborate and conference with peers and support staff. Differentiated instruction needs to be embedded in everything that the classroom teacher does. With a shift in program delivery, teachers have learned the benefits of embracing comprehensive literacy and teaching through problem solving in all grades. Group work, with students in fluid groupings, is now the expectation and a normal part of the learning process. Classrooms have moved to a more collective model and inquiry model. Classrooms are now more student-centred, thus creating a shared responsibility for learning in the classroom setting.

In addition to this teaching philosophy shift, we also saw the emergence of a dominant male South Asian population in the intermediate grades in the fall of 2009. These students embraced a dominant role at school, a reflection of their culture. This made school staff uncomfortable. This lens is the hidden curriculum – their value system.

This raised questions for staff, who kept in mind that when students “start to question their roots, their sense of belonging, and their existence, they ask questions which are often difficult for parents to answer. If these children find a school system which has no answers, they may internalize their problems and become alienated from the school system.” (Across The Racial Divide, 1993)

With this visible power dynamics in the school, teacher unrest and discomfort emerged, particularly in the intermediate grades.

As a leader, I was open to learning and knew that there were two ways to approach this new challenge. One way was to rely on school and system policies to address behaviour issues informed by cultural norms. Behaviour by the male students could have been viewed as 'bully like.' I connected with my Superintendent of Student Achievement, Pam Reinholdt, who provided me with support. She encouraged me to connect with HWDSB's Principal of Equity, Gail Belisario.

My own leadership vision honored the Code of Conduct at Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, as well as equity principles and inclusion principles (Equity and Inclusive Strategy, Ministry of Education, 2009). "The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will support curriculum, learning materials and school practices which reflect and include the principles of equity, as regulated by the Ministry of Education." (HWDSB Policy No. 1.01 – Equity Policy, Pg. 2) In addition, "The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will strive to provide appropriate and bias free assessment, evaluation, reporting, placement, and programming to equitably meet the educational needs and to maximize the learning potential of all students." (HWDSB Policy No. 1.01 – Equity Policy, Pg. 2)

Principal of Equity Gail Belisario aligned me with a partnership between Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion. This partnership provided me, as an administrator, along with the whole school staff, specifically the intermediate staff, with an opportunity to explore and learn about the benefits of creating and sustaining an inclusive learning environment at Mountain View. This learning began with plenty of discussion and dialogue, led by Pat Wright, Manager of Training and Community Engagement at the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion.

To move staff forward, Pat Wright began with a job-embedded model – short 'blurbs' of knowledge and reflection within the physical environment of Mountain View. The starting point was a Self Reflection Survey. This was followed with the unpacking of the Mountain View population in terms of Knowing Our Students, based on the HWDSB Annual Operating Plan. Questions included: Who are the cultures that attend the school? What are their backgrounds? What does their value system look like?

Sharing this demographic information with staff injected new meaning into the reflection process for every member of the teaching staff at Mountain View. Staff members were put into the uncomfortable position of unpacking their beliefs and values, both internally and externally. "When educators and students derive from dissimilar backgrounds and cultures, then understanding must be learnt, each must learn to understand the other." (Across The Racial Divide, 1993)

Throughout the process, change evolved and comfort emerged as the adults realized their critical stance in both their personal and professional lives. They began to realize how treating all students equally denies the "reality that all students are not the same." (Race Relations In The Classroom, 1994) This stance was affecting the classroom setting,

especially since this stance is surrounded by an educational system that is moving from a teaching model to a learning model. What does this mean?

At Mountain View, this shift in thinking allowed staff members to ‘Know Themselves, Know Their Students and Know Their Community.’ This shift aligned with the HWDSB Strategic Directions, which contain as pillars the belief that Achievement Matters, Engagement Matters and Equity Matters (HWDSB’s Annual Operating Plan 2010-2011). By wrestling within themselves, unpacking the values and beliefs of the students in front of them in the classroom everyday and putting research and terms such as ‘cultural proficiency,’ the ‘cultural iceberg’ and the ‘ladder of inference’ on the table, staff were persuaded to find common ground. This common ground truly embraced the Board’s Strategic Directions (2009-2013).

**Vision** – All Students Achieving Their Full Potential.

**Mission** – Providing relevant, responsive education so that each student becomes a lifelong learner and contributing citizen in a diverse world.

**Values** – Respect, Creativity, Excellence, Citizenship

Staff learned about the importance of understanding and embracing the cultural diversity of Mountain View, leading to a successful inclusive learning environment for all.

Teachers now build classroom pledges collaboratively with their students. Team-building/community-building exercises are in place and students have the opportunity to explore inclusion and exclusion, in a safe environment. Teachers are more confident in empowering their students, from all cultures, to take a leadership role. The Bollywood experience is incorporated, informally and formally into the music, drama, and dance programming. Inclusion is addressed and the entry point for all students is discussed within Professional Learning Communities, within all three divisions, so that the Big Idea can be embraced by all students using the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP). Students see themselves reflected in their learning environment.

Keep in mind that students will always express themselves, but boundaries and guidance are paving the way towards a respectful and inclusive community and Mountain View. Lastly, all staff members have a greater understanding and a deeper respect of the community in which they teach.

Mountain View’s School Improvement Plan looks at literacy instruction, numeracy instruction and character education. Monthly staff meetings and weekly divisional professional learning communities allow staff to share their knowledge, issues, concerns and expertise. Professional development is provided to staff and students, thanks to the ongoing support of Pam Reinholdt, our Superintendent of Student Achievement and the ongoing partnership we have built with Pat Wright, through the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion.

We discuss and review our School Improvement Plan using the equity lens as our primary filter. “PLC teams develop age and grade level appropriate goals regarding the use of critical thinking to promote Equity perspective”. (Using an Equity Lens, November 2010) The ongoing training, through the Board, with regards to Restorative Justice principles, allow the staff to creatively place a priority on character education, with the lens, once again, being that of equity and inclusion. With the support of the Equity Department, Pat and I have shared what we have learned as well as our shared belief in the critical importance of cultural proficiency. We have done so at an after-school equity workshop as well as a community forum, and have begun to move forward with efforts to continue the collaborative endeavor of building a positive school climate.

Informal pieces are evident that validate the roots of our student body. Translators are present at school meetings and interviews. A dual-language club meets twice a month. The street sign says the word ‘Welcome’ in three languages (English, Punjabi and Urdu). Each morning, equity announcements that speak to celebrations taking place across the globe on a daily basis are read after the playing of O Canada. Rooms in the school (e.g. gym, library, office) are labeled in our three dominant languages. These informal pieces send a huge message, not only to our students, but also to our community. The message is that Mountain View is an inclusive community that embraces the diversity within our student body.

The formal pieces that speak to an inclusive, challenging and support environment are reflected in our school’s results on the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAQO) assessments, as well as our suspension rates. Mountain View has experienced an improvement in EQAQO reading, writing and mathematics results at the Grade 3 and Grade 6 levels. Currently, the results are in the 90 per cent range in writing and mathematics at the Grade 3 level. The Grade 6 results are in the 80 per cent range in writing and reading.

Suspension rates have decreased over the past three years as students realize that the climate of high expectations is not an option, but a reality. With teachers building an inclusive community within their classrooms, the entire school presents as one large community of respectful, caring and responsible citizens. For success to happen, the students need to know that there are clear expectations. By marrying these expectations to the restorative justice practices, the climate has been established.

Over the past three years, incredible gains have been made for the staff, students and community of Mountain View, but the journey is far from over. By addressing and unpacking the issues and questions that surround inclusion and human interactions, a kind, respectful, inclusive and academically driven student body has emerged. Teachers recognize the relationship between equity and differentiated instruction and there is a comfort level amongst staff and students. Constant attention and vigilance will continue to help this relationship move forward. We consider this part of our attention to the needs of the whole child, so that our students embrace diversity within our school, and so students depart Mountain View with a broader and deeper understanding of the real world they are about to enter as young adults.