

## Profile

# The Renfrew Quality Education Project: Teachers' Views After the First Year

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**Abstract:** The Renfrew Quality Education project was designed to train teachers in using television as an educational tool that can support the child-centered teaching strategies being encouraged by the school board. This project was developed cooperatively by the Renfrew County Roman Catholic Separate School Board and TVOntario, the provincial educational broadcast network. Design of the project was guided by a collegial approach to teacher training and a strategy for implementing change formulated by Michael Fullan at OISE.

Based on interviews conducted after the first year, this paper presents teachers' reports on how the project affected their teaching and how their students' behaviour and learning were affected as a result. Summaries are presented of the teachers' initial activities in working with other teachers, of their observations on the training sessions provided by TVOntario, and of their suggestions for the next phase of the project.

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As one component in a board-wide move toward child-centered teaching practices, the Renfrew Quality Education Project was introduced to train teachers in how to use television programming effectively in their classes. Prior to the project's conception, the Renfrew County Roman Catholic Separate School (RCSS) Board in Ontario had introduced several measures to encourage the approaches and practices described in *The Formative Years* (1975) and *Shared Discovery* (1985), two guidelines issued by the Ontario Ministry of Education. These documents emphasize the developmental needs and styles of individual children, with the goal of helping students become independent problem solvers. Strategies to support this child-centered view include increasing opportunities for children to interact both with teachers and with other children, and to undertake activities suited to their individual learning patterns. In developing this project, the board worked cooperatively with TVOntario, the provincial educational broadcast network, whose Educational Services Branch produces support materials for school television programs and offers teacher training activities. An extensive network of Television Resource Teachers — TRTs — distribute materials and encourage television use.

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As the project began, some teachers were already using available school television programs. The project planners, John Stunt, Superintendent of the Renfrew RCSS Board, and Marcia Cunningham, Educational Development Officer at TVOntario, hoped to "change the attitudes and practices of teachers, while helping to produce self-direction and critical thinking in students" (Cunningham, 1986). After participating in the project, teachers were expected to have learned how to use television equipment, view programs critically, and plan lessons that relate television programs to curriculum objectives. In their teaching they would use television programs, along with related classroom activities, in ways that encourage students to participate and become critical viewers.

Another aspect of this project was the adoption of a collegial approach to teacher training. Initially, eight teachers were involved and trained with the expectation that, once they felt confident using television effectively, they would work with other teachers in modelling for them and encouraging them in adopting similar strategies. This peer-coaching strategy represents a new approach to professional development for teachers (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Little, 1985).

In planning this project, the model for implementing change in schools, developed by Fullan (1985), was used as a guide. In keeping with his view of change as a gradual process, a two- to three-year time frame was agreed on. Stunt and Cunningham, the project designers, received commitments of considerable resources and support, including three days of release time for participating teachers from all levels of the Renfrew RCSS Board.

Principles of adult education, which view adults as self-directed learners, were also incorporated, both to promote the teachers' learning and as examples of the strategies they were being encouraged to use with their students. Many ideas and options were presented to the teachers but no precise expectations were defined. Rather, teachers were encouraged to design personal performance contracts to direct and monitor their own progress.

Marcia Cunningham prepared and led workshops for the varied group of five women and three men, including six elementary teachers (one teacher/principal) from different grades and two high school teachers. Two training days were held during the 1985-86 school year and two more in the Fall of the 1986-87 school year. Figure 1 summarizes the main objectives and activities of the training sessions. Between training days, teachers' contact with the project was maintained by telephone calls from Cunningham and by encouragement from the principals, school board staff, and trustees.

While working in Planning and Development Research at TVOntario and studying part-time with Fullan at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the researcher became interested in the process of implementing change in schools and learned of the Renfrew Project as it was being developed. Following lengthy discussions with Cunningham during the design stage, the researcher proposed conducting interviews with the teachers to look at the project from their perspective. In the model for implementing change, monitoring the project's progress is recommended as a way of identifying problems and guiding development.

In February 1987, toward the end of the project's first year, the researcher

interviewed all eight teachers directly involved with the project about their experiences — their use of television, involvement with other teachers, views of the training, and suggestions for the remainder of the project. Structured, one-hour interviews were held and taped in the teachers’ schools. The tapes were later transcribed. The next section of this paper summarizes the teachers’ views and reports their experiences. The last section relates their views to the objectives set in the project’s design and discusses the questions and issues ahead.

FIGURE 1. Training Objectives and Activities.

Date	Classroom Use of Television	Working with Other Teachers
February '86	demonstrate operation of VCR pause and replay settings  discuss how to use TV to spark discussion, how to tie TV with curriculum, develop follow-up activities  encourage teachers to plan TV use with their classes	introduce basic features of adult education  practice presentations to each other  encourage teachers to plan working with other teachers
April '86	assessed performance contracts, success and difficulties in using TV in class	plan and practice giving workshops for teachers  organized a buddy system for linking teachers in same school
September '86	developed profile of a successful television-using teacher outlining skills involved: setting objectives, preparing instruction and student progress.	television-using teacher outlining arranging the environment, activities, evaluating students'
November '86	on developing utilization units to guide teachers in using particular television programs, relating programs to curriculum, preparing questions to ask, pre-viewing and follow-up activities.	

### TEACHERS VIEWS

#### *Impact on Teaching*

All of the teachers involved found the training in classroom use of television very valuable. Four of the teachers began the project with skeptical or critical views of television in school. One teacher said, “I wasn’t really into TV . . . I felt that children see

X number of hours of TV at home.” Another teacher ‘was a firm believer that children watch too much television. . . When we finally did get a TV and VCR here, I didn’t really realize what its function was all about”

Several teachers pointed out that the TV is sometimes used as a filler, particularly just before holidays or weekends. After learning to preview critically and to use the technical capabilities of VCRs in their classrooms, the teachers felt that they had control, that TV was an effective teaching tool that they could use to get students active and involved.

The five teachers who had used TV to some extent before the project appreciated the opportunity to talk with other teachers and hear new ideas about classroom techniques. Two teachers mentioned the value of television in subject areas they were weak in such as music or science.

The teachers also saw many ways that using television could support a more child-centred approach, aiming to encourage independent thinking and problem-solving skills. Well chosen programs or short clips were found useful in starting lively small group discussions and in sparking students to pick their own topics for further study. “Everyone who follows the programs and uses the guides finds that there are plenty of follow-up activities, plenty of choice I found that the programs do promote the curriculum renewal within our Board It’s a tool.”

Another teacher had the students plan follow-up activities. ‘They’ll get ideas from the tape and then they’ll think of what else they could do. they came up with ideas.”

Compared to the enthusiastic assessments of using television in their teaching, the difficulties and adjustments teachers reported going through seemed modest. Only a few problems such as stolen equipment or awkwardness with window blinds were mentioned. Teachers found that beginning to use television took extra time. “I have to spend some extra hours putting together sort of activity booklets for my kids and stuff like this . . . I think if you don’t do some of this type of development, you sort of lose the flair.”

### *Impact on Students and Their Learning*

As one teacher pointed out, “You have to look at the children’s interest in it, how they respond to the TV itself. . . . Otherwise, you know, I wouldn’t use it if it wasn’t working.” Teachers’ reports of student interest and involvement were very favorable. The attention-getting and motivating aspects of television were mentioned repeatedly. Teachers reported a variety of benefits for and from their students:

I could not believe how much they had retained, which I know they would not have retained if I had all my maps and my charts and we had gone at the Seaway the traditional way.

I found I got more quality stuff with the visual than they did with just the reading lessons . . . The quality, their answers, their sentence structure, not just the creativity, everything was better.

Some teachers commented on the media sophistication of their students:

Children know how to get information from the television better than we do. They’re brought up on it I’ve had instances in which they will pick things out that I don’t see.

Teachers also saw changes in their students' attitude to watching television, both in class and at home.

They were thinking of television as being entertainment and I really had to push them in the beginning. I really talked to the them a lot ... I found by the second week they realized this was different.

Stopping the program several times for questions and discussion changed the students' expectations and encouraged them to be critical.

Teachers reported successful experiences using television as a teaching tool but they also pointed to some reservations. Some teachers felt that certain programs would be more useful and easier to use if they were more closely related to the curriculum. They also felt that television is a tool to be used in moderation—using only one series at a time or using three- or four-minute clips to get things stated. The costs in terms of time are discussed later. But overall, the teachers' comments indicated that the project enhanced their use of television and contributed to successful experiences for the students.

Most teachers still preferred to use television sparingly — only one teacher greatly increased the amount of television she was using. For several teachers, their views of television meshed with a changing view of their students and, as the project designers hoped, connections were made between using television and increasing student participation in activities related to their individual preferences. Gains in students' critical thinking and self-direction were suggested as well in the teachers' comments.

#### *Working with Other Teachers*

From the beginning of the project, the eight teachers were called model television teachers (MTTs) — a name some didn't like to reflect the expectation that they would gradually become involved in training and encouraging other teachers in using television in their classrooms. This process was only in its beginning phase. No specific expectations were set out for the role that each of the model teachers would play. Rather, TVOntario staff gave presentations in workshop techniques and in principles of adult education, and outlined several options that the teachers could choose to pursue. In keeping with the adult education model, performance contracts were introduced to encourage teachers to consider and choose activities they would like to carry out between training sessions, and for monitoring and assessing their own progress. So far, six of the eight teachers have designed and tried out activities involving other teachers.

In the interviews, these teachers described the activities they've undertaken so far and what they thought the results were. Four of the elementary teachers became very active and involved in giving workshops, in working with individual teachers in their classrooms, and in one case, organizing weekly noon-hour tape viewings and discussions, and developing television support materials as well. These teachers seemed very comfortable and eager to work with other teachers in their schools. In one case, the model teacher took one or two programs and the teacher's guide from the primary social studies series *We Live Next Door* to a meeting to introduce the series and discuss it. He then followed up by going to the classrooms himself and teaching one or two lessons. Another teacher who had shown and discussed television programs with staff in her school was pleased with a colleague's progress.

Another elementary teacher was active in organizing several workshops and presentations with parents as well as a small group of teachers. The fifth elementary teacher had several frustrating experiences in getting the programs and the teacher's guides. She then arranged, instead, to work with TVOntario in developing support materials which help teachers prepare to use programs, relate them to curriculum, and plan follow-up activities. The sixth elementary-level teacher in the project only joined the project during the 1986-87 school year. Having missed much of the training, she did not yet feel ready to work with other teachers but was expecting to start soon after the interviews.

The two high school teachers in the project got together and organized an after-school workshop for English and Student Service teachers in their school. While these two teachers felt that they learned a lot in preparing the workshop and that their efforts were well received, they did not see any future for themselves in giving workshops. Since high schools are organized by subject departments, people with expertise in each area and familiarity with the related television programming would be necessary to work with teachers in other subject areas.

There's a little problem in how does the TVO project see this modelling concept (work) in a high school setting... I'm teaching English but now what do I do for science...it breaks down a little bit in high school versus elementary.

In talking about working with other teachers, one teacher said:

One of the resentments is that you still have your classroom to prepare... you have to get all that work in advance. You're never totally released because you have to prepare. It's a lot of work to do in advance to leave behind, and it has to be suitable work. My biggest problem in teaching is time. There are so many things in life I want to do and teaching is consuming so much as it is. I just could not imagine doing more.

Working with other teachers was identified as the area most in need of attention during the rest of the project. Individually, most of the teachers have identified the kinds of activities they would like to become involved in, but there was only a vague idea of how the project as a whole will develop in reaching other teachers and whether both the first group of teachers and the new teachers will be given time to do this type of work. This issue is discussed further in the final section.

### **Training**

Four training days had been held so far — two during the 1985-86 school year and two held early in 1986-87. Several of the teachers have found the sessions valuable in offering demonstrations of classroom techniques given by the leader and by other teachers, and in showing new programs for all grade levels. One teacher emphasized the importance of learning about VCRs:

I learned how to use the remote control how to pause, how to use my reset and my memory and use it properly to pause and ask them questions, how to use it effectively.

Some of the teachers, however, were left overwhelmed and intimidated after the

first session, feeling that the expectations were too great or feeling let down when they returned to their classes.

I don't think I was the only one. I know I'm not because I talked to a few others that felt kind of overwhelmed at the beginning. And I'm just wondering if it couldn't have been that that anxiety couldn't somehow have been omitted by another approach.. The first time we went we got into giving workshops. I didn't know how to turn the VCR on ... Now I don't know whether they realized that after because we took it a little slower from then on.

Not all of the teachers attended all of the sessions, and invariably, joining the project late or missing a session in the middle, created problems for the teachers involved. One teacher who missed the first session mentioned several times during the interview that "I always had the feeling I was catching up." After missing one meeting, another teacher said, "when I came back I could just feel that everybody was kind of going into different little areas."

As mentioned earlier, teachers used performance contracts as aids in setting goals for themselves and monitoring their progress:

I like the performance contracts. It's a sense of accomplishment. For me, it's a check list and I find it a very good way to organize what you're going to do for that particular time in between meetings.

The teachers were asked how this training compared with other training with which they've been involved. Most teachers felt that this program was unique in being small, personal, accepting of individual differences and needs, and continuous over many sessions.

Overall, Cunningham's presentations, the workshop simulations, the work with television programs, and the use of performance contracts to help teachers direct and supervise themselves were all well received. The first session seems to have moved too quickly and an adjustment period was needed for teachers to learn to use the performance contracts, to realize that they were expected to formulate expectations themselves, and that external pressure was very limited. But, once the project's pace was established, the teachers seemed to thrive.

#### *Support from Principals and the Board*

Based on his review of research, Fullan concludes that active support from principals is crucial to a project's success, 'Principals' actions serve to legitimate whether a change is to be taken seriously (and not all changes are) and to support teachers both psychologically and with resources.' At the same time the role of school board officials is essential (Fullan, 1982).

Our principal and some parents organized a mini-sports day for the children. So you see it gave us an hour-and-a-half one day and we sat down and viewed a program, the teacher and I, so I was able to show them using the remote control and discuss the program.

I've always found the Board very supportive when it comes to trying to better the quality of education we have for students. They pick up on suggestions

and give you credit for any suggestion that you may give. They're very compassionate and they're very understanding of the human aspect, it's not that you're looking for a pat on the back, but when it's there it sure makes it a lot easier.

All of the teachers felt commitment and encouragement from the Board, reflected in John Stunt's support, the availability of equipment and programs, and some release time. While most teachers were also getting support from their principals, one teacher felt that the school principal was not particularly interested in the project, although he didn't stand in the way. "He wouldn't come down here. . . he hasn't been in to see what I'm doing or hasn't asked . . . if I asked him for something, he'd give it to me?" While the causes are not clear, this teacher did in fact report greater frustrations with the project than did the other teachers.

#### *Ideas for the Next Phase of the Project*

When asked about their suggestions for the next phase of the project, the teachers' greatest concern was the extension of good educational television into other classes and the role they themselves could play. All of the teachers felt that more release time is needed if they are to become more involved in working with teachers.

One teacher focused on the need to produce more curriculum-related utilization materials to make it easier for teachers to "use the programs. Several teachers felt that workshops are of limited "use and stressed the need for trained people in each school who will promote TV "use in their school on a day-to-day basis. One teacher emphasized that she would rather do in-class demonstrations to bring the ideas to the teachers: "I would prefer to work with children if I'm going to present. I would prefer to use someone's class rather than give it to a group of teachers. Just so they then see it can be realistic."

Finally, a couple of teachers would like additional training in presentation skills and ongoing training in classroom "use of television. The implications of these diverse views of what is needed and how the project should move are discussed in the following section.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE

The teachers' perspectives as presented in the previous section point to several areas for consideration in planning the next phase of the project. Implications of the teachers' comments for understanding of the change process and for design of future projects are indicated as well.

- 1) The project is having considerable success in fostering the "use of television as a" educational tool and in relating the "use of television to the Board's broader concern with child-centered teaching. Further research could look more closely at such areas as how television use can combine with particular teaching styles and learning outcomes and how the development of critical viewing skills can be encouraged.



- 2) The project provided effective training in using television in the classroom, gave teachers the opportunity to share ideas about television "se, and maintained ongoing contact with the teachers while they tried it out. However, their successful experience in the classroom was crucial - their reports supported previous research findings which show that teachers change as a result of successful experience (Fullan, 1982; 1985).
- 3) The value of seeing change as a lengthy process requiring ongoing personal contact and support was strongly supported by the teachers' comments. Not only did they identify the long-term support as an essential feature of this project but some were extending this support in their suggestions for working with other teachers. While workshops were seen to have some value, an ongoing involvement on an individual or small group basis was seen as the key to spreading the use of television to more schools and classrooms.
- 4) The use of an adult education approach in conjunction with this ongoing support contributed to the teachers' positive experiences. The performance contracts were a successful means for helping teachers select the activities they would like to pursue and assess their progress. Although considerable frustration was involved as teachers overestimated the amount they could do at first, or felt that there were unspoken expectations of them, the ongoing support provided helped them ride through this phase. and find gratification in working independently. This initial difficulty and gradual recovery is typical of the change process (Fullan, 1982; 1985). Ongoing use of performance contracts with this group and with other teachers as they become involved is warranted.
- 5) Consistent with adopting an adult education approach, the project has had very open-ended goals, allowing the teachers to make choices that shape the project's direction, rather than specifying expected results in detail. Given this freedom, each teacher has developed a unique combination of activities and objectives, including one or more of the following:
  - using classroom television well;
  - giving good presentations for small groups;
  - developing successful workshops;
  - following up with teachers after group events;
  - inviting teachers into their classroom;
  - teaching lessons in another class; and
  - relating programs and curriculum and developing utilization materials.
- 6) The project includes teachers at all grade levels and in several subject areas. Although two teachers found the varied group a positive experience, others would have preferred to be with teachers in the same grades or divisions. This was a particular problem for the high school teachers who found that the subject department structure of high schools limited their ability to work with other teachers.
- 7) In all aspects of the project, but especially in working with other teachers, the project teachers felt pressed for time and in some cases drained by the extra

- workload. While working with other teachers and students can be useful for their professional growth, some teachers felt that their own day-to-day teaching suffered when they became involved in planning and giving workshops or working with other teachers on more than a very occasional basis.
- 8) Teachers felt at a substantial disadvantage when they missed even one training session, no matter how unavoidable the absence was.
  - 9) The teachers described support from their principals, who in most schools asked about or sat in on classes where television was being used and helped teachers arrange release time. Similarly the teachers felt that the board was behind the project, providing video equipment and tapes, support services, release time and personal encouragement from John Stunt. Their comments support earlier research which emphasizes the necessity and value of such support (Fullan, 1982).
  - 10) Perhaps because of the costs involved in training and supporting television use in schools, some teachers questioned the future direction of the project. Although one teacher described the television equipment and programs as a cheap source of worthwhile educational materials, the question was raised whether the training aspect was too costly to be a priority, compared to other needs in the board.

While this paper cannot compare the value of this project with alternative ways of using the resources involved, it does suggest that the project has been proceeding successfully. The teachers' reports indicated they had learned new strategies for using television in child-centered ways with their students and that with additional release time they would be interested in extending this expertise to more teachers. In the coming phase of the project, it can be expected that the board will gain both a larger number of teachers skilled in using television as a classroom tool and additional first-hand experience with the peer coaching approach to teacher training.

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