

# Addressing Educational Debt in Adolescent Literacy (DIAL)

**Year 1 Report**

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**Prepared By: TDSB Research & Development**

TITLE: Addressing Educational Debt in Adolescent Literacy (DIAL): Year 1 Report

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*Note: This report was completed in equal collaboration with all the authors and the arrangement of authors is not in any particular order.*

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## Introduction

The TDSB is committed to addressing the fact that there are intermediate learners in our schools who are not yet reading at or close to grade level. This negatively impacts student's educational outcomes and their development of a positive reader identity. The following report first provides the background and context, program design, and research design for TDSB's Addressing Educational Debt in Adolescent Literacy (DIAL) plan. Next, the report provides a high-level overview of how the DIAL initiative was experienced by practitioners thus far, with some emerging information about impacts of this work on educators, students, and classrooms.

## Background and Context

The overarching goal of DIAL is to “develop classrooms that have strong reading pedagogy as well as accessible and engaging texts, where teacher pedagogy is culturally relevant and students are active partners in the learning with teachers who are explicit and transparent about what they are doing and why” (Right to Read, TDSB, 2019, p. 31). The term “educational debt” was coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings as a critique of the educational discourse of “achievement gaps” (2006). Ladson-Billings argues that historical, economic, socio-political and moral decisions and policies have caused an educational debt that is owed to racialized students. The DIAL Plan reflects TDSB's commitment to address persistent educational debts that negatively impact achievement and well-being, and to transform learning for all students.

The DIAL Plan is grounded in the theoretical framework of multi-literacies (New London Group, 1996) that positions, “the centrality of diversity, the notion of design as active meaning making, the significance of multimodality and the need for a more holistic approach to pedagogy” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009. p. 167). The plan is also grounded in anti-oppressive education, the practice of teaching to all students by embracing their diversity, engaging in understanding the dynamics of oppression and creating spaces to actively work against various forms of social oppression (Kumashiro, 2000). Culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris and Alim, 2017) are also essential to this work.

## Program Design

School literacy teams (up to four educators) from 71 schools are engaging in professional learning on how to facilitate a successful collaborative inquiry to improve literacy outcomes for adolescents. Key aspects of the SIP collaborative inquiry include:

1. School literacy teams, that may include administrators and superintendents, engage in professional learning on how to facilitate a successful collaborative inquiry to improve literacy outcomes for adolescents. The inquiry is not a static

set of steps with a fixed beginning and end but is flexible and continuous with opportunities for reflection and change throughout.

2. A key feature of this collaborative inquiry is learning about how to gather qualitative data from students.
3. The focus of School Improvement Plans is Grades 5-10, but this does not preclude the involvement of students and educators in other grade levels.
4. Central staff, teachers, system leaders, school teams, community members and students engage in school-based professional learning/school improvement planning that combines theory on effective collaborative inquiry with building capacity and content knowledge on adolescent literacy.

## Research Design

### Objectives:

- Monitor implementation (perceptual, observational, anecdotal data)
- Document the effects of the collaborative inquiry on educators who engaged in the process in an effort to address student learning needs related to adolescent literacy
- Document the short and long-term effects of the collaborative inquiry on students (i.e., reader identity, engagement, literacy skill development, etc.)

### Research Questions:

1. How were the professional learning and collaborative inquiry experienced by practitioners?
2. What impact did DIAL have on practitioners and their teaching practices and spaces?
3. What impact did DIAL have on students and their learning spaces?

### Data Collection Tools:

- *Observations*: Observations of the professional learning opportunities (i.e., both mandatory and optional opportunities).
- *Focus Groups*: Focus groups with educators and administrators to explore participants' ongoing experiences with the DIAL initiative.
- *Survey*: A baseline survey to capture some demographic information and to evaluate participants' levels of understanding, practice, attitudes, and supporting structures regarding the initiative goals using closed and open-ended questions. Surveys at the end of different professional learning opportunities were also used.
- *Educator Scrapbook*: Educators were asked to create digital scrapbooks where they answered key questions and provided artefacts to document their DIAL journey.

## Preliminary Findings

### How was the professional learning and collaborative inquiry experienced by practitioners?

Administrators and educators alike shared that the DIAL professional learning, and Dr. Nicole West-Burns (who delivered many of the professional learning sessions) in particular, was an inspiring, affirming, and galvanizing speaker who empowered them to unlearn/re-learn and consider initial shifts in their practice. Adopting the collaborative inquiry approach, with the support of Moses Velasco, meant that practitioners recognized their role in affecting meaningful change in their classrooms and schools. Other experiences with the DIAL professional learning that surfaced during the focus groups were:

- Acknowledgement that this contextualized learning opportunity was a moment of awakening, particularly around the notion of educational debt that is owed to racialized students;
- DIAL offered multiple entry points for learning, such that everyone was able to deepen their understanding and engagement, particularly in spaces where there was existing work in anti-racism and culturally relevant pedagogy;
- Importance of learning that is responsive to the real-world issues and lived realities for both practitioners and students; and

*"For me I love the perspective of the debt [...] that we're not trying to fix them, but that we need to go in there and repair what we as educators have failed to provide and so that perspective [...] I found for me resonated and has really helped to drive me."*

*"Even if I am a seasoned and I've been doing this, my entire career there's still opportunity for learning in this area so there's always opportunity for growth so I think that, regardless of where you are on the spectrum the DIAL sessions have been really good learning."*

- Educators and administrators felt that they did not have enough time to unpack their DIAL learnings and have rich discussions with colleagues due to the condensed professional learning schedule and pandemic related challenges.

## School Inquiries

The following questions illustrate the DIAL inquiries chosen by schools as submitted in educator scrapbooks. In many instances, educators also created individual inquiry questions (not shown below).

*As we strive to collectively create an inclusive school climate by providing positive cultural representations, how can we support our Black Students to be critically conscious of their social identities, to be problem solvers and to be successful learners?*

*Who has been historically left out? Who do we center in our learning experiences? What learning opportunities are provided for the students we have in front of us? What cultures are included, and what is our understanding of the cultures represented in our space? What is our awareness when developing lessons around the prevalence of racism in all subjects? And finally, how can this be a collaborative undertaking with teachers, students, family and community members in an intentional and sustainable way.*

*What would happen if we centered student voice and choice, to facilitate developing student identity, and encourage critical thinking through the intentional use of explicit literacy strategies?*

*Can school wide long range plans with Cultivating Genius at their centre positively impact student engagement and improve achievement?*

*What will CR texts do to impact my teaching?*

*Why do we use CRRP to develop our literacy to create environments and learning opportunities inclusive for all students. We want all of our students (especially those that are traditionally marginalized) to engage & bring their voice forward. To make sure the content areas allow our students to identify themselves in the class, the curriculum, the school and our society.*

*What would happen if we centered student voice and choice, to facilitate developing student identity, and encouraged critical thinking through the intentional use of explicit literacy strategies?*

*How can we use relevant, responsive and in particular sustaining literature, multimedia, real lived experiences, cultural experiences and other significant real life examples that are important to engage our students when teaching effective strategies in reading, writing and learning as well as other curriculum areas more broadly.*

*If we purchase and utilize a variety of developmentally appropriate, culturally and socially responsive resources and intentionally consider the academic, social and emotional needs of all learners, in a student-centred, culturally responsive and relevant, trauma informed school/classroom environment, where student individuality, student identity and student voice not only matter but are sought out, how might these actions improve engagement and outcomes for students across the grades and various curricular areas?*

## 2) What impact did DIAL have on practitioners and their teaching practices and spaces?

Involvement in DIAL had both personal and professional impacts on practitioners, in that they became conscious of their identity, power, and privilege, and how this may manifest in their classrooms, as well as broader resources, policies, and structures in education. Other impacts that were noted were:

- Adopted a growth-mindset orientation for themselves and students, which facilitated humility in the learning process, greater reflection, and student-centered pedagogy (e.g., co-generative dialogue, student voice);
- Felt more courageous and confident to have intentional discussions on current events and social justice issues such as Black Lives Matters, the discovery of the unmarked graves out of the former Residential School in Kamloops, and anti-Asian racism at their school, among others;
- Developed a community of practice within their school to plan, collaborate, and share resources; and
- Cross-curricular integration of DIAL learnings in teaching practices and spaces in subjects such as mathematics and music.

*"I've also taken a different viewpoint, when it comes to that educational debt and looking at it not through a deficit lens but more through asset based lens within my classroom space as well, so just really taking what's happening in our spaces and just looking at it a little bit differently [...] The sessions have definitely changed the way that I look at what's already happening in my space in order to evolve that learning to be more reflective of the students that we have in front of us."*

*"One of the things that was really empowering for me was at the very start, when we were asked to come up with our statement of what is true, what is true for us, what we want to be true for us. I think that task right off the bat it, it laid the groundwork for everything that I did afterwards. So whenever I was planning whatever I was thinking I had to keep that in mind, is like I needed to be true to to that statement and [...] that I teach in this way, so I found that that was that was an incredible task, and it really impacted me"*



- The practitioners reflected on the relevance of DIAL as an opportunity to not just empower the students to be agents of change but also be agents of change themselves. The diversification of texts in the classroom was not just relevant for the diverse learners in the class but also to question the educators' own biases and prejudices.
- DIAL prompted educators to value the need for more collaboration to discuss and develop lessons and unique unit plans around critical consciousness with other members of the school community to ensure that the students are able to experience a shift in their schooling experience at large. This would encourage students to be more confident in valuing their voices and strive to be heard.
- Several educators shared the personal statements they had written as a part of the DIAL sessions and emphasized that this process was critical in their learning. Putting their thoughts into words on paper helped them in holding themselves accountable to the vision of creating an anti-oppressive and equitable environment for students. The statements opened conversations into topics that have been impacting school communities everyday such as racial discrimination, Black Lives Matter, gender inequality, anti-Asian hate crimes, etc., to forefront how the educators would initiate conversations around these topics in classrooms and with colleagues.

*"After watching Dr. Nicole's presentations which gave so much history about the Black experience in Canada and in our school systems, I wanted to try to make sure that much of my content was Canadian as I felt that a lot of what we learn or hear comes from the US. I started by asking whether they had heard the statement, "Racism in Canada is not as bad as the US." I had one student reply, I say that all the time. We watched a video called Battleground by Kwesi Thomas and Mark Bone in which various Black Canadian voices are amplified."*



### 3) What impact did DIAL have on students and their learning spaces?

Administrators and educators felt it was somewhat premature to determine the impact of DIAL on students and their learning spaces, yet, over the span of the focus groups, there were some suggestions of impact.

- In providing opportunities for student voice, students were empowered and their critical consciousness, agency, and advocacy efforts were nurtured;
- Students were more curious, vulnerable, and open to trying new things with their learning and assessment.

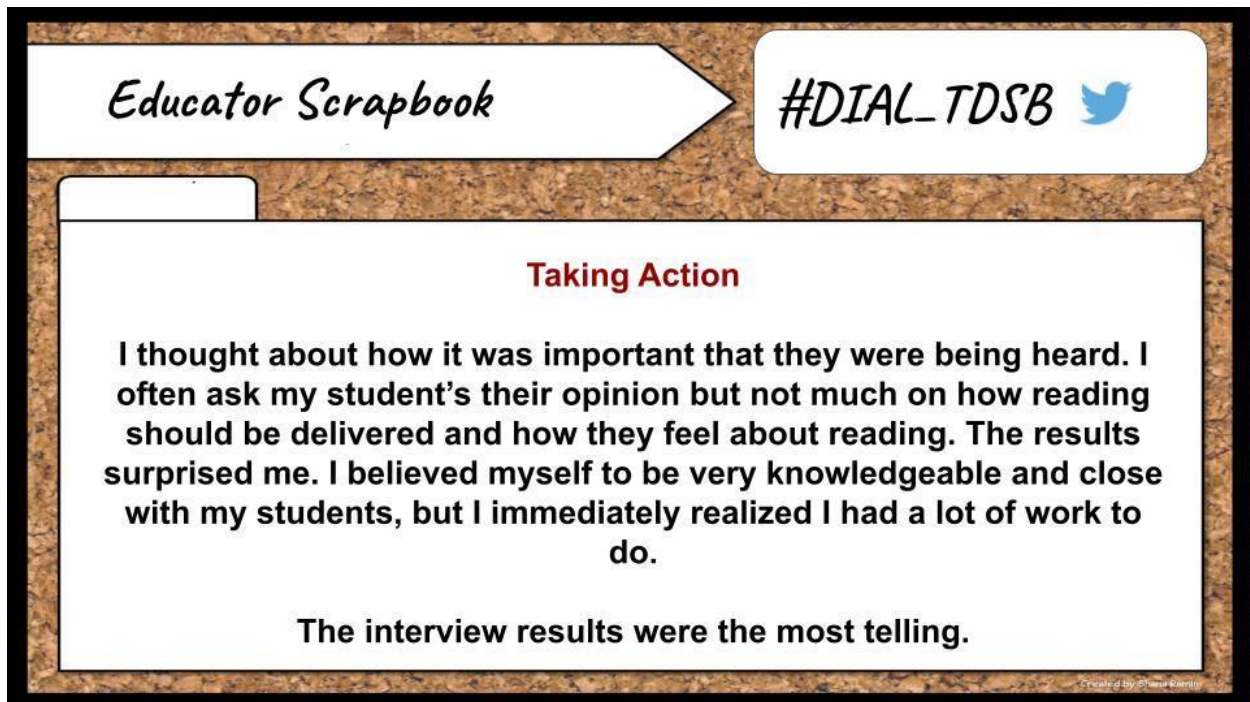
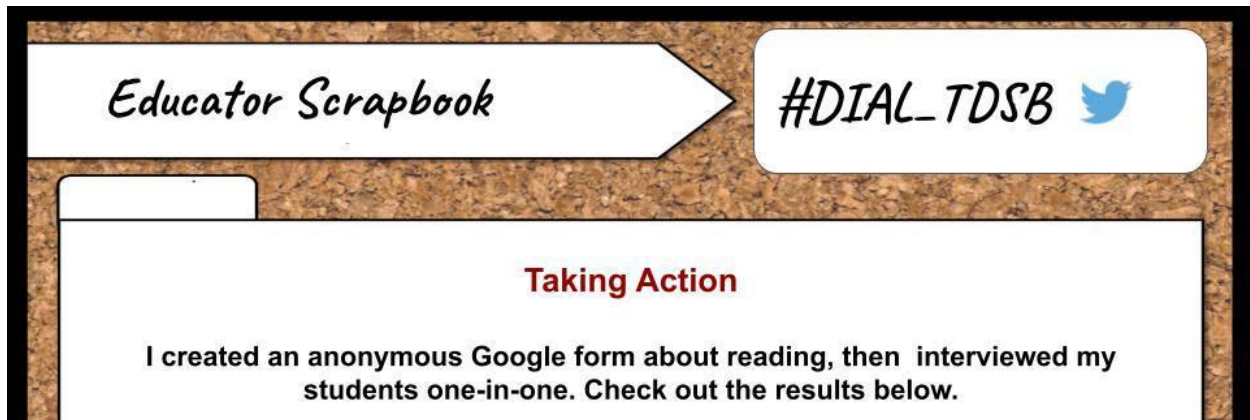
*"Kids were outraged by [incident of anti-Asian hate]. We asked them what we should do and they wanted to do announcements, they wanted to do signs, they wanted to march [...] Their messages were everything from Black Lives Matter to Stop Asian hate [...] And then there was a lot of talk about like how different groups of people are discriminated at different times [...] I loved how it was their call to action [...] I think their voice is so strong and I think it's because of this work. So I'm very grateful for that."*

*"With DIAL, having a focus on literacy and having conversations about equity and racism, and you know real life discussions about their communities and their thoughts and I think it really made it so that the kids were able to feel more empowered to speak and more like yeah I want to know what they have to say and what they have to say is important, and I think I think that came about because of DIAL."*

*"They all want to share their ideas which I think is great they they're eager to talk. They want to tell you what they think and what they know [...] So the kids are willing to try and willing to put themselves out there but they're also really curious to hear what other kids have to say and they like having a conversation and a discussion about different things."*

While this was difficult to capture in the first year of DIAL, a few educators also illustrated examples of student work in their Educator Scrapbooks. These educators seemed experienced in anti-oppressive work and thought deeply about the DIAL process. Emerging information from their scrapbooks illustrated that students seemed quite engaged with these types of activities and had rich discussions. However, it should be noted that this information comes from a small sample of educator

scrapbooks and this is not indicative of wider impact on all students the initiative aimed to support. An example of one scrapbook that speaks to this question is shared below:



*Educator Scrapbook*

#DIAL\_TDSB 

### **Taking Action**

**After surveying, interviewing and listening. I created a document of books they wanted in the class that stemmed from conversations. Students chose books that reflected them. The majority of my students are BIPOC and POC children.**

**Check out the student book wish list:**

*Educator Scrapbook*

#DIAL\_TDSB 

### **Taking Action**

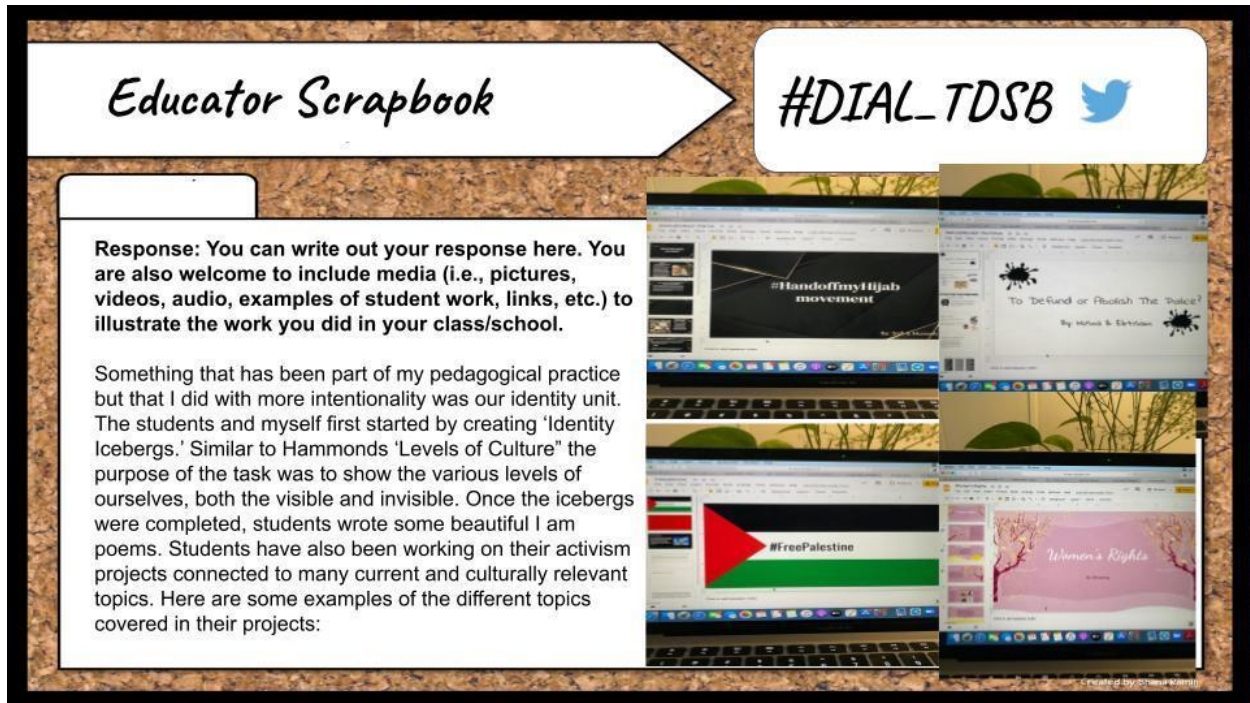
**Also, students shared that they would like to have conversations and discussions based on topics that come up for them. So since then, I ask students every week what topics they would like to discuss. I see this is building a stronger classroom community.**

**Starting next year, I am going to start a new reading program based on the students suggestions.**

In this example, students talked about both joys and challenges of reading. Some talked about feeling anxious when asked to read aloud (e.g., being made fun of by peers for not reading correctly or worries about their accent). Other students talked about not feeling represented in the chosen texts (e.g., lack of Muslim characters in books). The student book wish list included everything from graphic novels to manga to horror to comedy to texts about Black Lives Matter, Syrian Muslim students experiences fitting into an American school, immigrant parents, police brutality, and Muslims who wear hijabs, among others.



Another example of the impact of DIAL on students is illustrated through the following student project:



However, in some instances, while educators were really committed to DIAL goals and were attempting to create anti-oppressive literacy classrooms, some of their lessons inadvertently could have caused harm. In one example, an educator relied on conversations around perspective to start discussions about how each of our lived identities and experiences enable us to see the world in very different ways. While this was a great start, latter components of this lesson asked students to imagine how they would interpret some pictures from the point of view of a "lower class", "middle class", "upper class", "privileged", "visible minority", or "Indigenous" person. This may have posed some harm to students of different identities in the classroom as it could have perpetuated stereotypes or opened spaces for cultural appropriation. Similarly, in other instances, there have been examples of educators asking students to create "activist" projects to investigate examples of local activism against systemic discrimination, but at times, these conversations did not go deep enough (e.g., at times students focused on white activists without investigating the ways in which white supremacy has shown up in their work).

#### 4) Considerations for the 2021-2022 school year

Across educator and administrator focus groups, a number of similar suggestions for Phase II of DIAL emerged:

- An opportunity to revisit key learnings from Phase I of DIAL early in the school year;
- Importance of expanding the reach of DIAL through capacity building with colleagues and adopting a whole-school approach;
- Provision of more teaching and learning resources that align with DIAL;
- Establishing the conditions to collaborate with peers, such as regular meeting time, supply coverage, and opportunities such as demonstration classrooms and co-teaching; and
- Greater continuity and cohesion in anti-oppressive literacy teaching and learning across feeder schools.

Research & Development's analysis suggests the following considerations:

- Consider providing wrap-around support or an individual that educators can "run" their ideas by when developing their inquiries so that learning experiences do good by students. This could also help push educators in their own critical consciousness development (e.g., akin to getting feedback on their work).
- Review scrapbooks prior to posting them in the shared repository and/or consider giving educators feedback to support their growth into the next school year.

*"Learning happens on a continuum, we're all at different points of the continuum, so if more teachers, even in this space that we or the school that we service were able to participate, and this could have even been more impactful than it was for us because now we can take out conversation to more spaces, plan with more teachers, we can pull resources from more individuals and and really just benefit the community that we service as well."*

*"I'm going to do the work, regardless of whether I'm a member of BSSE or DIAL I'm going to still do the work, I love the PD so I'm glad to be a member, but I always wonder like is there a way, is it possible to get this to everyone in the school so that everybody is accountable and that everyone is able to have the benefit."*

*"Something else that came out of it that was interesting was the teacher said they feel a disconnect as a middle school, from what the Elementary, the feeder schools, are giving us and also what's happening after us, and so they wanted a better cohesion between the feeder schools and the schools that we're feeding to; so that's something that we are going to have to just, we want to address."*

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