

Summer I Reflection

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This summer, I conducted research comparing the performance of students enrolled in Ontario’s English- and French-language school systems on province-wide standardized tests administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Perhaps a bit deceptively, the allotted six-week research period started out very smoothly for me, in no small part thanks to the assistance of my research advisor in conducting statistical tests. At this time, I also expected to be least busy during the first week of research, which I imagine bolstered my commitment to meeting research goals.

Despite the apparent successes of my first week, I faced my most significant setback late into the second, when I was informed by multiple experts in the field that comparing EQAO achievement between language systems was unreliable due to nonparallel curricula, psychometric differences, and differences in how course content is taught, among other obstacles. Around the same time, I was told by a third-year Ph.D student with similar expertise that my choice of years for the third research question (“How has the English–French achievement gap evolved over time from 2003–2019 and 2021–2022, whereas EQAO assessments were cancelled from 2019–2021?”) was problematic. This, he said, was because (a) the data were collected separately between Academic and Applied streams (discontinued in 2022) and (b) EQAO assessments moved online beginning the 2021–22 school year, which makes comparing pre- and post-pandemic achievement unreliable. Naturally, these challenges caused me to feel somewhat hopeless as only three weeks remained to carry out what was to become the bulk of my research. Through this, I found that communication, whether with my research advisor or with other EQAO experts, was instrumental to moving past my initial paralysis and developing actionable next steps. I came to learn from this setback that without direction, it is easy to lose motivation and faith in a research project, or any personal undertaking

for that matter. As a new researcher, communication and mentorship were vital to restoring my confidence during this time.

Fortunately, my earlier setback was balanced by a victory in the third week of research, which I attribute both to my initiative a month prior and a fair bit of luck. I learned from an EQAO representative that while comparing EQAO math results in particular is possible between language systems, it would be much more reliable to do so using data collected on the school level as opposed to the board-level data I then had. Fortunately, I had obtained school-level data about a week earlier through a data request form I sent to EQAO in mid-May. Were I to send the data request only after hearing the EQAO representative's advice, I might not have secured the required data before my research period ended, which could have compromised the validity and accuracy of my eventual results. As the focus of my study shifted from board-level to school-level data, I decided to drop the third research question and focus only on the first two. In other words, I no longer sought to carry out a longitudinal analysis of my data, instead opting to compare English–French achievement for the 2022–23 assessment period alone.

This event served as another example of how research is often unpredictable, with many ups and downs that can be prepared for (if not predicted) with a bit of early initiative. Despite my success with completing the data request, obtaining Research Ethics Board (REB) approval took significantly longer: I received an email notifying me that my study was approved in my last week of research, by which point I had already ruled out semi-structured interviews from my research methodology. Having to exclude interviews was not a significant loss, though, as I had by then gained a number of insights from EQAO experts in unstructured Zoom meetings. Nonetheless, receiving REB approval assuaged my uncertainty about using coders for the content analysis portion of my research.

Foresight, or anticipating the direction a project will take before embarking on it, proved to be an important skill in my research. At times, especially given the relatively short time period allotted for research, I found myself tempted to begin writing the final report midway through the research. While I knew this would grant me a temporary sense of progress and productivity, I also realized it would be more beneficial to my final report to take notes in the meantime, then draft an outline of each paragraph before writing. This way, my writing would have more substance, structure, and overall flow, which in the long run would decrease the time needed for revision. In this sense, while immediately beginning to write would give me the impression that I was well ahead of schedule, it would also cost me about as much time in revision as would taking the time to write more thoughtfully. I recognized early initiative and foresight as a powerful combination of skills in facing the novel and unpredictable world of research, and ones that I hope to continue developing in tandem.

Toward the end of the six-week research period, I became increasingly able to make time for pursuits unrelated to research. Music making and songwriting, for instance, helped me relieve occasional stress and express myself creatively in a way that nicely balanced my academic responsibilities. Sessions of the Deep Dive conversation series with other Laidlaw Scholars had a similar effect: though the focus remained on Laidlaw research, I was able to relate to the obstacles faced by other Laidlaw Scholars in a way that ultimately helped me regain a sense of direction. From these meetings, I also borrowed a peer's idea to create a source sheet, wherein each source I consulted was listed alongside its author and year of publication. In later weeks of research, which felt a bit less organized given the need to draw connections among a number of studies, I felt very grateful for having created this source sheet.

Around this time I also managed to improve my sleep schedule—which in earlier weeks had sometimes complicated communication with my research advisor—by setting alarms and sticking to my usual nighttime routine. This would often require me to bring research or writing to a close after a set time, even if doing so disrupted my flow in the moment. Gradually over the course of the six weeks, I came to appreciate the value of a more rigid work schedule to produce rigorous work on a tight deadline. One strategy I used to this end was the Pomodoro Technique, which separates 25-minute intervals of focused work with 5-minute breaks, and a 15-minute break every third round. When I began writing my report, I discovered another simple yet effective technique to improve my productivity: zooming in. By increasing the zoom on Google Docs to 125% or even 150%, I was able to concentrate solely on the part of a paragraph that I was writing in that given moment. This strategy was especially useful given my habit of reading and rereading what I have already written, particularly when the screen is sufficiently zoomed out for me to see it. I believe I have zooming in to thank for the introduction of my report, which has a level of detail that would have otherwise been challenging to achieve under the time constraints.

While building structure into my research schedule did increase my overall productivity, there were still some days where my motivation naturally but unpredictably waned. These moments stressed the importance of self-care, even (or perhaps especially) with my busy schedule. For instance, if I found the idea of conducting a statistical test or writing a paragraph too daunting, I would jot down bullet points on how I would approach the given task and approximately how long it would take to complete. Equipped with blueprints for many action items, and from these a growing to-do list, I would feel more prepared to face the task the following day with greater enthusiasm.

In supporting my research, the Laidlaw Scholars Programme has given me the opportunity to develop key leadership skills while contributing to an academic discipline that I am passionate about. The research period, though only six weeks, brought with it a number of triumphs, setbacks, and learning moments. Through this rare experience, I believe Laidlaw has shaped my journey as a leader and learner in ways that I am continuing to recognize and appreciate. Now, instead of feeling anxious as I did prior to Summer I about such future milestones as the upcoming 3MT pitch or my Leadership-in-Action project, I feel a new sense of optimism and readiness to face the unexpected.