Capacity Building Series K–12

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SPECIAL EDITION # 38

Principals as Co-learners: Supporting the Promise of Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry is easy to consider on the surface, but "tough to do well in practice" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 26). Yet, in growing an organization's ability to uncover and challenge existing mindsets and assumptions about learning and teaching, its power resides in practice.

At the school or district level, collaborative inquiry engages teams of educators – teachers, principals, school district leaders and other partners – in discussion and study of student learning. In contrast to school improvement efforts which rely on outside experts, it begins with the tacit or existing knowledge of educators in schools and classrooms and moves out to potential new actions and resulting expansion of professional knowledge. As a professional learning strategy, collaborative inquiry encourages all educators "to fulfill their potential" in order to be able to help students "fulfill their potential" (Dweck, 2010).

An Invitation to Administrators

This monograph draws from school improvement efforts underway, both internationally and in Ontario schools, that are using collaborative inquiry to wrestle with ongoing challenges of practice. In sharing tips, insights and lessons learned from these inquiries, we hope to invite administrators to reflect on their learning stance and mindset, to pursue their own inquiries and consider ways in which they might engage in collaborative inquiry as co-learners with teachers and students in their schools.

When schools were engaged in inquiry by ....

"... re-focusing on persistent issues of underachievement ... investing in continued knowledge-building and establishing coherence of instructional practices across curriculum areas, gains in student achievement were realized over time."

– Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009, p. 2

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"We Are All in This Together"


Michael Fullan

Principals Understand …

- ***The power of permission***
  They establish conditions where educators have permission to not know, to be imperfect, and model this through their own actions and openness to learning.
- ***Diversity is an asset***
  They search out and welcome diverse ideas, opinions and evidence – research, articles, media, classroom data – that shape a "both/and" rather than "either/or thinking."
- ***The importance of building shared understanding***
  They unpack preconceptions, including their own, by making them explicit and transparent.
- ***Once is not enough***
  They build in regularly scheduled time so collective conversations and learning are an ongoing part of the inquiry. As well, they recognize the value of informal, just-in-time, focused learning conversations.

Principals as Co-Learners

Consider the potential for collaborative inquiry to "merge top-down, bottom-up and sideways energies to generate change." This dynamic view of a learning culture is one in which teachers "proactively learn alongside students" and, in turn, administrators learn "alongside their students and teachers." In both contexts, all contribute "their own ideas, experiences and expertise to the learning process" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 12). What is an administrator's role in this kind of learning and leading?

When it comes to supporting educators as they learn and work to improve student achievement, nothing a principal does "has a bigger payoff than learning visibly and publicly alongside staff in a school" (Katz & Dack, 2013, p. 46). A co-learning role enables principals to "drive transparent, collaborative reflection," continually assessing "what is working," as well as learning from those things that didn't work (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 8). It signals to students, parents and teachers that "I lead because I know how to learn," rather than because "I know more" (Katz & Dack, 2013 p. 46). Through the actions they take, administrators communicate a growth mindset, one in which all learners have the "freedom to stretch themselves, make mistakes and try again" (Dweck, 2010, p. 29).


Marion Small

Who's Doing the Learning and Why?

In practice, principals often engage in a variety of learning opportunities with other educators, including: guiding and facilitating groups of teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry; joining professional learning and/or network sessions with teachers; and participating in principal learning teams. Kasl and Yorks call on administrators to not only be attentive to the learning of teachers within these experiences, but also to focus on their own learning, because "changes in their personal meaning schemes can change the system" (2010, p. 318).

For example, a traditional inquiry question posed by principals might be more likely to highlight what teachers will do: "How can we improve the way that teachers use technology in the classroom?" In contrast, the question posed by the same group with a focus on their own learning would be, "How can we improve our ability as administrators to influence the way teachers use technology in the classroom?" The difference between the two questions "may seem minor" but in fact "points to a radical distinction." The first question implies that administrators are "taking action on the system," while the second suggests "that the change they seek is in themselves" (Kasl & Yorks, 2010, p.318).

It is important that principals "individually develop their own theory of action," but equally important that they shape their inquiry so it "relates concretely to the work of teachers and students in the classroom" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 41). Powerful and "robust connections to the school professional learning community" are formed when a principal's inquiry is parallel to and in support of teacher and student learning and inquiry (Katz, in *Leaders in Educational Thought*, 2013).


Steven Katz

Working Through a Hypothetical Example

The administrator's challenge of practice: "At our meetings connected to inquiry, teachers often tend to stay at the level of polite conversation. We have co-constructed norms of collaboration and teachers bring evidence of student learning to anchor discussions. To support our continued growth and learning, I am wondering how I might participate in or facilitate discussions more effectively so teachers feel more comfortable about sharing successes and challenges and raising questions."


Lucy West

The administrator forms an inquiry question to address this challenge of practice and examines it through the lens of a divisional team's inquiry about student communication in mathematics: "What impact will building my own knowledge about communication in the mathematics classroom and participating more strategically in discussions with the team have on teachers' comfort levels about sharing more openly what is working and what is not?"

Criteria to describe how the administrator will know whether the action taken is having impact. *For example when meeting as a team, teachers will:*

- Present questions they have, or challenges they are facing and tap into the collective knowledge and support of the team.

And/or:

- Voice connections they are making between their current practice and the new perspectives they are learning from one another.

And/or:

- Add to/question my thinking and support my learning in connection to the evidence of student learning in math.

Evidence and tools are identified that capture criteria. *For example:*

- student work and/or documentation of learning that I have collected and shared and that teachers engaged with and responded to

And/or:

- sample(s) of student work/documentation shared by teacher(s) that provoked questions and rich discussions about practice

And/or:

- an "exit ticket" from teachers after our meeting (e.g., highlighting their learning or sharing questions they still have)

Administrators can lead the way ...


Ken Leithwood

- Be open to uncertainty – curiosity and a desire to know drives inquiry.
- Be a co-learner – connect your professional learning and inquiry to the learning and inquiry of your students and teachers. Be open and present to the process.
- Be vulnerable – acknowledge when you don't know and openly share what and how you are learning.
- Be aware of your own mindset – operate from an asset stance with students and with other educators.
- Position student learning and well-being at the heart of all discussions and decision making.
- Make room for everyone – ensure equity of voice and diversity of opinion. Co-create and use collaborative norms to guide collective learning and to keep the focus on students.
- Expect challenges and mistakes – welcome them and learn from them.

Broaden the understanding of documenting student learning.

"The most effective model ... is a model of someone who is struggling to learn and who is demonstrating what it takes to learn something new. Not somebody who is past all that ... I think principals who are willing to make themselves a little vulnerable ... are saying to teachers, 'We are all in this together'."

– Leithwood in *Leaders in Educational Thought*, 2012

A Model to Guide C


Catherine Bruce

There is no one recipe for effective collaborative inquiry – located in different con
their ideas "about what [they] think will work against the evidence of what actu
here is one way to engage in collaborative inquiry in school, network or princip


Bruce Rodrigues

OBSERVE AND REFLECT

Take an inquiry stance.
Make sense of learning through the combined lenses of data, professional experience and relevant research and expertise.
Seek out best evidence.
Question the evidence.
Use evidence to challenge current thinking and perspectives.


Steven Munby

Address the dissonance between the "intended" student learning and the "actual" outcome. Asking "why?" forms the substance of reflection, planning, research and action.

Understand what data can and cannot do. Large-scale assessments and data sets provide a needed big picture perspective. These create entry points for reflection and serve as school and district checkpoints. It is formative classroom evidence, however, that sustains learning momentum. What is the purpose of the data? What limitations are there? What are the data not showing? Describe patterns and trends, reserving judgment. What questions are generated? What further data are needed? What might be next steps? What else do we need to understand about this problem?

Broaden the understanding of documenting student learning.

- You get what you ask for ... When it comes to quality assessment and quality learning, "the real accountability system is in the tasks that students are asked to do," or, what Elmore suggests, students will know as a result of "the doing" (2010, p.4).
- How will you capture evidence from conversations and observations? Notes, audio, video, artefacts and so on assist to reconstruct children's learning paths and processes, and highlight the relative impact of instructional moves and/or educator action.

A challenge of practice highlights what students need to learn and what educators need to learn.
What instructional practices are improving this learning? Which are not? For which students? Why? About what do we need to learn more?

Provo

- What are we t
  Has it changed
- What pivotal
  our thinking?
- How is our pr
  as a result?

ACT AND REFLECT

Implement strategies outlined in the plan and adjust as needed.

- Are there any surprises or unanticipated needs? Are any immediate adjustments needed?
- What additional supports are required?
- What is the impact on student learning and experience so far? How do we know?

Engage in professional learning.

- Is the learning you identified for yourselves meeting your needs?
- What else may help deepen your learning? For example, co-learning/co-teaching experiences, consultation with others engaged in the work, accessing professional learning resources, etc.

Reflect and revise the plan as needed.

- Accept that an inquiry question may evolve and/or generate new questions.
- Be open and responsive to unintended outcomes.

ollaborative Inquiry

texts, it can look different. Common to all approaches, however, educators test ally works" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 56). The model described al teams; it includes three phases, each being a possible starting point.


Steven Katz

PLAN AND REFLECT

From challenge of practice to working hypothesis or inquiry question. What actions might you take to address a student learning need as identified in a challenge of practice? What intended impact on student learning might these actions have? What new educator learning is needed? When it comes to assessing efforts, how will results be made visible?

Focus the inquiry.
If [educator action(s)] then [student learning outcome] ... What is the relation between [educator action(s)] and [student learning outcome]? What impact does [educator action(s)] have on [student learning outcome]?

- Statements and questions such as the above help frame a working hypothesis about the relation between the identified student learning focus and planned educator action(s) to address that focus.
- The actual phrasing of a hypothesis or inquiry question may not be as important as are the often messy conversations that contribute to its design or redesign.
- There may be a large umbrella question around an over-arching theme that is then studied in more specific ways by grade team members, or there might be a very specific inquiry question appropriate to and studied in all classrooms. This applies to both school-based and network inquiries.

Create an action plan.
Outline how you are going to approach your inquiry (e.g., co-planning, co-teaching, analysing pedagogical documentation) and how you will interpret and use expertise and wider bodies of knowledge to enhance the plan and support the team.

Build criteria that describe student learning outcomes.

- What will students learn and/or demonstrate as a result of the actions taken?
- Do the criteria detail the finer attributes of the intended student learning outcome(s)?
- Do the criteria provide clarity and contribute to a shared, nuanced understanding of the outcome, on the part of participants?

Discuss the associated evidence and documentation that will be gathered, and how it will be collected (e.g., pedagogical documentation).

- What assessment strategies and tools will best capture the criteria that have been determined?
- Will students have a variety of authentic ways and opportunities to show learning? Will they be engaged?
- How will conversations and observations be documented?

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moments changed
actice changing

Keep focused on the "why?" ...

Inquiry shifts the purpose of examining evidence of student learning from grading it to understanding it.

Cycle back to deepen learning ...

The reflective process is most powerful when it cycles back, reviews and rebuilds. Deeper understanding is built from cycles of learning over time.

Avis Glaze

Tips for Inquiry

Inquire and *collaborate* are verbs ...

When the desired outcome is deep engagement with professional learning, it is helpful to conceptualize collaborative inquiry through the lens of the actions often associated with it:

Within cycles of inquiry, educators **collaborate** for real purposes, **pose** and **explore** meaningful questions; they **investigate** and **take action** rooted in classroom practice; they **collect** and **reflect** on evidence to **analyze** what has worked and what has not. In light of challenges, they **create**, **build on** and **extend** their professional knowledge, **engage with** and **mobilize** relevant expertise and research, **adapt** existing practices and **find** new avenues of action. They **begin** again ...

This perspective on learning as a dynamic iterative process that connects educator and student learning helps to counter the view of collaborative inquiry as a technical event or a product, an end in-and-of itself as exemplified in the statement, "We *did* our collaborative inquiry this month."

Begin where you are ...

Why are we doing this?

When teachers perceive collaborative inquiry as a directive and are unclear about the benefits of using student learning to inform their work and guide their professional learning, they are less likely to increase their engagement in evidence-based decision making. Administrators can contribute to their team's collective professional learning journey by engaging in reflective dialogue with teachers:

How might we describe our current collaborative inquiry/professional learning processes? What impact are these having on our students? Our classroom practices? Our work and learning with each other? How do we know?

Based on the thinking that emerges from conversations such as these, administrators can ask of themselves:

What conditions for learning do we need to further nurture? What knowledge and experience do we collectively have that might further support learning – my own, teachers' and students' learning?

Beliefs Matter ...

Our beliefs are subtly woven through the fabric of our actions. Do we truly believe that "all students can learn, progress and achieve," and if we do, what does this belief look like in action? How might collaborative inquiry support administrators and classroom educators in talking about their beliefs and understanding the impact that they have on fostering a "culture of high expectations" for all (*School Effectiveness Framework*, 2013 p. 2)?

Carol Dweck has developed the concept of "growth and fixed mindsets" as a compelling way to understand how beliefs can influence action. Educators operating from a "growth mindset" believe that "all students can learn," that intelligence is malleable and ability and potential can grow and change (Dweck, 2010). A "fixed mindset" is a belief that

intelligence is static and that innate ability is the primary driver of achievement – for example, a belief that learning in mathematics is a product of innate ability. The challenge for educators is understanding how their beliefs and resulting actions convey powerful, perhaps unintended, messages to learners.

Beliefs, of course, do not change overnight, nor can they be mandated. Changing, evolving or sustaining beliefs within a learning culture is "an adaptive rather than a technical challenge" for principals and teachers. Adaptive challenges cannot be resolved "through the application of authoritative expertise" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2010, p. 3). Negotiation is required if educators are to find common ground in which to engage in collaboration.

Traditionally, successful practice has been viewed in terms of the degree to which educators have implemented or not implemented strategies. When implementation is the main goal, it can be perceived as an end in and of itself – "We taught it; they just didn't learn it." Strategies such as setting student achievement targets, SMART goals and moderation of student work are some of the ways districts and schools have tried to reset attention on evidence of student outcomes. How do the practices of collaborative inquiry represent a different view of the relationship between professional learning and student achievement?

Because collaborative inquiry is rooted in the study of the classroom experience, educators focus on the reciprocal relation between student learning and educator action(s). They inquire, "What impact does [educator action(s)] have on [student learning outcome]?" Actions taken may indeed lead to the intended outcomes for all, or for some students. However, it is the process of reflecting on the evidence of impact, on the potential dissonance between educator actions taken and student learning outcomes realized, that fuels new educator learning and next steps. Connected to the notion of "Just because we teach, doesn't mean they learn," educators move beyond the technical to ask, "We 'taught it' – Who learned it? Who did not? Why? What adaptations are needed? What else may be done?

Much more than a meeting ...

When our practice is adaptive, it evolves continually in response to the needs of students and in light of our own professional experiences and understandings. While "short-term 'wins' are useful," these "must be integrated into a long-term process for change – one in which the work is never done" (Katz, Dack, & Earl, 2009).

How can formal opportunities to participate in collaborative inquiry foster a collective inquiry stance that lives beyond the network and school meetings, or outside an initiative?

An inquiry habit of mind is cultivated when educator learning is evidence based and anchored in situations that emerge daily within classroom settings. Educators require opportunity to "seek emergent possibilities – new questions and solutions" (Collaborative Teacher Inquiry, *Capacity Building Series*, 2010) to challenges of practice that describe what students need to learn and in turn, what educators need to learn.

Involve everyone in the inquiry ...

- All educators need to be involved in all parts of the inquiry cycle (versus a small select group acting on their behalf).
- Plan ongoing opportunities to meet and monitor progress.
- Support collective "just-in- time" learning.

Make the data accessible to the team ...

- Collective ownership results when the team has ready access to the data and jointly engages in interpretation of the data to construct a challenge of practice or an inquiry question. Use of cameras, chart paper, photocopies, audio amplification, etc. can help ensure access and transparency.


Cathy Bruce

Learning – Make It Visible, Make It Public

Issues and questions that emerge during inquiry are not so much problems to be resolved, as they are tensions to be negotiated, a means to gain deeper insights and to explore alternative perspectives. This kind of nuanced and differentiated interaction calls for understanding teaching and learning on the ground. The ways in which administrators take action "beyond the meeting"are vital and shape the learning culture of school or district. Actions can signal the difference between simply giving input to fostering learning that is internally owned, understood and put into action (Earl & Hannay, 2011).

In an in-depth review of the literature, Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) identify five leadership dimensions ranging from establishing goals and expectations to planning, evaluating and coordinating that have the most impact on student outcomes. Of these, one dimension, "promoting and participating in teacher learning and development," has double the impact of the other dimensions on student achievement. More than "just providing opportunities for staff development," leaders engage in their own public and visible learning alongside teachers. They maintain "energy and purpose for both what is being learned and how it is learned."


Steven Munby

- *In what ways do the inquiries of classroom educators guide my own inquiry about principal purpose and actions?*
- *How, when and why will I interact with students as they learn in classrooms? What forms will this interaction take? How will students know I am genuinely curious about their learning and well being?*
- *How does experiencing learning through the eyes of classroom educators and students guide the kind of support I provide? What actions can I take to cultivate efficacy?*
- *What actions can I take that will have a coordinating influence or build coherence?*
- *What questions have emerged for me in light of perspectives presented by students and classroom educators? What do I need to learn more about?*

What we're learning about the principal's role ...

- Inquiry "provides a through-line to the instructional core – what are the vital activities that need to happen to improve teaching and learning?" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 45)
- "... the most effective/telling feedback that teachers will get is that which is built into the purposeful, interaction between and among teachers and the principal. Such interaction is specific to the task of learning." (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012)

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The K–12 School Effectiveness Framework: A support for school improvement and student success, 2013

Leaders in Educational Thought

Volume 2 Number 1, 2013 – Steven Katz (Leader Learning Teams)

Volume 1, Number 2, 2012 – Kenneth Leithwood (Principal as Co-learner and Enabler)