

## Fostering Teacher Leadership Through Collaborative Inquiry

By Peter DeWitt on December 23, 2013 8:11 AM

**Today's guest post is written by Jenni Donohoo. Jenni works with the Ministry of Education - Literacy GAINs in Ontario, Canada, and is the author of [Collaborative Inquiry for Educators](#).**

The power to shift practice and improve student achievement lies in the hands of teachers who need to be entrusted with the responsibility of shaping and enacting change initiatives. Teachers as change agents have the potential to transform their classrooms, schools, and communities. They are in the position to make real change happen. Therefore, fostering teacher leadership is not only a viable strategy for school improvement, it is a necessity.

Collaborative inquiry is a powerful design for professional learning that supports the notion of teacher leadership as it recognizes the role of teachers in on-going school improvement. It provides a systematic approach for teachers to explore issues and determine resolutions through shared inquiry, reflection, and dialogue. Rather than being merely consumers of research and the professional knowledge that accompanies it, teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry become producers and disseminators of knowledge.

Collaborative inquiry should be conceived as a professional learning strategy as opposed to a rigorous research design. It is a powerful strategy for building teachers' capacity to lead because it provides a structure for teachers to become authentic leaders and decision makers. Leadership opportunities extend beyond merely serving on a committee or acting as a department or grade level chair. Through their collaborative work and *learning by doing* teachers have the potential to become more meaningfully involved in school- improvement and catalysts for change.

The four-stage model begins with teachers framing a problem of practice. During this first stage, teachers determine a meaningful focus, develop an inquiry question, and formulate a theory of action. The most effective collaborative inquiry teacher teams keep in mind that their end goal is to increase learning and achieve greater success for *all* students. Therefore, they begin by identifying current student learning needs in order to ensure that their inquiry is authentic, relevant, and worth the investment. The focus of their inquiry must also be an issue individuals can act upon. Identifying promising approaches and implementing changes in practice are key elements in this process. If the problem the team identifies falls outside their realm of control, there will be little they can do to impact change.

When formulating a theory of action, teacher teams compose a sequence of 'if - then' statements that illustrate the causality between their actions and expected outcomes. Framing theories in the form of a hypothesis (*if - then*) compels educators to consider *causes* (instructional and/or leadership practices) that precede *effects* (student learning/teacher learning). It helps to uncover relationships between teaching and learning and/or leading and change as teams examine what they *think* will work against the realities of what is actually happening given their existing culture, specific context, and unique population.

During stage 2 of the collaborative inquiry process, teachers work together to develop new knowledge and competencies and implement changes in practice. They also identify sources of information that will help answer their inquiry question and collect evidence about how their actions are impacting students. Once teacher teams feel they have gathered enough information to address the question posed, teams engage in analyzing the evidence (stage 3). Teachers make meaning of data by identifying patterns and themes and formulating conclusions. As teams refine their thinking, they revisit their theory of action accordingly.

During the fourth and final stage, teachers come together to document, share, and celebrate their new understandings. Teams consider next steps by identifying additional student learning needs and reflecting on what they learned through their inquiries. Finally, participants debrief the process by considering how their work was reflective of the characteristics of collaborative inquiry.

In *Reframing Teacher Leadership to Improve Your School*, Douglas Reeves noted that when teachers engage in sustained collaborative inquiry they:

- frequently have a direct and measurable impact on student achievement;
- affect the professional practices of their colleagues;
- influence teachers as new professional practices are reinforced and repeated by others.

In my experience, I have witnessed greater alignment between the work/learning that is happening in schools and larger system improvement efforts as a result of a collaborative inquiry approach to school improvement. I have seen the de-privatization of practice occur as teams collaborate with colleagues within and across content-areas, grades, and divisions. Greater consistency in terms of practice has been the result. I have also witnessed shifts in ownership to the point where school improvement efforts become self-generative.

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if you are interested in fostering teacher leadership through collaborative inquiry four key things to keep in mind are purpose, structures, process, and relationships.

One purpose of fostering teacher leadership is to sustain school improvement. This means that teachers need to believe that evaluating the effect of teaching and leadership practices on student outcomes is their fundamental purpose. They also need to see themselves as agents of change, recognizing that success and/or failure rests in their actions - that their actions (teaching and leadership practices) *cause effects* (student learning/teacher learning). In addition, in order for teachers to engage meaningfully in school improvement, they need to hold, to a certain extent, decision-making power.

Structures need to be in place in order for this type of learning and leadership to occur:

- *How do teachers access materials, time, and space for activities that facilitate teacher leadership in your school?*
- *Do structures enable teacher teams to collaboratively focus on learning, inquiry, and reflective practice?*

The process is situated in inquiry; a cyclical rather than a linear model. As teacher teams cycle through the stages of inquiry, they change and refine their thinking. Inquiry teams are likely to reframe problems of practice, revise inquiry questions, and re-formulate theories of action as they proceed through the process. Teacher teams generate knowledge and meaning as they move through the stages, co-constructing new understandings through *learning by doing* and reflecting on the impact of their actions.

Finally, nurturing teacher leadership requires high trust and positive working relationships. Megan Tschannen-Moran described trust as the 'invisible underpinning of collaboration and learning' underscoring the importance of human relationships in regard to positive school cultures. She noted that you have to work actively at gaining someone's trust. Establishing trusting and constructive relationships is a condition necessary in fostering teacher leadership.

In *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Michael Fullan noted that leading schools required principals with the courage and capacity to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action. Fostering teacher leadership through collaborative inquiry just seems like the right place to start.

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