The Complexity and Reward of Teacher-Leadership:
Using Collaboration to Make a Difference

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Abstract

Leaders who can articulate a vision for a school culture that values increased teacher voice and teacher leadership, are especially influential in increasing teachers’ capacity to change practice to increase all students’ achievement (Rennie Center on Educational Research & Policy and Edvestors, 2012, p. 9)

We define the most impactful approach for a leader to exhibit toward collaborative learning is that of modeling a positive learning stance that is, being willing as a leader, teacher leader or teacher to become a collaborator and co-laborer as well as co-learner. It means both participating in making a decision to undertake an inquiry, and, then enabling the collective capacity of the individual participants and their teams by providing positive, supportive cultures within which to deliberate on the impact of their inquiry findings.

This paper discusses how teacher leadership can optimally support and motivate teachers such as when teacher leaders create the conditions where teachers can be successful day after day by being involved in structured collaborative work in schools, across schools, and beyond schools in the system and community. Through involvement where everyone learns, leadership skills can become a by-product at every level. As Hargreaves and Fullan suggest (2013), when the right conditions are in place, teacher leadership thrives. Those conditions include:

- focusing on the FACES of individual students;
- building a culture of trust;
- being open to dialogue;
• supporting professional relationships; and,
• putting structures in place to allow teachers to work together.

In Realization (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009), we write about the impact of the 14 Parameters on increasing student achievement at the system and school level. Parameter 1, the notion of shared beliefs and understandings, sets the stage for system- and school-wide shared beliefs and understandings that begin to create a positive cultural base and common foundation. Parameter 11 specifically addresses the importance of undertaking Collaborative Inquiry—using student data to ask system- and school-level questions. Parameter 2, embedding experienced master teachers as Instructional Coaches or “knowledgeable others,” brings us to where we are in this paper: discussing the necessary leadership dimensions of the teacher-leader, beginning with professional knowledge of teaching and learning, and strong interpersonal skills in working alongside others.

Teacher-leaders must be carefully selected. Teacher-leaders become highly influential members of school leadership teams because they become recognized by their peers as:

• exhibiting skill in instruction and assessment;
• being valuable to them as professionals;
• being passionate about ongoing learning;
• having strong interpersonal skills;
• being good listeners;
• having strong communication skills;
• having high energy and being enthusiastic about being part of collaborative teams;
• being willing to share ideas that have worked;
• being open to learning, and
• being committed to taking action with others.

It is clear then that selecting the “right” teacher-leaders from the beginning makes a difference to the future professional success of the teachers they support and of the student achievement across all classes. For teacher-leaders to become truly influential stakeholders, they need support in their own professional development to better understand how to explain their practice, and how to model a positive learning stance for others by:

• examining their own and the practice of others reflectively;
• honing their own assessment and instructional skills while supporting and modeling for their peers; and
• working with teachers as co-teachers using self-, peer, and teacher assessment processes with learning partners as this improves both student achievement and teacher efficacy (Hattie, 2009).

It is important that school leaders including teacher leaders become knowledgeable about the impact of various collaborative approaches and the supports required to initiate and sustain them. In our current research of over 400 survey respondents (Sharratt & Planche, 2016), participants reported that teacher-leaders who put learning supports in place, as shown in Table 1, made the most gains in supporting teachers to change practice.

Table 1: Considering Learning Supports for Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supports for Teachers</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents Who Strongly Agreed or Agreed Regarding the Importance of Supports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A nonjudgmental approach to learning</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time to work with peers during the day</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to practice</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a participant in inquiry</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having an inquiry approach modeled</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing exemplary practice</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching a video of a Collaborative Inquiry process in action</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With supports in place and collaborative learning experiences generated, all teachers can become leaders in their own classrooms, and many of these become informal leaders within their schools via participation in collaboration. This becomes a catalyst for the emergence of many new teacher-leaders who, as team members, are thinking about improved outcomes for all students. Collaboration is a powerful way to deepen educator capacity, to increase the total value of the professional capital in the school, and to harness the power of the collected professionals in the school, area or system.

When leaders make site-based Collaborative Inquiry possible, teacher-leaders and teachers are engaged deeply if observations, assessment, and analysis are purposeful and guided. As teachers work together with a clear student learning focus in mind, skillful instructional knowledge can be brought to the surface and refined (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 2014b).

Teacher-Leaders engage colleagues in Collaborative Learning through inquiry in order to change the nature of learning conversations. A report by M. Robinson et al. (2010) for the Consortium for Policy Research in Education highlighted school perspectives on Collaborative Inquiry in 13 New York City schools. The three-year study of both elementary and secondary schools summarized that principals who promoted shared decision making, enhanced teacher participation in Collaborative Inquiry (M. Robinson et al., 2010, p. ii). Most importantly, the process of inquiry resulted in qualitatively different kinds of conversations between and among teachers and leaders—conversations that indicated an intention to take action to address student learning needs.

Teacher-Leaders engage colleagues in Collaborative Learning through inquiry in order to change the nature of learning conversations, a classic example of providing the necessary structures to work together. Four high-impact strategies that Teacher-Leaders use to produce collaborative conversations with teachers and with school leaders that lead to changed classroom practice and improvements in all students’ learning are discussed below: (1) Case Management Approach, (2) Instructional Coaching, (3) The Co-Teaching Model, and (4) The Collaborative Assessment of Student Work.
1. Case Management Approach

The growth of teachers as leaders through structured Collaborative Inquiry is essentially what has been defined as one form of “site-based” teacher leadership development. Danielson (2007) acknowledges that the development of site-based teacher leadership generates a renewed interest in Professional Learning and this interest sets the stage for deeper forms of collaboration. The two prongs of the Case Management Approach – Data Walls and Case Management Meetings – are forms of job-embedded (or site-based) co-learning that promote learning conversations. The two prongs not only put FACES on their data, but through that also develop a focused culture of collaborative conversations that lead individual teachers to more effective practice through empowerment, and lead teams of teachers to ownership of all students’ growth and achievement.

2. Instructional Coaching

System leaders look to their full cadre of specifically skilled collaborators such as literacy coaches, curriculum consultants, and specialist teachers, as Teacher-Leaders when planning to embed improvement actions. An instructional coach is another valuable asset; those who can approach colleagues with sensitivity and inviting dispositions are soon welcomed into Teacher-Leader style learning conversations. Collaborative Learning with a “knowledgeable other” has its advantages and its cautions. Dr. Jim Knight’s insightful book, Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction (2011), clearly outlines the elements of impactful instructional coaching. Working from what he calls “partnership principles” (Knight, 2011, p. 28), effective coaches become partners with administrators and teachers to support change processes. Teacher-Leaders who are instructional coaches have expertise in quality teaching practices, such as assessment that improves instruction, and often in particular subject areas. They are highly sought-after to share that knowledge. Instructional coaches model practices in the classroom, work alongside teachers, and engage in supportive learning conversations. One of the important takeaways from reflecting on instructional coaching is that good coaches have learned to:
resist rushing in to solve the problems of others;
help others to solve their own problems;
listen actively;
respond reflectively, then
support and partner (adapted from Knight, 2007, 2011).

When voice, choice, and respectful listening are evident while working with an instructional coach, teachers are more likely to feel a sense of partnership as professional equals, which helps to keep an important sense of efficacy intact (Knight, 2007, 2011). Effective coaches listen as much as speak or suggest. They focus on assessment that gives teachers information to differentiate instruction the very next day for all learners. As partners they discuss learning, dialogue together to make good decisions, and give each other feedback that increases learning for all involved—including learning for the instructional coaches. Principals and instructional coaches must realize the time commitment needed and what a partnership approach entails. They have to balance that investment of time against the return in higher student achievement and the increased depth of teaching capacity. On a side note: we have found that instructional coaches should at least in the beginning have a timetabled teaching load that establishes their bona fides within the collected teachers in the division or whole school.

3. Collaborative Co-Teaching

We have moved well beyond traditional notions of team teaching that included the work a special education teacher might have done with a classroom teacher in the service of individual students (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Today, however, we emphasize level playing fields for all collaborators involved in co-work and co-teaching. Co-teaching can take many forms. The goal of a partnership approach in co-teaching is to focus together on the impact that the partner’s teaching has on the what and the why of the resulting student learning and thinking. The important factor to remember in implementing a Co-Teaching Cycle is to find release time to support staff in this kind of learning together. Time to plan, teach, debrief, and reflect together is critical to having successful experiences.
In essence, Teacher-Leaders partner with teachers to co-teach in a process where:

- pairs of teachers working as co-teachers first assess their student data together;
- as co-teachers, they co-plan a lesson and determine what aspect of his or her teaching practice each would like to improve through constructive feedback from the partner;
- they co-teach the lesson using video to observe that part of their practice each wants to improve and to look for evidence of student thinking;
- they co-debrief after the lesson; and then,
- they co-reflect on the learning of students from the lesson as taught, and on their own learning from the experience in order to plan for their next steps.

Teacher-Leaders and teachers engaging in this cycle may find they go more deeply into trying to understand their practice than they would on their own because they have a partner in the process. Before the lesson, participants question their assumptions of what prior knowledge they think students have. During the lesson, the teachers observe students’ thinking. After the lesson, they debrief their own assumptions from the observed evidence, and reflect on their inquiry question about an aspect of improving practice in order to inform their next steps. Teacher-leaders and teachers as co-teachers learn to:

- value colleagues and their contributions,
- listen respectfully to others,
- refrain from judgment,
- reflect on improving their practices,
- become intentional in trying to understand student thinking and learning, and
- share learning across the system.

The inquiry process within the Co-Teaching Cycle allows for deeper conversations...
about student understanding of concepts and weaves in assessment as a core component of the learning.

4. Collaborative Assessment of Student Work

Moderation of learning through collaborative assessment of student work helps teachers to develop deeper and shared understandings of curriculum expectations or achievement standards as they apply to instruction. Potential collaborators include grade partners, literacy and/or numeracy leads, special education teachers, and classroom teachers across subject areas and grades. The Teacher-Leader’s or principal’s role in this process is to facilitate the moderation to ensure that, during the process, participating teachers learn how assessment informs differentiated instruction when all have a common understanding of leveled work.

The principal’s and Teacher-Leader’s role includes finding resource time to work together, then listening, questioning, observing, and participating as a co-learner. A guiding question for this work is, “What feedback about our teaching does the work sample give us as teachers, and what Descriptive Feedback can we give this student to help with the next steps in learning?” As Hattie (2012) outlines, the most effective teachers gauge the success of their teaching on how well their students are learning and take this as powerful feedback about the effectiveness of their teaching. We add that effective leaders gauge the success of their leading by how well their teachers are teaching and their students are learning and take that as powerful feedback about their leading.

Given constructively, Descriptive Feedback can change not only learning conversations but also classroom practice. Hattie (2015) strongly maintains that for collaboration to make a different it must focus on evidence of student learning and on understanding what impact the teaching has or not had. Ultimately, teachers and leaders need to understand how to best change classroom practice so that all students can achieve expected levels of growth each school year.

If collaborative assessment of student work takes place on a regular basis and several teachers share samples of student work at each session, program coherence is strengthened and consistency of practice across classrooms is more likely (Sharratt, 2014).

Collaborative assessment of student work leads quite naturally to opportunities to plan
formative assessment and consequent instructional strategies together. The key to developing the culture of trust to support this kind of co-learning is to keep the focus on the student work samples and not permit teachers to begin to feel that assessing the student work is critiquing their work. Establishing and referring back to group norms when necessary keeps conversations on focus and minimizes opportunities for individual participants to feel pressure. Sample norms for collaborative assessment of student work include:

- beginning and ending on time;
- listening respectfully;
- seeking to understand and to have clarity first—withstanding judgment;
- challenging ideas not individuals; and,
- keeping the focus on student learning.

At times, challenging questions will arise, especially if moderated student work reflects variations in teacher understandings or interpretations of specific curriculum expectations or achievement standards. The process of collaborative analysis of student work not only reduces the future incidence of these potential variations mentioned, but it also works to establish assessment literacy, cultivate a culture for inquiry, provide excellent examples of Descriptive Feedback to students, and to foster a sense of collective responsibility and accountability, which leads to a desire to repeat the process or engage in similar collaborative and sharing processes.

There are four major challenges to the Collaborative Learning processes that add complexity to the teacher-leaders’ and leaders’ instructional leadership role: time, facilitation skills, absence, and fear.

1. **Time.** A Co-Teaching Cycle, for example, involves following a process while practicing together. One practice round does not make for sustainable change. Ideally, participants in the leader training sessions or in their own schools would benefit from on-going opportunities with time between sessions to practice areas of assessment,
instruction, and integrating technology. In some schools, team members are motivated so they find time to complete reflective conversations after school or during shared preparation time. Participants find ways to circumvent the time management difficulties to make Collaborative Inquiry processes work when they have learned to value them.

2. **Facilitation.** A good facilitator moves conversation along, especially if there is a learning protocol to support the discussion. If the facilitator is also knowledgeable in the subject area under study, her impact can be considerably multiplied. Most would agree that learning experiences are enhanced by skillful facilitators, however they are not always available or affordable. Investing in training for teacher-leaders to facilitate co-work and co-learning processes is time and money well-spent as teacher-leaders being on-site resources are likely to want to use their learning to the benefit of their own school, colleagues, and students in their schools.

3. **Absence.** Over time, leader absence from Professional Learning or from involvement in collaborative processes clearly indicates the work being done by teachers and teacher-leaders is not valued. If administrators are present as co-learners, their involvement is a very tangible measure of support and an indicator of being valued. Participating in co-learning as a lead learner moves the learning forward by focusing attention on the importance of the work and its results and in this way, it strengthens the learning culture.

4. **Fear.** In the coaching work Planche and Sharratt are doing with teachers using Collaborative Inquiry and *inquiry-based learning*, one theme recurs regularly. It seems that any change including those to professional practice releases anxieties, or causes some to feel fear. Rather than simply acknowledging these as givens, there is another option for leaders or facilitators. Fullan (in personal communication, January 2013) says to go toward the danger and investigate the reasons for fear of change. They often surface as fear of failure. Empathy, perseverance, and patience are needed but, at times, courageous conversations are in order (Abrams, 2009). For many, this is
best unpacked by keeping the focus on what data reveal about student growth and achievement not the quality of the

For those in fear of failure or of making changes to undifferentiated teaching practices, for example, the resulting discussions of specific pedagogical change are easier when they are perceived to be supportive of co-learning and when leaders use a coaching stance within a school culture that authentically supports changing practice. Creating safe environments for “practicing our practice” together is beneficial for all concerned. Negotiating meaning together and working to align our actions with our espoused values is a powerful, positive experience that underpins sustainable change.

Shared ownership of the outcomes (developing a positive culture) and the infusion of skilled collaborators (“home grown” via intentional learning structures) are factors that develop strong team work. As one of our research participants noted, “Teachers change their practice when they are supported to take risks to try more effective teaching strategies”. They become better teachers and good leaders with their peers. Teacher voice, through time for collaborative learning, is essential to be heard in order to change practice and impact students who learn alongside teachers in classrooms.

Ultimately, as Dr. Alma Harris states (Sharratt & Harild, 2015), in a model of distributed leadership, Teacher-Leaders and teachers empower students to have agency and influence; the challenge is to release the power of their leadership in authentic and trusting ways. It means putting FACES on the learners and empowering them to be leaders – the ultimate goal of and reward for being Teacher-Leaders.
References


