

CAPACITY BUILDING K–12

SPECIAL EDITION # 42

System Leaders and Collaborative Inquiry

Join us in this [Capacity Building](#) monograph as we explore how collaborative inquiry fosters a spirit of innovation while enhancing a problem-solving disposition and embracing a commitment to learning.

“Through collaborative inquiry, educators work together to improve their understanding of what learning is (or could be), generate evidence of what’s working (and what’s not), make decisions about next steps and take action to introduce improvements and innovations. And then they start again on emerging new issues and challenges. Notably, collaborative inquiry sees educators as key participants in understanding how to achieve excellence and equity in education.”

Capacity Building Series – [Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario](#)¹

Read the online version for hyperlinks to additional resources. Tip: Download the online version to your computer for ease of use.

District leadership today is about building on the educational achievements of the past decade. It’s about inspiring the work of educators at all levels of the system – through inquiry, action and refinement – to ensure that the Ontario school system continues to improve. It’s about promoting, enabling and encouraging improvement efforts through continuous learning for all.

Previous *Capacity Building* monographs have explored how collaborative inquiry (CI) can help educators make deeper connections between student learning and educator learning at the classroom level (e.g., [Dynamic Learning](#)²) and at the school level (e.g., [Principals as Co-Learners](#)³). This monograph highlights the experiences of directors and

superintendents of education – system leaders in Ontario and elsewhere – to look at CI’s potential to create the conditions system-wide for creatively addressing the complexities of education today. We hope it sparks productive dialogue across the province on how to make our system the best that it can be.

The only way “we practise differently is when we understand differently.”⁴ A district leader’s ability to construct understanding of instructional and curriculum policy innovations is significantly influenced, not only by his or her work context, but also by prior “beliefs and knowledge.”⁵ CI is an innovation that creates a profound shift in how we think about, talk about and value learning.

System Leaders – Learners First

Engagement in inquiry as a senior team can become a means to more than one end. Due to an authentic focus on personal and team learning and growth, district leaders begin to change their personal schemas. And “because they are integrated and interactive with the system,” they “change the system” at the same time.⁶ As well, they collectively gain insight and personal experience that provides a more nuanced understanding of the power of inquiry to impact learning. Because their role broadens beyond providing professional development to being co-learners and co-participants, it positions them to more strongly influence change connected to [system learning](#).⁷

But why CI?

There is much that is known about what makes schools effective – about the strategies, tools and pedagogies needed to help students learn best. However, many system leaders struggle to bring these practices to scale. Why? The challenge may lie in connecting the “supply” of content and pedagogy to an authentic “demand” for professional learning; that is, what [Steven Katz](#) refers to as creating the conditions for educators “to need and want to know.”

Just as teachers often think that if teaching happens learning happens, many

professional development sessions operate on the premise that the act of supplying educators with information will result in improvement. While such sessions may indeed be interesting, learning may remain superficial or discarded and forgotten. Collaborative inquiry, as previous [Capacity Building](#) monographs have explored, is professional learning that begins with an authentic need to learn more about both student learning and our own learning as educators. Meaningful questions are surfaced before solutions are sought or actions taken. In other words, “the demand for learning precedes supply.”⁸ CI provides learners with opportunity to say, “We noticed this, and want to know more about _____,” building incentive to collectively investigate and engage in timely actions and application of new learning in practice.

What’s in a name?

One of the challenges of large-scale reform is that “terms often have the tendency of traveling well, but the underlying conceptualization and thinking do not.”⁹ As districts work to foster common understanding of what collaborative inquiry is in practice, it may be helpful to conceptualize it in terms of the best evidence about how people learn.

Impact of CI on School Systems

promotes, cultivates and supports deep thinking and efficacy for all

Successful CI involves leaders at all levels of the system – provincial, district and school – in transforming culture and enabling the conditions for optimal learning.

Best Evidence About How People Learn

Many characteristics of effective professional learning found in the literature form the guiding principles of collaborative inquiry, as outlined below:

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
• learner-directed and research-supported – educators, facilitators and researchers work collaboratively to engage in areas of emerging need
• activity focused on students, student thinking and student demonstrations of understanding
• credible evidence – at the right “grain size” – is used to frame a challenge of practice
• professional learning needs, relevant to the context and roles of the group, are identified
• an iterative process in which learners design, try out and test changes in practice

Adapted from Bruce and Flynn (2014) and Rincon-Gallardo and Fullan (2015)¹⁰



Using the above description of effective professional learning, district teams may wish to consider...

- When is CI an appropriate means for [professional learning](#)?

Beyond the broad strokes, what does collaborative inquiry in practice look like in our district?

- What practices are common across the system? For which learners?
- How does the learning from one group inform the learning of others?
- What needs to be supported or leveraged? With which stakeholders?
- Is it making a difference in student learning and well-being? How do we know?
- How is the learning documented and shared so that others may benefit?

Tips on CI for System Leaders

Create the conditions that foster inquiry:

To support educators in learning deeply together, system leaders continue to learn about supports and conditions that make inquiries effective. They consider the importance of collective responsibility, shared practice, trust and access to research/expertise in changing leader and educator practice to increase and support student learning.

A Call to Action

“Deliberately and proactively welcome challenge, refusing to accept the status quo, always looking for where the best practice is – inviting it in, going to see it, asking for critique, having that robust dialogue – and enjoying ambiguity.”

Steve Munby¹¹

Look for evidence of impact: Proposed solutions to challenges of practice emerge through collaborative inquiry. It is vital to test these to see

if they help. Actions taken may indeed lead to all or some of the intended outcomes. However, it is the process of reflecting on the evidence of impact, or the potential dissonance between the actions taken and outcomes realized, that fuels new learning and next steps.

Collaborate and inquire as a senior team:

System leaders ask themselves, “What are the needs of our learners?” and set up a plan of action to answer this question. Their questions become the means to explore their collective understandings relative to the learning and actions of educators and students across the system; their inquiry becomes a means to build joint responsibility and ownership for identified system outcomes.

Lead from common ground: By acting together, members of the senior team have a much greater capacity for systems thinking than does any one member acting alone. Ken Leithwood suggests that “improving the systems thinking capacity of district leaders is a function of improving both individual and collective capacity.”¹²

Learn alongside others in the system:

Many have observed that “the presence of senior leaders signals ... the importance of collaboration for the system.”¹² By attending school/district/Family of Schools networked learning opportunities, and school-based inquiries, senior leaders engage directly and strategically with people across the system. Co-learning with a small number of selected learning teams over time may offer an even more nuanced perspective.

Align inquiries with system goals and plans:

System leaders build cohesion in board-wide learning systems by collaborating to develop plans that connect multi-level professional learning, including inquiries. The plans are based on educator needs that are rooted in student needs and the learnings are shared and used to help determine where the system is and how to move forward.

An Ontario Example of a System-level CI

In one Ontario district, a superintendent dedicates a significant portion of her monthly meeting to administrator team inquiry. Through the lens of their respective theories of action, administrators on teams share evidence, consult professional resources and research, and plan actions and next steps. Learning is further supported by a planning team of K–12 peers, who use feedback after each Family of School meeting to develop responsive, just-in-time learning for the group as needed.

Here is the CI process they undertook to further the district's numeracy goal.

Beginning with school-based inquiries, K–12 administrators:

- brought inquiry question(s)/theory(ies) of action from their individual schools, connected to the district's numeracy goal
- shared these by placing them under relevant characteristics of student numeracy learning, individually posted around the room and drawn from the [School Effectiveness Framework](#) (page 29)¹³
- engaged in a gallery walk to locate common ground and to self-organize into principal learning teams of three or four (principals and vice-principals could choose to be on different teams)

Connecting school-based inquiries to the inquiry at the "leader learning table," principal learning teams (see above):

- shared their personal challenges of practice relative to their school-based inquiries
- co-created a single administrator inquiry question or theory of action for the entire team or chose to maintain their respective inquiry questions, feeling their mutual connections to the inquiry work at their individual schools provided sufficient common ground

- used the sample theory of action found in [Principals as Co-learner: Supporting the Promise of Collaborative Inquiry](#) as a guide to help develop their hypotheses through the lens of their own learning ("if I/we ...") and detail their actions beyond a "provide support" type of statement

Bridging system learning and school learning, the superintendent:

- co-constructed a theory of action with peers connected to the district's numeracy goal, prior to her work with family of school administrators
- co-learned with principal learning teams, actively joining discussions, probing thinking, celebrating successes and shared her evolving thinking and learning with her superintendent colleagues

Differentiating professional learning support, the planning team of K–12 administrators:

- supported administrator learning about inquiry practices – i.e., planned brief, research supported, whole-group time to consolidate and problem-solve emerging questions connected to inquiry practices
- supported numeracy learning germane to team inquiries – i.e., helped teams access numeracy support resources and research connected to their inquiries, so they could guide their own learning

As educators come to internalize this way of thinking and doing, collaborative inquiry becomes an integral part of how we work and learn together—"a do rather than a talk mode" and "developmental doing rather than routine doing."¹⁴

How to Navigate Tensions in CI Work

A number of tensions are inherent in all CI work, as explored in the previous *Capacity Building* monograph [Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario](#). One tension that is particularly challenging for system leaders (see the table below) is between maintaining a strong focus on system goals while fostering capacity and ownership of inquiries and professional learning needs at local levels.

There is wide consensus in the literature that focusing on system goals alone will not lead to deep and sustained change. Ken Leithwood, for example, suggests that change may be initiated by central strategies, but that sustainability and growth are dependent upon “a devolution of authority from the centre.”¹⁵ In the same vein, Lynn Hannay and Lorna Earl note that implementation of centrally directed change will remain superficial unless educators are engaged in making the reforms their own, entailing the reconstruction of “mental models and personal practical knowledge.”¹⁶ Santiago Rincon-Gallardo and Michael Fullan further suggest that educators working in collaborative groups should be given “reasonable control” over their agendas such as selecting “their specific problems of practice, internal norms and processes.”¹⁷

When navigating the tension between system goals and locally developed goals, it is important to keep in mind that the latter are not so much about, “Let me do my own thing” as they are about what Steven Katz describes as, “Let me do what matters most to me, closest to where my reality is ...”¹⁸. Therefore, there is limited benefit to taking either a system-wide or a local view, or even attempting to give equal weight to all views; rather, it’s about being responsive to need and context and bringing quality evidence to bear on the intended impact.

A recent evaluation of CI in Ontario revealed that five key tensions are being experienced by educators at different points in the provincial CI journey.¹⁹ The table below provides a summary of the tensions and highlights a key question for each. You may find it especially useful in articulating how CI can be used as both a method of system-wide knowledge generation for Board Improvement Planning for Student Achievement (BIPSA) and as an approach to School Improvement Planning (SIPSA) which keeps the focus on educator problem-solving at the local level.

CI Tensions in Brief

What is known about the impact of CI?	Why are we choosing to conduct CI?	How are districts and schools experiencing CI?	How are educators experiencing and taking ownership of CI?	How do students experience CI?
Tension #1 Educator Learning ↔ Student Learning	Tension # 2 Educator Problem-solving ↔ System-Wide Knowledge	Tension # 3 Self-directed ↔ System-directed	Tension # 4 Process ↔ Product	Tension # 5 Student focus ↔ Student partners
CI contributes to both an educator’s professional learning and student learning	CI is both a method for problem solving and a system approach to generating professional knowledge.	Meaningful participation in CI leads to new learning that can be shared and applied.	CI fosters educator ownership of the process while maintaining focus on system direction	Students are both the focus for and partners in collaborative inquiry.


From System Coherence to Shared Mindset

Sometimes a change in term can alter the way in which we think about something. Change the term “system coherence” to “shared system mind-set,” and how we learn together comes to the fore.²⁰ Shared mindset suggests a way of thinking about coherence that returns to the notion of creating a need and a want to know. It implies a view of “systemness” that results in people purposefully “doing their own part as they contribute to and benefit from the agenda of the larger system.”²¹

A coherent shared mind-set will not happen by chance or by mandate, and “it will not happen by leaving teachers and school leaders to figure things out on their own.”²² Beyond creating the broad design and organizing the structures for collaborative inquiry, and beyond making logistical decisions concerning the who, the why and the how, system leaders need to think deeply about how learning will function in practice across the system and then take action to put structures and resources in place.

“Collaborative practice is the method by which a school system ‘hardwires’ the values and beliefs implicit in its system into a form manifest in day-to-day teaching practice.”

Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., Barber, M. (2010)²³



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.²⁴ Equally robust connections between system leaders’ problems of practice and principals’ and teachers’ problems of practice are needed. How can these be made possible and sustained?

- **In what ways** are current structures (e.g., senior team and Family of School meetings, district supported and locally organized networks, etc.) used to provide administrators with job-embedded opportunities to engage in, practise, learn about and form effective collaboration and inquiry practices?
- **School-to-school** learning and peer-learning strategies promote interactions that contribute to coherence. How are networked forms of learning differentiated, supported and sustained?
- How are resources for professional learning (time, money, support staff, etc.) differentiated and allocated? What is viewed as adequate and why?

New Measures for Impact on Student Learning

There is no one recipe for effective collaborative inquiry – common to all approaches, however, educators test their ideas “about what [they] think will work against the evidence of what actually works.”

When measures of student learning are viewed from different vantage points and from a range of district perspectives, what students learn or don't learn becomes a mirror reflecting back to educators at all levels of the system the impact of their **actions and strategies**.

Engagement in collaborative inquiry opens the door to practical discourse about what forms quality and relevant evidence. Reflective questions arise, such as how does each level of a district know its impact? What evidence, for example, would highlight the impact of actions taken by a system leader on the achievement of the board improvement plan?

Typical metrics (e.g., reliance on EQAO data and narrow focus on student learning) are sometimes inappropriate or insufficient, depending on the CI question under consideration. How might data that emerges from a senior team collaborative inquiry, focused on some aspect of the BIPSA, for example, offer more compelling evidence of impact?

[Click here](#) for tips, tools and strategies – including an overview of criteria for assessing qualitative data and an example of reshaping school visits as a monitoring strategy. Also available for download, an example of using the “Five Whys” to support a board’s numeracy goal and developing a storyline for a theory of action to support reflection on evidence and action.

Endnotes

Note that for reading ease, this publication uses a modified version of American Psychological Association (APA) style for references. The titles in red are available online a hyperlinks.

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19. Bolden, B., Christou, T., DeLuca, C., Klinger, D., Kutsyuruba, B., Pyper, J., Shulha, L., & Wade-Woolley, L. (2014). **Professional learning cultures: An evaluation of collaborative inquiry in Ontario elementary schools**. RFS. No. 1339. Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Queen’s University Faculty of Education.
20. Fullan, M. (2014). *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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23. Mourshed, M., Chijoke, C., Barber, M. (2010). **How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better**. McKinsey & Company.
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