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*Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.*

A Journey into Inquiry – A Principal's Real Story Laurie Reid

This story focuses on building staff capacity to bring about improved student achievement in a French Immersion, dual track urban school located in a low socio-economic area. This story is a vivid portrayal of the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#) in action beginning with taking stock of starting points for improvement, envisioning a shared mission, and then realizing the mission using collaborative inquiry as the central vehicle for achieving shared goals for teaching and learning.

My first placement as principal was to a French Immersion, dual track school in a low socio-economic area. I was excited about the prospect of working with the staff to build capacity and support student achievement. First off, I had to determine where to begin - a question that was larger than it seems. The learning conditions had to be established in a clear, deliberate way that would gradually but intentionally pull the work forward. The French/English partnerships were new to me and I am not French speaking.

Being placed in March gave me the advantage of taking some time to observe without changing too much, too quickly. The strengths and needs of the school emerged much more easily than I expected and the staff became increasingly receptive to my quiet determined leadership. It was through my experience at Clarksdale Public School that LSA's Theory of Action and the Four Paths of leadership¹ became an authentic journey.

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity

Our Starting Points

The leadership influence on student learning started with the Organizational Path but quickly permeated through the Rational, Emotions, and Family Paths. We decided as a staff that in order to move forward, we had to work collaboratively. The beginning stages involved working with the leadership team to review our primary goals and deconstruct existing data.

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

¹ Leithwood, K., Patten, S., Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how leadership influences student learning, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 5, 671-706

The unique needs of the school surfaced very quickly; behaviour issues were severe and constant, and engagement was low. I joked with the secretaries and vice principal that we needed to install one of those deli-style machines with numbered tickets. It was a revolving door of incident after incident. This aspect of school culture was a top priority to resolve. The fact that so many children were out of their classrooms and in my office meant that valuable learning time was being lost triggering a clear need for increased student engagement. This is not to suggest that teachers weren't working hard. In fact, they were working too hard and not getting cooperation from their students. We just needed to re-vision, and align our focus based on the urgent needs of our particular community of learners. Students needed to be engaged in their learning, and to become active participants in the work of the day.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

Identifying our Mission

As a staff, we talked about what we wanted the learning environment to look like and sound like each day. A common understanding and agreement were reached, and we decided that we wanted students to respect and engage in learning and follow school rules.

1.1 Building a shared vision

We brainstormed a future vision for our students and ourselves arriving at the following goals:

Goals for Our Practice

1. Positive Culture Building ~ Growing A Community of Learners
2. Small Group Instruction ~ Gradual Release of Responsibility
3. Collaborative Professional Learning ~ Together is Better, We Can't Do It Alone
4. Outdoor Experiential Learning ~ Take it Outside

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

Goals for Students:

We want to provide a rich learning environment that encourages students to be:

1. Critical Thinkers
2. Resilient Risk Takers
3. Collaborators
4. Problem Solvers
5. Prepared to make real world connections.

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

We were all invested in working collaboratively and collectively. In this third full year, together, we continue to maintain these goals, reflect on them, and implement them. It has become an internal expectation.

Implementing our Mission

The tools used to bring our intentions forward and into actionable change were multi layered. First, we anchored our journey to the Student Inquiry Process described in the Capacity Building Series "[Getting Started with Inquiry](#)", and to the Monograph "[Collaborative Teacher](#)

[Inquiry](#)". The inquiry focus provided an entry point for all teachers on staff – French, English, Planning / Coverage teachers and support staff. Our exploration question was "Why Inquiry"? Simply put, it involved 21st Century meta-cognitive thinking and learning, and was connected to authentic learning experiences – which was what our most disengaged students needed. As we considered our next steps, teachers were asked to slide the inquiry lens over the good work they were already doing and to plan together in making small changes in practice.

The four-phased student inquiry process became, and still is, the center of our conversations. We wanted to find ways to deepen our inquiry stance as educators and really analyze how we were engaging students in learning. We knew what we had always done needed to be re-worked to suit the needs of our learners and this meant taking some risks and changing some things to get kids involved in the daily work of their classroom.

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

Professional learning teams, co-plan /co-teach opportunities and staff meetings were used to talk about problems of practice and to work together to improve conditions. The Rational Path, with our focus on high academic expectations (Academic Emphasis in LSA terms) and reduction of disruptive behaviour (Disciplinary Climate in LSA terms) was being developed. Through our work on inquiry-based learning, and collaborative problem solving, the culture in the building started to change. The school wide focus on student achievement required that as a leader I use the personal resources in my own bank of skills to develop trusting relationships with the staff. In order to be willing to take risks, staff needed to feel supported. The Emotions Path led us deeply into a plan to try environmental inquiry through hands on outdoor education experiences that engaged students in learning and resulted in a marked improvement in behaviour.

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

Social Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways

Change is never easy. We like the comfort of the known and learning is hard work. However, as educators, we are ever engaged in the teaching and learning process for our students and for ourselves. My role as principal became to facilitate opportunities for staff to practice and reflect on inquiry as a teaching stance. Every staff and division meeting centered on building this process. Using a variety of Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) monographs and visual resources, and teaching tools, our conversations grew rich with an end goal of student achievement.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing

We explored resources such as the [Four Roles of the Literate Learner and the Five Productive Talk Moves](#) (page 8) in both English and French and considered the cognitive experiences students were having when engaged with purposeful text. Asking questions and recording student wonderings helped us to identify entry points for learning. Teachers talked about the "ah ha" moments that they were

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experiencing in the classroom as they saw their pupils become active participants in the learning. Engagement was growing and students wanted to ask and answer their own questions based on the big ideas in the curriculum.

The Central Role of Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry became the focal point of learning for all staff members. Offering opportunities for teachers to engage in the co-plan co-teach experience in grade teams and with system based instructional program leaders strengthened our plan to engage kids in experiential and outdoor learning experiences. Grade partners in both the English and French Immersion tracks could enter the same conversation to develop an inquiry question based on urgent student learning needs and then work together to develop a plan of action.

There was an important balance of pressure and support in working collaboratively to try this new model out. A willingness to allow others into the classroom and participate in the learning grew a new passion and excitement for teaching in our building.

Reflective conversations rich in content were rooted in the activities of the day. The most exciting thing was that the contagion of inquiry to engage students spread. Teachers wanted to be part of the learning. Kids wanted to be part of the learning. There were a lot fewer kids waiting to see the principal for disciplinary reasons. More often, they were coming to me to ask if I would join an outdoor experience or knowledge-building circle that they were proud to be involved in and wanted to share.

A balance of collaborative inquiry, staff meetings and divisional conversations were all happening simultaneously. Each layer represented a piece of the puzzle that was becoming more clearly “our real story” of learning.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement

One particular staff meeting stands out in my recollection of our growth journey. As usual, I had asked the staff to read a monograph ahead of the staff meeting. The start of each meeting signaled a review of our goals and of the student inquiry process, followed by sharing of our assigned reading in small groups. Nuggets of the small group conversation then would be briefly shared with the larger group. It was at this moment that I realized our learning was creating change. A primary French teacher offered to share her insights. She explained that at her table they had been talking about the contents of the monograph that I had assigned as staff meeting homework. The conclusion was that the strategies they were reading about were now part of the collective understanding.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

She stated, *when we first started, I didn't know what half of the stuff was or meant, but today I realized that I not only understand it, I am doing it in my classroom and that feels really good. I feel like I have learned a lot but also that I am doing stuff differently. And the stuff I am doing differently is impacting kids in a good way. They are loving inquiry-based thinking and learning. They can't get enough of it. I've had kids be excited about school before, but now they just squeal with delight. It's different. It's good.*

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Connections to the Family Path

Families have become engaged in the learning. As teachers share pic collages laden with captions and labeled with curriculum expectations, more conversations have connected learning across the classroom and kitchen table. Students are linking their daily experiences with what they are learning. Recently a photo of some windmills was sent to one of the grade two teachers. The parent of a child in the class was urgently instructed by her daughter to “pull over” while they were driving along the 402 on the way to her grandparents’ home in Sarnia to take pictures of the wind turbines on the farmland because the class was learning about air. The message continued “Sara is continuing to talk about school with so much excitement every day!” There is a lot of power in family connections, the direct links being created and in the authentic connections being made between home and school.

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

Conclusion

Our story has momentum. The implementation of inquiry-based teaching and learning has re-engaged our teachers and students in the process of collaboration. The school has outperformed both the province and the district, (primary and junior levels) on EQAO scores. Though this accomplishment is rewarding, the most important part of our story is that we believed we could change our practice to benefit student achievement, and we did. Students are excited about learning and teachers are energized by what is happening in the classrooms. Our EQAO scores have increased significantly in all areas over the past three years. Our TTFM ([Tell Them From Me](#)) data indicates that the students feel engaged in learning and want to be at school. We have significantly reduced behaviour issues as evidenced by a huge reduction in office visits and suspensions. As a member of the LSA project for the last five years, I have been learning about the importance of the Four Paths alongside others in the network. It was the real experience at Clarksdale that made the work authentic. The accomplishments achieved have been the highlight of my career, so far.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress