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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.*

Using Collaborative Inquiry Processes to Build Capacity on the Family Path in One Elementary School, Robert Iannuzzi

This story illustrates enactment of many of the leadership practices in the [Ontario Leadership Framework](#) (OLF) supported by the Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) of the OLF. While the focus is on the collaborative processes and structures used to bring the staff together for their shared instructional improvement work, the story also illustrates, for example, productive ways of engaging parents, keeping all staff focused on a shared set of very specific goals, as well as using data effectively to pinpoint next steps in the school improvement process.

Background

I wrote this account of Leading Student Achievement LSA-related work in my role as vice-principal of a high needs, urban elementary school of 385 students and 30 staff. Just prior to the work described here, the school had performed below the board average on provincial tests. These results prompted us to undertake this work in response to our achievement data with the goal of improving the literacy and numeracy achievement of our students.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement

As a staff, our initial focus was on “knowing the learner.” Each teacher accessed student voice through effective questioning, providing an opportunity for active student participation and using student responses to co-construct success criteria for each of the learning skills.

In addition, all students developed a learner profile, engaging in self-assessment based on the learning skills. Students also focused on values, learning barriers and learning preferences. These learner profiles were used during an Open House to engage parents in discussion regarding how best to support their children. Throughout the process, students took the learner profiles home as a means of engaging parents as partners in their child’s development as a learner.

1.1 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

Recognizing the need to develop what the LSA *Theory of Action*¹ has called the Family Path, special education staff worked diligently to prepare an Assistive Technology Evening for all parents and students. A recommendation from our District Review was to use assistive technology across the curriculum to support the learning of all of our students. Our Assistive Technology Evening familiarized parents with software that they could use at home with their children in order to scaffold and maintain high expectations for their children's learning.

The impact of this evening was evident as feedback shared by one parent who participated indicates:

"We had a technology night for parents to attend. This was an exciting opportunity for me to see the technology my son uses and also see what other computer programs are out there to help him learn and to succeed in school. This was very eye opening for me because it gave me the opportunity to see the programs in action and also showed me that there are lots of children who benefit from these programs. During the evening it was nice to see how eager the teachers are to teach us, the parents, this new way of learning. I am very pleased to see that kids with a learning disability are given the right tools to learn and not just shuffled through. It has been proven to me by my son that a kid with the right learning tools can succeed well beyond what anyone ever thought."

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributed leadership

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

In order to develop consistency and alignment across our school, we have focused on developing a collaborative learning culture, providing job-embedded professional development opportunities in order to build the collective capacity of our staff. As a staff, we have engaged in collaborative inquiries in both literacy and numeracy.

Our [Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways](#) in literacy have been rooted in the greatest area of students' need, as reflected through the triangulation of our data. We have used such achievement data as PM benchmarks and Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA) to develop both our grade team Specific-Measurable-Attainable-Relevant-Timely (SMART) goals and to inform the development of a pre-assessment question. In addition, staff has used observational data and ongoing conversations to determine targeted areas of growth for our students. Our mantra has been "Student work is the work."

Divisional teams in our school have used the Collaborative Analysis of Student Work as a protocol to ensure consistency and alignment across the school. Teachers would

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

describe student work in a non-evaluative way, while the presenting teacher, who had brought forward a student work sample, did not respond. The non-presenting teachers then raised questions about the work and speculated about patterns evident in the work. The presenting teacher then shared what they saw in the child's work and added any details about the work that had not been discussed. The final component in this protocol was implications for teaching and learning. Teachers reflected upon and discussed what they had learned about the way these students think and learn and how this information will inform their teaching practice.

This protocol has sharpened our focus by keeping conversations objective and identifying next steps to be taken, based on needs reflected in student work. Staff also engaged in teacher moderation in which teachers collaboratively assessed student work to develop a shared understanding of what student work looks like as it approaches, meets and exceeds provincial expectations. As grade or divisional teams, we committed to a strategy in order to move the learning of our students forward. As part of the process, we focused on providing frequent, on-going descriptive feedback that causes thinking, while collaboratively establishing next steps for the learning of our students. Targeting this aspect of the what the LSA *Theory of Action* refers to as a Rational Path had a positive impact on student learning.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

We focused on developing more check-ins to continuously monitor student progress. As a result of the collaboration, an informal network of support among colleagues developed.

As a staff, we also were committed to using the Bump It Up Strategy. This is a strategy in which student work is analyzed and discussed with students to improve the quality of the product.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement

Specific areas of growth to improve their work and reach the next level of achievement are

4.2 Providing instructional

discussed. Using Skopus data, we identified and targeted a cohort of level two students in each of our classrooms and used research-based strategies, such as providing descriptive feedback with specific next steps, to improve their work.

Throughout our inquiries, staff focused on developing a community of discourse in the classroom. In particular, they used Lucy West's top three "talk moves" – re-voicing, turn and talk and wait time – as strategies to facilitate accountable talk in the classroom. As the leadership team, my principal and I viewed inquiries through two lenses – student assessment and staff professional development. Our goal was to build collective teacher efficacy around numeracy instruction.

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

As instructional leaders, we recognized the need to build our own capacity in this area. We both participated in our district's Principal Learning Team and this encouraged us to become co-learners with our teachers, working with them in their efforts to improve student learning.

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

Working collaboratively with staff helped develop a culture of trust; taking risks by trying new strategies was accepted and valued. Our school became involved in the Collaborative Inquiry Learning in Math (CILM). This involvement, coupled with the ongoing professional development provided by our math coach, led to a more comprehensive understanding of the three-part math lesson.

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

2.3 Modeling the school's values and practices

We also noticed that our staff had become more confident teaching math and willingly "de-privatized" their practice by inviting colleagues into their classroom to observe students engaging in work.

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

The opportunity to come together as colleagues to reflect on student work and student learning led to deeper conversations about how to help students improve their achievement. Staff took responsibility for their students' learning, setting high academic goals and providing extra help to students experiencing difficulty.

My principal and I clearly articulated our school goals as we worked through the leadership practices of the OLF in the domain of Setting Directions for the academic year. Our extended leadership team, comprised of teachers and administration, developed a professional learning framework that guided our teaching and learning pathway throughout the past two years. During this process, we clarified our goal of engaging in collaborative inquiry in both literacy and numeracy. To enact the leadership practices in the domain of Building Relationships and Developing People in the OLF, we identified meaningful professional development, modeled desired practices and appropriate values during staff meetings and professional development days.

3.1 Building collaborative structures and distributing leadership

2.3 Modeling the school's values and practices

Our professional development was structured in response to the voices of our staff through "exit cards" they completed, either individually or collaboratively, prior to the end of professional learning sessions. The feedback they

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

provided on these exit cards identified areas of professional growth that they would like to pursue and equipped us with the knowledge to provide differentiated professional development opportunities to meet their needs and, ultimately, the needs of our students. Honouring these professional development requests helped to build relational trust because staff recognized that their personal and professional needs had been considered.

Staff also completed a survey, assessing the school's leadership team's success in meeting their professional development needs, level of approachability and display of appreciation. A quote from one of our teachers captures our impact on developing the efficacy and trust of our staff:

I have never felt this appreciated and confident in a really long time. I thank you for all the support and positive criticisms and feedback. I really enjoy coming to work and school.

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

Opportunities at the district level to share our District Review experience and how we responded to the recommendations served to build the collective efficacy and confidence of our entire staff. Hearing about how our school story had been shared with colleagues across the district increased staff confidence. For example, our Learning Resource Teacher had this to say:

Reflecting back on the District Review several months after the fact was actually quite helpful for me in terms of identifying the steps of our district review process that had the most impact. Summarizing our experience and generalizing the ideas so they would be applicable in any school further clarified what it was that made our District Review successful. Having left the school, it was gratifying to hear how the next steps from the District Review have been implemented and see that the things our staff valued last year have been successfully carried on.

Our principal had this to say:

I believe that in any type of reflection process, including the opportunity to share a District Review, it will help to improve capacity for both parties. Developing and sharing our learning journey has helped us to reflect on the purpose of our actions, while providing an authentic context where our colleagues can see themselves within our story. These influences can help to reduce stress of the unknown, while providing a better understanding of the positive impact from a District Review. It is safe to say that if we become more transparent in our school teaching and learning, we have the opportunity to have a greater impact to align our systems thinking around school improvement.

As a staff, we have high expectations of our students and of ourselves. We are confident that we can improve the academic achievement of all students, while educating the whole child.