

## Developing Knowledgeable Others

By: Beate Planche

*“Am I good enough, can I contribute enough, will my ideas be accepted?”*

This candid reflection by a teacher leader remains with me years after the conversation (Planche, 2004). The comments offered were somewhat surprising to me as I knew the great reputation of the teacher who was questioning her own credibility as an educator. Having recently been given the role of “Literacy Coach”, and anxious about her new role, the teacher’s questions underscored the importance of confidence and trust in working with peers. As our schools shift to a more deprivatized form of teaching, where the notion of learning together and from each other has gained considerable ground, we must be cognizant of the kind of support teacher leaders need as those who have been deemed as ‘knowledgeable others’ in our schools. Teacher leaders often carry a significant teaching load along with mentoring/coaching responsibilities to assist their peers. Increasingly, systemic leadership is recognizing that teacher leaders are now central to school change and are equally important as those with more formal leadership positions.

Drago-Severson (2009) suggests that the time has come for educators to consider how we shape schools as ‘mentoring communities’ or ‘learning centers’. Learning centers as Drago-Severson defines them “are schools and school systems that nurture and support the growth and learning of children, youth and adults” (p. 6). A ‘mentoring community’ sets the stage for collaborative learning and where educators support and challenge each other to grow (p. 7). As teacher leadership steps to the foreground, the role of the principal is certainly impacted. Kohn and Nance (2009) suggest that to nurture a positive change in a school, school administrators need to foster a climate of working together. In a collaborative culture, the principal’s role is able to shift to from being the person who sets the goals to being the person who sets up the conditions that allow others to establish collective goals (p. 69). Pivotal to moving school goals beyond rhetoric to action and focussed work together as a school staff, principals, vice principals and teacher leaders need to work together in effective and collaborative ways.

The power of the collective is key, suggests Michael Fullan (in Crow, 2009) and that the ingredients for sustainable professional learning are multi-faceted including “developing effective leaders, identifying high yield strategies, focussing on every child, emphasizing

collaborative learning and leveraging the entire system towards learning for all” (p. 13). The leadership of public school systems know much more today about what to do, and why mobilizing learning for adults as well as students is critical. As an adjunct to “what to do”, systemic leadership also needs to become clear on the supports that nurture key individuals in every school who are perceived to be or will become the leaders, the lead learners, catalysts and supporters of the growth of others – in other words those who become the ‘knowledgeable others’ in our reform processes.

Simultaneously, as we consider how to support teacher leaders in their growth, let us become very clear about what kind of learning we are asking teacher leaders to support. Heidi Hayes Jacobs outlines that the rethinking of how we deliver curriculum using a 21<sup>st</sup> Century frame suggests that learning is about knowledge building and responsive teaching – from knowing “right answers” to knowing how to behave when answers are not readily apparent (2010, p. 223). Helping peers value the process of learning as well as learning content is at the heart of a new paradigm – where it is the construction of meaning as a learning collective at the core of instruction rather than the transmission of meaning by teacher to student. Teachers must help to illuminate important learning dispositions for students and to model life-long learning as we shift from external evaluation being the driver to self-assessment and improvement being the catalyst for change. Effective teacher leaders understand the impact of learning as a social process and are able to draw their peers into a learning circle of collaborative support and challenge. Ultimately, challenge or risk is important to learning as these elements move us out of well-established comfort zones. We must be clear on this important point as well. It is not about educator happiness that we consider support and challenge but rather the impact that improved pedagogies will have on student progress. However, teacher satisfaction and learning are often very important by-products of improved student success.

What qualities and skills do we need to nurture in teachers in a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning frame and how do these compare and contrast to what we seek in teacher leaders? There are certainly overlaps and distinctions. Subject/discipline knowledge is still a defining element of effectiveness in our teachers. However, facilitation skills, presentation skills, differentiation skills and skills to support struggling students are common to both teachers working with students and teacher leaders working with their peers. As well, learning how to learn is increasing relevant as one considers the changing contexts for both employment and education.

As we consider strategic feedback and differentiated learning opportunities for students, system leaders need to consider how to build in differentiation for teacher learning. In considering the differing strengths of his or her peers, a teacher leader needs to know when to lead, when to model, when to coach, when to provide feedback and when to offer peer assessment (not evaluation!). Truly effective teacher leaders are very skilled observers, skilled communicators and facilitators and specifically skilled in the area of emotional intelligence. Bowgren and Sever (2010) offer that teacher learning is demonstrated through changes in behaviour and cite Cambourne (2000 in Bowgren & Sever) as offering an effective description of this change:

Learning or behaviour change happens when the learner has models, feedback, peer support, and a lot of practice. Learners move from novice to more expert through social interactions with others who are more knowledgeable. As learners share expertise with peers, the learning continues. This mode of learning is the “gradual release of responsibility” (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) where participants feel a purposeful shift in their level of accountability for the learning (p. 45).

Ultimately, teacher leaders are often asked to model effective learning and lead at the same time. Through a process of reflection, exploration, planning, practice and feedback, teacher leaders can effectively grow into leadership practice and then learn leadership in more formal ways as they become more experienced. System leadership has a role in this growth process in terms of enabling the structures of reflection, the forums for practice and the safe arenas for practice and feedback.

Fullan (2009) states, leadership development needs to be job-embedded, organization embedded and system embedded ( p. 46). Fullan’s triad of the kind of capacity that needs to be built takes on new meaning when thinking about teacher leaders. ‘Knowledgeable others’ need to clearly see and feel alignment from the system, be able to align school goals with system goals as well as integrate the goals of learning they hold personally as they are key communicators and interpreters of system messaging and the learning that needs to be at the heart of collective efforts. Often sitting as members of school leadership teams, teacher leaders carry specific messages for and to their peers. The learning and leadership needs for these key individuals now needs to be positioned at the heart of reforming and transforming efforts.

Building capacity is a term used rather loosely in the literature. Two current definitions include: Sharratt and Fullan (2009) who define capacity building as strategies that develop individual and collective knowledge, competencies and dispositions essential for improvement. As well, Eleanor Drago-Severson (2009) writes about three types of capacity that need to be built: (1) school or organizational capacity and (2) instructional capacity and (3) developmental capacity. Drago Severson discusses the limitations of traditional routes to build capacities which have included training and/or workshops to raise awareness and profile learning (p. 20). Other approaches include, observation/evaluation/feedback and assessment approaches. Increasingly, involvement in school improvement processes has fuelled learning opportunities. As well, inquiry/collaborative action research has become more relevant processes while self-directed learning remains a constant vehicle for personal professional development. Specific mentoring/coaching training is now considered important for those taking on leadership roles. From broad definition to actual practice, the challenge for those who seek to implement change is to make learning accessible and tangible. In the York Region District School Board, for leaders of all stripes, collegial inquiry through networked learning is becoming a learning vehicle of choice as well as design. While an impactful strategy, one does have to recognize the time needed to develop trusting forums for inquiry and that intentional action must follow inquiry to change classroom practice.

So how can we effectively address adult learning in school improvement efforts at this critical juncture? Drago-Severson writes with passion that the time has come to reframe adult learning in schools and offers four pillars for us to consider as ways of learning which are distinct and mutually reinforcing (2009, pgs. 24-25). She suggests (1) teaming as a defined structure for learning and to serve a variety of purposes, (2) providing adults with defined leadership roles, (3) engaging in collegial inquiry and (4) lastly, to include strategic and intentional mentoring and coaching skill building and practice to the mix. As a practicing administrator of a teacher support department at the district level, I see these four interactive frames as very timely for the development and sustainability of teacher leaders as ‘knowledgeable others’, be they curriculum consultants or teacher coaches within a school setting.

Educator teaming as an intentional structure for learning reinforces the notion that student achievement is a shared responsibility as well as offering a mechanism for mutual support. As

outlined in “The Learning System” (Crow, November, 2009), learning team options are plentiful and range from faculty-wide teams to special topic teams, interdisciplinary teams, grade level teams, vertical teams where teachers across grade levels address specific student needs, subject area teams and between school teams where teachers from different schools work together on a common initiative. In the school board I work in, school teaming across schools is very possible through ‘learning networks’ which offer mutually beneficial inquiry into practice as well as new teacher induction processes and divisional or grade support mechanisms. Any team requires some structure and working processes to be highly effective and ideally participants should see themselves as ‘a collective work in progress’.

Indeed, Conzemius and O’Neill (2001) suggest that in order to team effectively, team members benefit from collaborative training in specific skill sets. Highly effective team members are often skilled in problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, communication skills, group processing skills and meeting skills (p.69). This has implications for district support and the kind of professional development school systems need to provide to teachers and teacher leaders. A larger question includes how do these skill sets become integrated into teacher training as well? For example, in today’s context of building shared leadership models, a protocol for professional learning conversations has become quite impactful. Teamwork which is founded on agreed upon norms or ground rules for engagement and participation as well as structures to help participants get through more difficult topics is clearly a deeper level of professional engagement than simple attendance at meetings or membership in a collective. Developing a team protocol helps to guide professional learning conversations. A protocol developed collaboratively by team members helps to keep conversation focussed, promotes thoughtfulness, encourages active participation and provides a supportive, respectful structure for team discussion and analysis (Glaude, 2005). Team work that is focussed on discussing student work is surely the centerpiece of improving teaching and learning. Glaude suggests that a team protocol regarding the analysis of student work might involve reflection to begin the process, clearly describing student work, raising questions and hunches about how the student is approaching his or her work and what he or she might or might not understand, dialogue and suggestion of new ideas, further reflection on the general conversation and goal setting for the next meeting (p. 31). In the York Region District School Board, putting student work at the center of a team discussion is the essence of what is called a ‘case management approach’. Previously part of the role of staff developers,

today's teacher leaders working within schools are well served with professional development in how to facilitate learning and teaching conversations as a part of building strong and effective team structures.

Providing teachers with defined leadership roles speaks to organizational decisions that prioritize leadership growth and the recognition of time that is needed to practice new leadership roles. Today's Literacy Teachers, for example, often find themselves squeezed between the demands of their teaching assignment and the demands of coaching others towards better literacy practices. A Literacy Coach may well serve as a resource person, a collaborator, a facilitator, a model, a mediator, a consultant, a presenter, a coach, a mentor and encourager, and a voice for the role as it is defined in their work environment. Practicing teacher leaders need time for peer observation, program design, coaching and mentoring skill building and leading data review processes. Mentoring the mentors becomes an important consideration if we want to set people up for success. As Janas (1996) points out, it is important that we seek individuals who are people oriented, open minded, flexible and empathetic and I would add energetic and optimistic. Again, the literature speaks to specific training being of value such as in the area of communication, active listening, relationship skill building, conflict resolution and problem solving. Finally, the ability to be reflective and non-judgemental remains critical for teacher leaders as learning will be compromised without reflection and sensitive feedback (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002).

Thus, we find the assignment of the leadership role is the important beginning of a process which should continue beyond assignment to development and support. Rhodes and Beneicke explore the definition of coaching and mentoring as a part of development. For example, they share that coaching is seen as unlocking potential and helping others to learn while mentoring is a role which includes coaching but also embraces counselling and support. Mentoring implies an extending relationship and both coaching and mentoring are highly complex activities (p. 301). At the heart of the work we ask our teacher leaders to do, learning efforts flourish in an environment of trust, safety, support and mutual respect for those who are helping others and those being helped. District leadership and school administrators play a very important role in setting the stage for teacher leaders to be successful.

Collegial inquiry can take many forms but at its essence, engaging educators in shared dialogue and reflection on practice, seems to be a current understanding that suits our present

educational context. Drago-Severson (2009) defines it as a kind of collaborative reflective practice through dialogue which she distinguishes from discussion ( p. 154). Dialogue includes the art of thinking together and looking at issues together as one does in collegial inquiry and stands in contrast to discussion when personal views are often pressed forward. Collegial inquiry helps participants become aware of underlying assumptions and issues can be reviewed, rethought and revised in a safe arena. The building of a culture of reflective practice needs to become part of the fabric of school life if we are to transform school pedagogy. As with effective teams and effective leadership models, trust is essential. Drago-Severson writes, “when we engage in reflective practice, we are intentionally working to understand thinking, behaviours and events from a variety of perspectives” (p.157).

Those who lead collegial inquiry efforts also need to recognize the role that differentiation plays in serving colleagues. We have colleagues who learn best with others, essential socializing learners and others who require time to contemplate and consider learning on their own. Our colleagues have learning profiles similar to our students. What is the “right work” for the “right learner”? What are the skill sets that teacher leaders need to be responsive to in their defined leadership roles? These are important questions for us to consider as we support those who support others. From learning walks, to study groups, to team teaching, to conferencing, to learning networks around a question of inquiry, there are many ways to build a reflective teaching and learning culture. What is common to these different learning opportunities are some conditions for having inquiry drive professional discourse. For example, the following conditions help set the stage for deeper forms of teacher learning:

- Providing a structure for dialogue and reflection – for example, job-embedded learning time
- Ensuring a compelling and clear purpose for an inquiry
- Establishing clear norms or ground rules for how the inquiry will be undertaken and how those involved will interact
- Enlisting the assistance of peers as ‘knowledgeable others’ to model the habits of inquiry and how to effectively analyze and reflect on practice (for example, co-planning, co-teaching and co-debriefing develops strong shared understandings about pedagogy)
- Using opportunities to problem solve and share reflections as a means of keeping engagement high

- Using critical or guiding questions to move discussion and/or work forward
- Using a framework of inquiry as a way of staying on track

Finding impactful beginning points for collegial or collaborative inquiry is important. Perusing school data from multiple sources is often an effective starting point for building a culture of reflection but needs to be preceded by some specific skill building in how to use data, how to review it and how to be a critical consumer of data. Teacher leaders need to be included in the opportunities to understand how to use school, system and classroom assessment data as well as involved in professional exercises where they can practice the skills of inquiry themselves. The exciting aspect of building cultures of inquiry is that the outcomes serve many important purposes. Collegial inquiry can help to build interpersonal relationships, help adult learners to understand and manage change processes, build leadership insights and improve teaching and learning.

The last part of the framework that Drago-Severson offers is mentoring. While the definitions of mentoring and coaching seem to overlap, the role of a mentor is often depicted as a guide, a teacher, a sponsor and one who becomes a very important professional ‘friend’ (p. 214). Mentoring relationships that are built on clear expectations, mutual respect, emotional safety and trust stand on firm ground. Where mentoring commitments are made and met, the learning that results has been known to serve adult learners very effectively. Within a school setting, a more experienced teacher mentoring a novice teacher can make a very tangible impact on the success of the less experienced colleague while also offering the mentoring teacher new opportunities for growth and reflection. As Lipton and Wellman point out, mentoring relationships offer opportunities for reciprocal growth and learning (2003 p. xi). Few dispute the positive role that mentoring can play for beginning teachers. However, we have yet to explore the potential of mentoring in a more formal way for those who are charged to be teacher leaders. Teacher leaders who experience mentoring and who then practice the skills of mentoring others will be better positioned to take on more formal leadership roles in the future. We must also be cognizant that those charged with roles of leadership are obviously seen as skilled but there are significant journeys to be travelled as individuals move from competent to proficient to a more expert role. The bottom line is that there is a lot of learning left for all of us!



Mentoring the mentors would still charge us to be concerned with the same goals – to offer support, to help create challenge in a learning centred relationship and to facilitate a professional vision of improvement and growth (Lipton & Wellman, 2003). Teacher leaders, in particular, would be well served with practice in designing questions to activate thinking and problem solving and processes to analyze and evaluate teaching and learning processes. In practical terms, school administrators are often be in a position to mentor teacher leaders but must understand how to do so in non-evaluative terms. One of the structures that Lipton and Wellman suggest is the “collaborative role-alike support groups” (p. 92). I believe that school district leadership needs to consider how teacher leaders can be supported through interaction with those who perform similar functions and how a new teacher leader can benefit from working with a more experienced one. It is within this kind of forum that several key elements are highlighted: the specifics of working with adult learners, the attention one must bring to verbal and non-verbal cues, how patterns of interaction and communication impact learning and how different kinds of questioning can facilitate learning.

A continuum of learning –focussed mentoring interactions that Lipton and Wellman offer include consulting, collaborating and coaching (2003, p. 21). All of these interactions intersect positively with concepts about teaming, leadership practice and collegial inquiry. Helping teacher leaders understanding the skilful application of consulting, collaborating and coaching when working with peers would be practical learning for all concerned. From giving advice to counselling, to inviting peers to participate and engage to guiding a colleague to new learning through coaching, colleagues skilled in these areas can help to move schools from places where teachers deliver program to constructing platforms for learning for students and adults. Cognitive coaching, based on the work of Costa and Garmston (2002), is meant to support a colleague’s thinking, problem solving and goal clarification. It requires skill and practice to integrate. However, skilful coaches who can help colleagues address the underlying thinking that drives the observable behaviours of teaching and learning in a non-judgemental frame will be very well prepared leaders in the future. Happily, students will ultimately be the winners of a more informed teaching body.

In summary, how do we ensure that our schools have administrators and teacher leaders who can move learning forward in a way that encourages individual and collective accountability? I would suggest this requires intentionality in our systemic planning and actions.

There are school districts where teacher leaders as coaches do receive extensive professional learning opportunities and meet in the summer to prepare for the school year (Von Frank, 2010). In addition, these ‘knowledgeable others’ meet regularly together giving each other consulting and coaching advice as needed. In our province, this kind of interaction and preparation would require us to forge enhanced relationships with teaching federations – important work that needs to be recognized. Support for teachers and teacher leaders through technology is just beginning to surface and as Rock et al (2009) discuss we now have the capability of ‘on-the spot coaching’ through virtual bug-in-ear technology which gives immediate feedback to a practitioner. It is a brave new world, to be sure, however, at the heart of our efforts is the cycle of growth – from assessing where we are as teachers and learners, to outlining a growth plan and actions which move us forward.

Perhaps the question we must begin with, as we consider how to build a culture which supports adult and student learners, is how do we become clear on how students and teachers best learn and how can we integrate more adult learners into leadership of learning itself. Michael Fullan is quoted as contending that it is about an ever widening circle of leadership – to make learning sustainable, we have to widen our leadership circle (in Crow, Winter 2009).

Professional learning and leadership must be embedded in our schools – demonstrated not only by the principal and/or vice principal but also by teacher leaders who are supported intentionally in their growth. As so much of our work today is fuelled by collaborative effort, I contend that collaborative skill building needs to be infused into preparatory and staff development processes to build learning cultures where teaming, leadership inquiry and mentoring and/or coaching will flourish (Planche, 2008). We are talking about learning as a foundation for change. As Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2010) suggest in “The Fourth Way”, educators are the ultimate arbiters of change. They suggest that through high-quality teachers, powerful professionalism and lively learning communities, building from the bottom and steering from the top, coherence is developed through bringing diverse people to work skilfully and effectively for a common cause. Those who steer need to be concerned about how to build the skills so others can navigate their vessels through the challenging waters of change and improvement.

The research is clear on the impact of teacher coaching – there is a positive impact on student achievement and on the growth of teacher efficacy (Knight, 2009). Hattie’s synthesis of eight hundred meta-analyses relating to student achievement is very compelling and as a part of

his analysis he contends that what works best for students is similar to what works best for teachers – attention to challenging learning intentions, being clear on what success means and attention to learning strategies for developing conceptual understanding about what teachers and students know and understand (2009). He also found in comparing expert teachers with experienced teachers that students who are taught by more expert teachers exhibit an understanding of concepts that is more integrated, more coherent and at a higher level of abstraction (2003). Is this not what we want in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century education? Our challenge is to ensure that 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools are filled with a cadre of teachers, teacher leaders and administrators who want the same goals of success for themselves as they do for their students and that those charged to lead learning feel they are supported in their work to achieve higher standards of teaching and learning. We want teacher leaders in our schools who believe that they can make a difference, that their views are sought, welcomed and respected. We also need system leaders to recognize that well trained teacher leaders have significant contributions to make to the transformation of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools.

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