

A Road of Reform Well Travelled

By: Beate Planche

During the last decade, in a similar fashion to other school systems in Ontario, York Region District School Board educators have been involved in many professional conversations about how to best improve and reform elementary and secondary schools. With the benefit of dedicated investments and professional learning supports by the Ontario Ministry of Education, significant gains in provincial achievement in reading, writing and mathematics have been made. As importantly, as a part of a collective quest to develop relevant 21st century learning environments, our professional conversations are increasingly focussed on how to deeply engage students as partners in learning. Knowing our learners well is our beginning point for using data to define and respond with appropriate instruction. An appropriate beginning point is essential if we are to truly personalize educational practice and achieve our goals for an equitable educational experience for each student.

In our district, collaborative structures for learning have evolved from ‘PLC’s (Professional Learning Communities) to defined Learning Networks across families of schools. Every elementary and secondary school (close to 200 in our context with 115,000 students overall) is involved in at least one learning network with other schools. Michael Fullan has contended that the power of the collective is key 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” (2009, p. 13).

While being a part of a high functioning and successful school board is something to be proud of, as we delve deeply into our system data, we recognize that we have several subsets of students where equity of achievement has not yet been reached. For example, we know that we have improvements to make in terms of serving students with exceptionalities such as Learning Disabilities or students dealing with issues of social exclusion or mental health. It is not the academic achievement scores that drive us but wanting to serve those students who are not yet as successful as we know they can be. We have to ask - what are the essential equity issues inherent in these sub scores? What do schools need to do to move forward for specific students? We

must become more skilled in terms of differentiation and responding to many different learners. Part of the answer lies in understanding the strengths, needs and interests of our learners and using an equity lens to uncover more information about them. Part of the answer must also lie in how we approach students and how accurate we are in our professional instruction and support. Shifts in professional practice are leading us to an understanding that in order to develop a more precise practice and more personalization for students in terms of instructional delivery, collaborative learning processes for staff must deepen as well. Precise practice includes honing skills of observation, analysis and critical reflection – all part of effective assessment practice in order to shift instruction as needed.

Staff learning processes in Ontario have become quite sophisticated and we now routinely include teacher moderation – putting student work on the table, case management of individual student achievement, learning networks focussed on a question of inquiry across several schools, collaborative exploration of teaching/learning through what we call a critical pathway or through the exploration of a teaching/learning cycle. Rather than professional development being organized by a few in system leadership positions, increasingly in our context, teacher leaders who have developed their confidence and knowledge base are helping and influencing others through a variety of learning opportunities and this experience is generating a renewed interest in professional learning. This interest also sets the stage for deeper forms of collaboration such as a co-learning experience and coaching by and for peers. Indeed, intentional co-learning experiences can move collaboration from rather abstract conversations about learning to new forms of tangible co-labouring and reflection about what learning actually took place for both the teacher as learner and the student as recipient of the learning process. As Richard Elmore and colleagues offer in their research on the ‘instructional core’, task predicts performance and it is his contention that we must critically analyze the relationships between the triad of the student, the teacher and the instructional tasks that are the core to learning (City, E. et al 2010). A co-learning experience offers us the opportunity to go beyond observation to changing practice through action and reflection.

Instructional coaching holds much promise as Joyce and Showers (2002) have found in numerous studies. Coached teachers and principals generally practised new strategies more frequently and developed greater skill in the actual implementation process than did uncoached

educators (p. 86). As a system leader in this large school board, I wrestle with the question of how do we engage all of our teachers over time to participate in deeper forms of professional development to develop shared understandings about effective assessment and instructional practice. Logistical and financial limitations understandably impact the number of teachers who actually experience coaching as a form of professional activity. The solutions are more likely found in our classrooms than educators sitting around a table where professional learning is more theorized than practised.

Continuing the journey and going deeper

While setting high goals for further progress and progress is never linear, I believe we are narrowing in on a process for a deeper form of collaboration where coaching can be authentically embedded into a learning process. Experiences with many years of reform initiatives have shown that if the focus is on the professional conversation, whether this is part of a workshop, a professional learning community or a learning network, this will simply not be enough. Conversations among teacher and administrative leadership about improving teaching practice spark interest, build understanding and perhaps foster great reflection but most of the time conversations have limited impact on what actually transpires in classrooms. It is also clear that school reform across provinces, countries and jurisdictions that conversations about improvements without tangible teacher supports change very little.

So, what exactly do we mean by tangible support? The kind of support that's needed to move conversation to action is in sight, but it does take a direct investment of funding right at the classroom level. It involves release time for teachers not only to collaborate but to actually 'co-labour'. While it is helpful to discuss challenges and to learn about new high-yield strategies in a collaborative forum, *actually doing work together* creates the safe yet powerful collaborative culture that learners need to grow and learn (Planche, 2004).

The most powerful pedagogy that I have seen in all my thirty plus years in education is what we are labelling as 'The Four C's': Co-planning, Co-teaching, Co-debriefing and Co-reflection which lead to informed decision-making as to next steps in a learning journey as teachers and students. Practising together changes the practice as well as the conversation. Catherine Bruce from Trent University recently reported that classroom-embedded learning, where the primary

site of the inquiry and professional learning is within the classroom context, is highly effective in terms of staff learning and improving student achievement (2010) and we concur from what we are seeing in our own setting. Where are we? Where do we want to go in our planning? How will we get there? – These are initial questions in a co-planning phase. The questions that follow in co-planning are also concerned with the students themselves. Who are the students? Who needs more support? What kind of adjustments should we make? What are our assumptions about what students know and understand? Our co-teaching will give us an opportunity to check our assumptions and students will often surprise us.

In York Region District School Board, we inserted a critical question of inquiry at the heart of our 4C's work together. Our board has been involved in two projects that have advanced collaborative staff inquiry. Collaborative Inquiry of Learning -Mathematics (CIL-M) is a Ministry project which involved four schools in our school board and was focussed on uncovering and improving effective math pedagogy. As well, with the support of critical friends from the Ontario Ministry of Education's Curriculum and Assessment Branch, we have investigated how assessment for learning can be best integrated into an inquiry-based discipline such as Mathematics. It is the AFL-Math project (Assessment for Learning in Mathematics) that provided the bulk of the evidence for the reflections that follow, although similar results were reported in the CIL-M project.

To deepen learning through a 4C's model, Mathematics, as a subject area, offers rich ground for improved teacher practice. Mathematics instruction, if driven by active student involvement and opportunities for 'accountable talk' rather than textbook delivery, can provide great opportunities for critical thinking and problem solving which we know need to be driving forces in this century's curriculum delivery. Mathematics remains an area for both board and provincial improvement in achievement. It remains our theory of action that if teachers can be successful with inquiry in Mathematics, they will be able to adapt the pedagogy into questions of inquiry for many other disciplines. Mathematics inquiry uncovers for teachers what specific content knowledge needs to be built as well as what process knowledge students will need to develop to become learners who can apply and transfer evolving skills. An inquiry into Mathematics uncovers for teachers specific areas where further content knowledge for themselves would improve teaching and learning.

The approach to math instruction being promoted has three basic parts to a lesson plan : 1) a ‘minds on’ activity to activate prior knowledge around a ‘big idea’, 2) the actions of the lesson itself, and 3) a culminating ‘congress’ or student debriefing of their learning. The discussions in co-planning have also centered on the assessment components of how and when learning goals would be made explicit, how students would be involved in co-constructing the criteria for success in their work (also known as success criteria), how descriptive feedback to students would be involved and finally how teacher, peer and self-assessment processes might be authentically embedded in the work.

The 4 C’s Process

Overall, 40 schools have been involved in our formal exploration with 4C’s professional practice over the last two years and the intermediate grades (grades 7 to 10) have been the focal point for study. This has allowed us to have both elementary and secondary teachers and administrators involved. The process has involved several whole-day experiences for a group of teachers to ‘co-labour’ together. Typically, four schools would be involved with at least eight teachers as a part of the process, as well as one individual who acts as a facilitator for the group – a “knowledgeable other”, particularly in the study of mathematics. To date, the “knowledgeable other” has been a curriculum consultant or teacher-leader on our district Math team or an Education Officer attached to the projects involved. Administrators, principals and vice principals have been invited to be at the learning table as co-learners – not just as cheerleaders, and their involvement and modelling as co-learners makes a difference! In collaborating in a joint planning process, all participants own the lesson that is ultimately planned. This builds confidence and takes away any judgement. After planning, it is time for our first entry into the classroom of a brave teacher volunteer. I have observed that teachers are very willing to be brave if they feel they will not be judged and will be supported. Co-teaching involves several teachers in the classroom together, sharing the responsibility of how well the lesson actually goes. The host teacher is the lead, one or two co-teachers assist with their direction outlined in prior planning. Other teachers have defined roles assigned – an “insider view” to watch

individual students to gather evidence of their thinking during the learning experience or an “outsider view” – assigned to watch the dynamic of how the lesson plan creates an effective learning experience for the whole class. There is no judgement attached to the “teaching style” of the host teacher or peer teachers. If we are successful as a working group, we all celebrate, if we are not, we all own the issues. The co-debrief is just that – were we on track with what we hypothesized would happen? Were we successful in establishing clear learning goals, co-constructing success criteria with students or in anticipating where students might struggle? What surprises were encountered? We found, several times over, that students with Learning Disabilities surprised us. Using a ‘congress’ format to debrief mathematical concepts, some students were able to debrief their thinking in a way that was much more detailed than what their written products offered. Having extra pairs of adult eyes in the classroom to observe the processing that students were demonstrating around a big idea in Mathematics offers very valuable feedback for the host teacher and leads to great professional dialogue about next steps for instruction.

A typical Four C’s day would have participants plan in the morning and move into the first co-teaching phase before lunch. After lunch, a co-debriefing takes place and then participants plan a return to the classroom based on the analysis of the first round of teaching. Schools involved have generously adapted timetables to allow for the day of co-learning. A follow up co-teaching experience takes place in the afternoon and the day ends with regrouping and with much fuel for co-debriefing and co-reflection from the co-learning experience. Each school involved in the learning hub takes a turn at being a host school and are involved in cross-panel (elementary/secondary) visitations as well. The key difference in this kind of professional practice is that rather than sitting in a workshop or listening to a speaker, teachers are actually ‘practising the practice’ together. What was uncovered is that there were significant areas of Math content knowledge that needed to be clarified for staff as well for students. Staff benefitted from the opportunity to develop an enhanced understanding of effective learning processes regarding students’ mathematical reasoning. We cannot underestimate the role that a skilled ‘knowledgeable other’ plays in this learning structure. This individual fluctuates between being a coach, instructor and teaching peer. Reflections after the 4C’s experience help to shape the learning plan for the professionals involved as well.

Asking questions of the participants has given us pause for much thought about our own professional development planning as a Curriculum and Instructional Services Department and as a system supporting schools and area superintendents who are responsible for learning networks across schools in our district.

Staff involved in the 4C's model were asked the following: What are the benefits of a Co-Planning, Co-teaching, Co-debriefing and Co-reflection process? A few sample responses are below:

Teachers reported

“It is really the ‘co’ parts of the process that are most beneficial. Taking risks as an individual educator can be challenging; and is often the barrier to the success of any initiative or professional learning. This process creates a team atmosphere where taking risks, engaging in meaningful reflections and professional goal setting becomes common practice.”

“Most effective learning experience I have had in 20 years of teaching. It pushes teachers to the proximal zone of learning, slightly out of comfort level and you re-evaluate your teaching practices in a safe and supportive environment....teaching in pairs or triplets provides scaffolding and safety” .

Vice principals reported

“There is no doubt in my mind that when a ‘knowledgeable other’ is involved in this process, the learning is significant for all participants involved. I believe that it is great to have the co-planning happening and this is happening more often in more of our schools, however, doing the work is where the learning takes place. The co-teaching and co-reflection takes us beyond the superficial, and gets to the deeper learning. Have tried to move math practice, using many other models, I can now say that this has been the only model that I’ve seen that has a significant impact.”

“It puts everyone on the same page; staff are able to seek clarifications from colleagues and consultant support; excellent for cross school networking and builds common understanding among participating staff members. Since our introduction to this, we have adapted it in all our work in literacy and our network has also begun to use this model for cross-school work.”

Principals reported

“This process, once trust was developed, was incredibly powerful among the four schools involved. It allowed teachers to take it back to their own classroom and tailor it to their own context. In terms of co-planning, the use of a concrete model was helpful to shift thinking and practice to the inquiry approach. Teachers’ co-teaching encouraged risk taking as everyone was

viewed as an equal contributing member. The use of student work for debriefing was very powerful in informing next teaching steps.”

“The participation of administrators in the ‘co’ work was very valuable as well. We are learning how to use and practice appropriate planning based on our assessment together. The admin/teacher ‘co’ work has allowed us.....to consider the extension to other curriculum areas.”

Our project goals were focussed on the assessment practices that would complement an inquiry in Mathematics using the 4C ‘s pedagogy. Some participant comments follow as to what was learned about assessment for learning during this professional practice experience.

Teachers reported

“Assessment in this process happens at many stages, and in many forms, but it is always geared towards students constructing knowledge about math in meaningful and authentic contexts (rather than modelling concepts, teaching skills explicitly and then drilling). The teacher, the individual and peers are all involved in a process of questioning, justification and reasoning, that is in fact ‘assessment for learning’.”

“It is important to have a clear learning goal and success criteria (what it will look like when students have consolidated their mathematical understanding) when planning lessons even if the learning goal is not going to be immediately revealed. There is still a need to differentiate tasks based on the needs of the students. Students need to be able to self-reflect on their strategies, mathematical understandings and behaviour using the success criteria.”

Vice Principals reported

“What benefited us was the knowledge building and ‘levelling of the playing field’ in terms of everyone’s understanding of assessment for learning and the benefits of learning with colleagues collaboratively. We developed a deeper understanding of the curriculum expectations; building knowledge of how to co-create the learning goals and how soon to start developing the success criteria leading into explicit and descriptive feedback that is based on the success criteria. The whole process is aligned from the get go, and loops right back to student learning and differentiation.”

“What AFL looked like in mathematics inquiry was new for all of the teachers in my group. In math, our teachers’ normal practice was to model the steps to solve a problem, then test the knowledge in practice examples. During the AFL Math project, we gathered student data in order to plan instruction, to design pairings and create a profile of the classes (not new to teachers but rarely used). Each teacher did this, and then we used the data to design an appropriate rich math problem for the class we were co-teaching that day...formative assessment happened in the form of instant descriptive feedback to the students during the co-teaching (new to all!) – through the oral prompts provided to pairs of students and collected,

either on an observational tracking form or a ticket out the door task – to check for understanding.”

Principals reported

“Some interesting assessment pieces have become very clear. The AFL Math experience (using 4 C’s) actively engages students to assess their own work and that of their peers. When the students are presenting their work at ‘congress’, students will often stop themselves and make corrections to their own thinking.....one good question provides ample evidence of learning. One good question allows a teacher to see what a student already knows and what the student does not yet understand. The feedback is often another question to further push the student’s thinking.”

“The 4C’s pedagogy involved a true reflection of the Assessment for Learning process and we mucked about a lot with success criteria and when they should be developed. Oral feedback to students was frequent and ongoing during our ‘minds on activities’ and helped develop the teachers understanding of its effectiveness. The student was really empowered through this process by the use of peer feedback during ‘minds on’ and the culminating ‘congress’.”

Helping other colleagues value the process of learning for themselves as well as reaffirming the value of strong learning content knowledge is at the heart of this learning paradigm. It is the construction of meaning which is at the core of higher-order or ‘21st century’ instruction for ourselves as professionals and for our students. Effective teachers understand the impact of learning as a social process and effective teacher leaders 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 know teachers who are able to draw students into a learning circle of collaborative support and challenge are more successful as instructors. Students need to be the recipients of improved practice – more precise practice to meet their needs. The equity question inherent in the work for staff is: How does a system move towards having all of its teachers able to access and participate in such a circle of collaborative support and challenge? Clearly, there are no magical answers. We must use our resources strategically and systematically as well as make informed decisions as a system regarding how we support staff. As well, how do we reconcile, that just like students, some staff will require more support than others? Leadership needs to be in the hands of many in terms of

addressing these important questions – including teaching staff as each staff member is ultimately responsible for his or her own learning.

Nurturing teacher leaders is key

There are cautions inherent in this deeper form of collaboration. As our schools shift to a more deprivatized form of teaching, it is important to be cognizant of the kind of support our teacher leaders will need to sustain improvement processes. The work load is considerable and the rewards are variable for these important ‘knowledgeable others’. Teacher leaders often carry a significant teaching load along with mentoring/coaching responsibilities to assist their peers. Those in positions of system leadership need to become clear on how to nurture key individuals who are perceived to be, or will become the leaders, the lead learners, the catalysts and supporters of the growth of others. Ultimately, teacher leaders are often asked to model effective learning and lead at the same time. Through a process of supportive reflection, exploration, planning, practise and feedback, teacher leaders can effectively grow into leadership practices over time. Those in formal leadership roles have a distinct responsibility in this growth process in terms of enabling the structures for collaboration, co-labouring, reflection and the safe arenas for practise and feedback. ‘Coaching for coaches’ or ‘knowledgeable others’ is a distinct system need.

I suggest that we see in the 4C’s model – emerging evidence that safe arenas for ‘practising our practice’ together can be beneficial for all concerned. We see very engaged students as a part of inquiry into Mathematics and we know engaged students will be more successful students. We see more precision to meet the needs of individual students as the process has brought to the fore more ways for students to demonstrate their understanding and learning. I am really hopeful that the 4C’s model will be refined over the next few years and that it will help us to crystallize how teaching practice needs to evolve to meet the needs of all students, including those we have not adequately served to date. Our students deserve a generation of professionals who are willing to move from collaborative conversations to actually co-labouring together to serve and teach in the most effective ways. To ensure equity of outcomes for our students, we must move to more personalized forms of learning for our educators as well as our students. I believe we can and will make a difference in the achievement of our students if we work and learn together in deeper ways. Our collective goal of equity of achievement in schools is underpinned by the need for a

highly skilled teaching force who understand the true value of time to work together in the setting where learning must take place – the classroom. It's time to redefine 'teaching' as a profession with the practice of 'practising together' – and move from well intended but rather loosely structured collaborations to essential and more intensive 'co-labouring'!

References

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