

Capacity Building Series

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SPECIAL EDITION # 39

Why Collaborative Inquiry?

“Collaborative inquiry holds potential for deep and significant change in education. Bringing educators together in inquiry sustains attention to goals over time, fosters teachers’ learning and practice development, and results in gains for students.”

– Canadian Education Association, 2014

Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario What We Have Learned and Where We Are Now

“Our education system will be characterized by high expectations and success for all. It will be responsive, high quality, accessible and integrated from early learning and child care to adult education.”

– *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario, 2014*

The commitment to excellence and equity in Ontario education is about the success and well-being of every learner. How will the province go about realizing this ambitious commitment? Substantial evidence from research conducted in Ontario and internationally suggests that collaborative inquiry (CI) – a practice of engaging educators as researchers – holds great promise as a provincial approach. It has been shown to be an effective means to both professional learning and to enhanced student learning (Comber, 2013; Hannay, Wideman & Seller, 2010; Timperley, & Lee, 2008).

Through CI, 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, CI sees educators as key participants in understanding how to achieve excellence and equity in education.

Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario

This monograph offers a synthesis not just of international research but of “on-the-ground” Ontario research as well. It builds on the “the seven characteristics” shared widely across the province in an earlier monograph – “Collaborative Teacher Inquiry” (*Capacity Building Series, 2010*) – and it incorporates new learning from Ontario CIs that

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support every child
reach every student



The “seven characteristics” of collaborative inquiry at a glance ...

To what degree is your inquiry ...

1. **Relevant**
Does quality evidence of student learning guide the inquiry?
2. **Collaborative**
Is teacher inquiry a shared process?
3. **Reflective**
Are actions informed by reflection?
4. **Iterative**
Do progressive understandings grow from cycles of inquiry?
5. **Reasoned**
Is analysis used to drive deep into learning?
6. **Adaptive**
In what ways does your inquiry shape practice and practice shape your inquiry?
7. **Reciprocal**
How does your “local” inquiry about a practice connect with what others have discovered about it?

Collaborative Teacher Inquiry
Capacity Building Series, 2010

have involved thousands of Ontario educators since then. School-based professional learning communities (PLC’s) and board and network inquiries like the First Nation, Métis, Inuit Collaborative Inquiry (FNMI CI), Student Work Study Teacher (SWST), the Collaborative Inquiry for Learning – Mathematics (CIL-M), the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry (EPCI) and the Middle Years Collaborative Inquiry (MYCI) – all have evolved slightly different processes and structures to meet local needs but all have much in common. These commonalities have surfaced in interviews, focus groups and analyses conducted by researchers at the Ministry of Education, Trent University, Queen’s University and the University of Toronto; they are shared here to provoke further reflection and conversation about the CI approach.

A caveat: There are many forms of professional learning – e.g., book study, literature reviews, consulting with university researchers and other professionals, taking Additional Qualifications courses and engaging in collaborative inquiry – and all are essential for developing a high-quality teaching profession. Engaging in CI does not exclude these other approaches but embraces them. Not only is CI an approach to professional learning, but it is also a stance of openness to learning. It enables educators to work together to determine the purpose and focus of their professional learning so that it can contribute to system direction, action and understanding. One Ontario educator described collaborative inquiry as “a way of thinking” not separate from “your normal everyday way of doing what you do.” Similarly, researchers have learned from educators that “inquiry is not a ‘project’, an ‘initiative’ or an ‘innovation’ but a professional way of being” (Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014).

Collaborative Inquiry as a Journey

Creating a Working Definition

Educators often describe CI as a journey, an invitation to explore professional wonderings and questions. Choosing to embark on this journey means preparing to examine existing practices and assumptions. As a result, a first step along the journey is to construct a shared commitment to, and understanding of, collaborative inquiry.

School teams have found it worthwhile to invest time in constructing their own definition of collaborative inquiry. They do this by articulating a common understanding of the purpose and process for engaging in the work. This preparation maps the ground for the team’s focus and direction.



Where are you heading? Determine the purpose, passion and focus of your inquiry. How will you get there? Describe the process that your inquiry will follow and the activities that will be involved.

What can help you along the way? Identify the assets, supports and strengths you bring to the inquiry. Note the challenges that you might anticipate.

Collectively create your own working definition with your CI team.

Begin with all partners crafting their own short definition of CI. In pairs, review both and synthesize a new definition. Continue to merge definitions until your team has generated one synthesized definition.

You can find some sample definitions at LearnTeachLead.ca/capacity_building_cio_learned

Documenting Matters!

There is no prescribed protocol for collaborative inquiry, nor is there a single path that educators should follow. The work is inherently local and shaped by the school context. The inquiry focus emerges from educators' own practice and learning with students in classrooms, and the process develops through collaborative engagement with colleagues. As such, documenting the process and the learning – what was done along the journey – is a critical component of collaborative inquiry. Documenting the process captures the work and articulates findings, illustrating how and why the learning was generated so that colleagues can learn from what was done.

Data or evidence for collaborative inquiry primarily comes from pedagogical documentation of student learning and experience; however, the data can also include other information about students, school and community contexts and importantly educator practice and learning. The data can be qualitative or quantitative, or both. Using multiple sources of data strengthens the trustworthiness and reliability of the inquiry, as different forms of data can be compared or “triangulated.” For instance, in exploring student engagement, one data source might be student testimonials and another might be student survey data which looks at the relationship between student learning and motivation. A third source might be to participate in instructional rounds as a way to observe student experiences. These three sources of data, drawn from conversations, observations and products, are triangulated to provide a multi-dimensional perspective on the issue being explored.

Building Inquiry Skills

The inquiry process begins with a curiosity or a specific issue about learning or learners. It shapes the inquiry question. Educators then interpret together, analyze and reflect on the data to inform decision-making, future actions and change in or confirmation of their practice. This process is often not linear, but iterative as educators continuously adapt and improve upon it. There are a variety of entry points and processes that form the journey, and members of a school team may join at any time to contribute to the work.

Ideally, building capacity for inquiry skills occurs with support from all those who are actively involved in the work – classroom educators and administrators, internal and external researchers, community partners and others with expertise. Support from administrators and others in a facilitative role includes providing time, resources and expertise needed for a well-designed inquiry (Comber, 2013, p. 56). This support sends the message that inquiry is an important part of educators' work. Facilitation also involves helping to focus discussions, maintain momentum and fosters shared accountability for the application and dissemination of the inquiry's findings. It is important to stress that any member of a school team can formally or informally lead the work. What matters is that educators create a community of learning.

For reflection on an inquiry stance ...

- *How does an inquiry stance impact and manifest in your educational practice? In your collaborative work?*
- *How do you define a culture of inquiry? How do you think a culture of inquiry is created? What is your role in contributing to a culture of inquiry?*
- *Acknowledging time is a scarce commodity – Are you using your collaborative time wisely?*

For reflection on documentation and gathering evidence ...

- *How are you documenting your reflections on the inquiry to explicitly document student learning? Your own professional learning?*
- *How do you foster openness to alternate perspectives within your collaborative dialogue?*
- *How are you using the collaborative study to service the demands of everyday practice?*

An Organizing Framework for Collaborative Inquiry Processes

Although there is no one way *to do* collaborative inquiry, the following components have been identified as essential for promoting professional learning that contributes to student learning. This dynamic framework has emerged from an analysis of ongoing CI's in Ontario. It draws on learning from the reflections of Ontario educators on "the seven characteristics of CI" in conjunction with an extensive literature review of professional learning. The seven characteristics are highlighted on page 2 and bolded below. The framework can be used as a tool to reflect on CI processes.

Culture of Inquiry and Collaboration

CI requires a safe, inclusive environment built on trusting relationships. An open-to-learning stance is a condition of a collaborative learning environment. A culture of inclusivity must be part of the CI mindset when interpreting evidence and studying the student experience. CI promotes a democratic approach to shared leadership and joint responsibility (distributive leadership) for student learning.

Pedagogical Knowledge

Through CI, educators build pedagogical content knowledge for their own practice. This new knowledge can contribute to the body of professional knowledge. As a result, pedagogical learning from CI is characterized as **reasoned** and **reciprocal**.

Professional Discourse

CI involves educators working together to learn more about their practice. Professional discourse generates new knowledge and acts as a catalyst for refinements of practice. Professional dialogue is **reflective, adaptive, iterative** and, of course, **collaborative**.

Student Experience

CI professional learning is **relevant** to student learning in context. Student engagement and learning in the classroom is the anchor for professional learning and collaborative inquiry.

Culture of Inquiry and Collaboration

Collaborative Action

- Shift the role of participants from lead knower to lead learner. Everyone is a co-learner.
- Listen to each other in order to foster distributive leadership throughout all CI processes.
- Acknowledge how roles, hierarchy and personal biases affect CI processes.
- Apply an asset stance to all learners and partners.
- Facilitate access to resources, including building relationships with others with expertise.
- Foster a culture of inquiry, questioning and investigation of existing knowledge and assumptions.
- Support each other to engage in strategic risk-taking and action.

Pedagogical Knowledge

Collaborative Action

- Create evidence-informed questions and/or theories of action about pedagogy (learning and teaching).
- Question evidence of student learning acquired through pedagogical documentation against the existing knowledge and research (e.g., research papers, book study, curriculum, etc.)
- Explicitly connect understandings generated from CI and existing bodies of knowledge to the inquiry focus.
- Create documentation of locally-developed contextualized knowledge about pedagogy and practice to contribute to broader understanding of learning and teaching.
- Engage in “discourse analysis” (using a research lens to analyze conversations, dialogues, etc.) with learners, parents, community and educator partners and knowledgeable others to generate, share and deepen understanding of the possibilities of pedagogy and education.

Professional Discourse

Collaborative Action

- Analyze pedagogical documentation. See “Pedagogical Documentation” (*Capacity Building Series*, 2012).
- Engage in collaborative learning to challenge beliefs and practices.
- Engage with colleagues and knowledgeable others to implement actions responsive to learners in the classroom.
- Reflect on practice to inform professional learning.
- Engage with colleagues in discourse analysis to determine a mutual professional need, understand classroom experiences and co-learn about practice.

Student Experience

Collaborative Action

- Observe student learning and experience.
- Capture and analyze student learning and experience through pedagogical documentation. See “Pedagogical Documentation” (*Capacity Building Series*, 2012).
- Engage in responsive interactions with learners.
- Integrate student experiences and knowledge within practice.
- Engage students within the inquiry through assessment *for and as* learning.

Navigating Inherent Tensions

Within the journey of CI, all members of the team are moving toward a common goal of coming to a deeper understanding of an area of interest. Ontario educators have learned that along the way they need to find ways to navigate the tensions that are inherent in all CI work. These tensions refer to priorities and processes that can appear at times to be competing or contradictory; however, both sides of the tension are important to respond to – one should not take precedence or be pursued at the other’s expense.

Exploring the nature of the tensions inherent in CI provides an opportunity to better understand what happens when school teams work together to identify and analyze evidence of student learning, and how they navigate the roles, responsibilities, and purposes of collaborative inquiry in their work. These tensions can serve as points for reflection within collaborative work to inform and deepen school and district CI practices as well as professional knowledge more generally. These tensions are elaborated in greater detail below.

Tension # 1 Educator Learning ↔ Student Learning

Collaborative inquiry contributes to both an educator’s professional learning and student learning.

The purpose of CI is twofold: to promote professional learning and to improve student learning, achievement and a sense of well-being. These goals are interdependent. Learning experiences occurring in classrooms for students serve as the catalyst, or “curriculum,” for the educator’s professional learning. At the same time, when educators engage in CI for professional learning, the work contributes to changing classroom practice and improving efforts to support student learning, well-being, equity, engagement and belonging.

Tension # 2 Educator Problem-solving ↔ System-wide Knowledge Generation

Collaborative inquiry is both a method for problem solving and a system approach to generating professional knowledge.

Educators engaged in CI often see the value of their findings for refining their own practice. However, these findings can also contribute knowledge and understanding for system learning. For this reason, effective CI involves a deliberate and systematic approach to the use of evidence of student learning that builds collaborative school teams while informing coherent, integrated approaches to system work. Not only is CI a method for improving teaching and learning, but it is also a means to system improvement through shared professional knowledge.

For reflection on building pedagogical knowledge ...

- *How are you engaging with one another to ask questions that will lead you to generating new pedagogical knowledge?*
- *Have you taken adequate time to identify what it is you want to invest in exploring together?*
- *How do you continually document and analyze your evolving shared understanding of your inquiry focus?*
- *How do you access and use research to challenge your current knowledge and understanding of your inquiry focus to push beyond what you already know and believe?*

Tension # 3 Process ↔ Product

Meaningful participation in CI leads to new learning that can be shared and applied.

Having protocols and procedures is useful to build capacity for engaging in CI work; however, when CI becomes more procedural than substantive, its effectiveness decreases and it can shift the nature of CI work from collaborative engagement to compliance. School teams can get mired in the procedures of data analysis rather than focus on the practical meaning of the data itself. Participation in a CI is not an end in itself but leads to new learning and understanding that can be shared and applied.

Tension # 4 Self-directed ↔ System-directed

CI fosters educator ownership of the process while maintaining focus on system direction.

CI is most effective when participating teachers take ownership of the CI process and their own professional learning. Effective CI therefore creates informal accountability for learning and teaching within the context of a system vision of excellence and equity in education. Administrators often play a key role in leading collaborative inquiry teams. Keeping in mind both specific goals of the inquiry and the school and district goals, they scaffold the inquiry process and move school teams toward more sophisticated uses of evidence of student learning.

Tension # 5 Student Focus ↔ Student Partners

Students are both the focus for and partners in collaborative inquiry.

Although students and student work is a focus of CI, students also play a role within CI processes. Educators can involve students in any and all aspects of the CI process, from identifying an area of inquiry, working together to capture documentation of learning, and participating in analysis through assessment as learning. Students are the experts of their own experience. Finding creative ways to involve students in CI processes may open new possibilities for achieving excellence, equity and well-being in education.

For reflection on your sense of shared ownership ...

- *How do your actions reflect a learning stance and a sense of shared ownership for all participants with multiple roles?*
- *Who and what might support your inquiry?*
- *How have you engaged knowledgeable others, including families, FNMI elders, knowledge keepers, community organizations, researchers and other educator colleagues?*
- *How is learning through CI informing system direction, action and understanding?*



One educator described navigating the tensions of CI like paddling a canoe with a partner – coordinating paddling on opposite sides together. Maintaining momentum within CI similarly requires navigating and responding to conditions and context, just as paddlers navigate and respond to conditions of the weather, water and contributions of their partner.

For different examples of CI work in Ontario visit LearnTeachLead.ca/capacity_building_cio_learned

Or ask educators in your system about the CIs they have been involved in.

A Research Snapshot on Effective Professional Learning

In a chapter of *Teacher Learning that Matters*, Klaas van Veen, Rosanne Zwart and Jacobiene Meirink ask, “What makes teacher PD effective?” To answer that question, they present an overview of effective professional learning practices based on an analysis of 11 major reviews and texts and 34 empirical studies. Most of the studies explore the effects of professional learning interventions in the US., but other countries are included in their review, among them France, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, the UK and the Netherlands.

While the authors do not draw “rigid conclusions” about effective professional learning, they do offer some key indications. Effective professional learning is characterized by:

- A focus on subject and pedagogical content
- Opportunities for active and inquiry-based learning
- Collective participation in learning
- Sustainability over time
- Alignment with school or jurisdictional policies
- A supportive organizational culture

These indications of effective professional learning resonate with the principles of collaborative inquiry and suggest from an international research perspective that Ontario educators are moving in the right direction.

For reflection ...

- How are students involved not only as the focus, but as partners in CI processes?
- How do we start with student assets when analyzing the evidence of learning?
- How will we know student learning and engagement have improved as a result of our participation in CI?

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