Setting the Table for
Collaborative Professionalism

by **Dr. Lyn Sharratt**

How does a district move from pockets of improvement in some schools to improvement in *most schools* and *most classrooms*, then importantly to improvement in every school, in *every classroom*? In other words, how does a system or district move to ALL students showing growth and achievement?

Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159 entitled *Collaborative Professionalism* (Ontario Ministry of Education, May, 2016) is a critical part of the answer. It highlights a strategic leadership style elevated to the level of a systemic approach. It states:

> "Collaborative Professionalism in Ontario is defined as professionals – at all levels of the education system – working together, sharing knowledge, skills and experience to improve student achievement, and the well-being of both students and staff. Collaborative Professionalism values the voices of all and reflects an approach in support of our shared responsibility to provide equitable access to learning for all. All staff are valued and have a shared responsibility as they contribute to collaborative learning cultures."

In *Leading Collaborative Learning: Empowering Excellence* (Sharratt & Planche, 2016), we describe collaboration as an approach in which system and school leaders build collective capacity; create new, energizing knowledge together; and move schools from being places of "plans and good intentions" to centres of "purposeful practice" on the part of all teachers who then empower students to do the same. To successfully grow practice and sustain potential impact on increasing student achievement, Collaborative Learning among teachers requires an atmosphere in which system and school leaders are intentional in demonstrating they are equally committed to continuous learning alongside teachers, students and each other.

Let's return to the original thought – how do we make it possible to improve student achievement and growth in every school and classroom?

My view is that sustainable system and school improvement is research-based; evidence-proven; and leadership-driven. In this article I will focus on my research findings regarding the third point – **leadership-driven**, meaning that leaders at all levels are knowledgeable, can mobilize self and others, and consider sustainability of the improvement work.

There are three critical components when leaders embrace Collaborative Professionalism.

1. Strong Leaders are Knowledgeable

Leaders need to be "knowledgeable others" (Sharratt, Ostinelli & Cattaneo, 2010) when leading sustainable change in classroom practice. As one research respondent said, leaders need to know how to teach (Sharratt and Fullan, 2012). This is about listening hard to "hear" the questions to ask rather than talking or "telling" everyone the answers. Knowledgeable leaders come to Case Management Meetings ready to discuss matters of differentiating instruction so that every FACE is known and grown. Questions for clarity start with the curriculum expectations, proceed to developing Success Criteria that are transparent and demanding, and then progress to questions such as, "How will we teach it?" and "What will we do if the students aren't learning?"

Leaders ask:

- Do I model a belief that all students can and will learn and all teachers can teach?
- Do I use data to make decisions to improve learning for all and measure impact on learning?
- Do I use improvement data to evaluate my effectiveness as a leader?

- Do I provide for and participate with teachers in ongoing Professional Learning to ensure wise and timely use of relevant assessment data to differentiate instruction every day?
- Do I conduct Learning Walks and Talks every day to collect evidence of impact on learning and have open to learning conversations by "Talking" with teachers about their practice?

2. Strong Leaders Mobilize Self and Others

Leaders need to clearly articulate a shared vision. Guskey's (1986) finding, that changes in teacher beliefs and motivation only come after changes in practice, suggests that, to achieve the deeper conceptual change, beliefs will change after the teacher sees the effects of new strategies on student learning and not as a result of prolonged discussions about theory. Successful practice changes beliefs only when the vision articulated by leaders aligns with the shared beliefs and successful practices. Leaders mobilize self and others by articulating that vision and doing the work together – learning alongside others how to do the work in all classrooms.

Leaders ask:

- Do I create a sense of collective urgency to put FACES on the data and convey the vision of a shared moral imperative?
- Do I provide encouragement for teachers to take the lead by distributing leadership, sharing responsibility and accountability?
- Do I have high expectations for every student and teacher?
- Do I create rich conversations about every FACE by co-constructing Data Walls and providing timetabled problem-solving forums called Case Management (CM) Meetings?
- Do I give and get feedback?

3. Strong Leaders Sustain the Work

Scaling up with improvement strategies needs to be considered carefully – think big and start small – meaning that every effort must be able to be scaled up to include all schools in a system. Maintaining integrity demands a nimble plan and continuous evaluation of what has been achieved. Leaders must be able to see the process unfold "from the balcony and from the dance floor" thinking about where they are as leaders and where their followers are. This constant review process causes leaders to self-reflect often and demands that they differentiate their leadership support through modelled, shared, guided and interdependent stages.

Leaders ask:

- Do I open classroom doors to make teaching public?
- Do I build a caring community of leaners, which includes parents and the broader community as partners?
- Do I create a "we-we" culture of learning where there is responsibility and accountability for all students within and across schools?
- Do I create a trusting and respectful learning environment where students and teachers feel safe to take risks, make mistakes – and where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities?
- Do I develop and leave many leaders behind to continue the achievement work when I am gone?

Actions Speak Louder than Words

The following five practices demand leaders who are knowledgeable, can mobilize others and do what it takes to sustain the improvement work.

1. **Data Walls** are living evidence of students' growth and achievement – both are essential. What is important is that Data Walls are teacher and leader co-constructed in order to promote rich conversations about students' FACES. The most effective Walls are in discreet locations where teachers and leaders pass by often and can stop to make notes on their observations. Learning Walks and Talks (Sharratt, 2008-2016) start at the Data Wall and are focused observations on aspects of the Wall that the Walkers want to know more about and take collective action on.

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2. **Case Management Meetings** are often a result of looking more deeply into a FACE on the Data Wall. When questions arise about a student on the Wall then teachers and leaders hold a Case Management meeting to discuss possible answers. The classroom teacher, principal, instructional coach and others who may add insight attend. The focus of the timetabled 15-minute meeting is on instruction – and only instruction. Suggested instructional strategies to support the classroom teacher may be necessary for one but will be good for all in the class.

3. **Lesson Study and Co Teaching are brought together** when teachers and leaders gather to create a lesson and then one person teaches it. All participate in classroom observation by focusing on students' thinking. This is videoed. What the group observes in the video is debriefed and changed, and another teacher steps forward to reteach the tweaked lesson. The process is repeated with various changes being discussed and tried while the other teachers observe the students' thinking (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). A rich conversation follows about what works best, what doesn't, and lessons learned to apply in classrooms moving forward.

4. **Collaborative Inquiry** is a structured, collaboratively-planned approach (Sharratt and Harild, 2015; Sharratt and Planche, 2016) focused only on evidence of student learning. A problem is identified by reviewing student achievement data (at the Data Wall), and a group of teachers and leaders come together to focus on a question to improve their practice. An impactful Collaborative Inquiry (CI) is iterative, that is the CI is reviewed and tweaked as the research progresses toward creating one or more solutions. The CI cycle includes opportunities for mid-course corrections and reflections in a never-ending quest for assessment strategies to meet the learning needs of every student.

5. **Collaborative Assessment of Student Work** is a gathering of teachers who have collaboratively developed the same assessment task and then explore the levels of the student performance task to ensure consistency of levelling of the work (Sharratt in Jarvis

& Elliott-Johns, 2013). The power of this process comes when teachers express feedback in two ways: 1. Descriptive Feedback for the classroom teacher on next steps for teaching the student, and 2. Descriptive Feedback that the teacher will give to the student to deepen his/her understanding of the next steps needed in their growth and achievement. Operating norms are set at the beginning of the sessions and a definitive protocol is followed (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, pp. 227-239) in order to ensure objectivity and non-judgementalism.

Leaders who find the time, during the school day, to have collaborative professional conversations with teachers and other leaders, using any or all of these five instructional processes, give and get feedback as a critical data source about the impact they are having as leaders and use that as data to get better at their own learning, teaching and leading. When we know how to use these 5 key strategies then Collaboration + Assessment "for" and "as" Learning + Differentiated Instruction = increased students' achievement and teachers' capacity to teach and learn. Well-being for all! ⊲⊳

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Building Capacity: Instruction Walks
www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6417m3kNIE