



# pedagogically focused leadership

Creating reciprocal and respectful relationships

As educators, we need to reconsider what “making a difference” means. Until recently, we believed that it meant moving every child forward through years of pre-packaged solutions. Now the question is: What do the actions and conditions associated with making a difference look like today, and how do we facilitate them? We know that it’s no longer the variation in social and economic circumstances, or background, or where they come from that makes a difference in increasing all students’ achievement. We know our between-the-bell actions make a difference in the achievement and, subsequently, in the lives of the students we serve because, in the words of Asa Hilliard (2012), “human beings are learning machines” who can grow to supersede variations in socio-economic status!

By Lyn Sharratt, Denis Maika and Elaine Hine

Illustration by Aaron McConomy

With those thoughts, the questions now become: How do we help teachers perform optimally in every classroom with best practices pervasive in each? How do we ensure that all students better understand and can take advantage of their unique gifts and talents in ways that will contribute to the knowledge of the community?

Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood et al, 2004). As Fullan (2014) says, we need to stop depending on Band-Aid remedies to school improvement,

and focus on changing the culture itself so learning is the work. Principals *working with* teachers and community partners have a key role. Those who are engaged in actions with evidence showing improved student achievement are charged with a responsibility to share their knowledge and expertise with others.

This article examines three pedagogically focused leadership practices that enhance the impact principals have on building community, setting high expectations and creating a culture of positive energy in which students learn best. Today we are preparing students for a world where the creation of knowledge is the new essential, where critical literacy is needed and where critical thinking strategies are required to solve different types of complex problems in varied contexts and cultural situations. We are preparing students to claim their voices on route to becoming contributing members of a localized global society. To do this, we present three powerful leadership strategies that can be interwoven with a common thread of inquiry to make a difference to increasing *all* students' achievement:

1. Learning Walks and Talks
2. Collaborative Inquiry
3. Principal Learning Teams.

## 1. LEARNING WALKS AND TALKS

### Engaging in reflective inquiry

Learning Walks and Talks (Sharratt, 2013) begin at the Data Wall (a visual inspirational area) in order to make emotional connections and have cognitive insights about each student – the personalization of data of all learners. It is a daily practice that develops and enhances leadership competencies – an approach in which system leaders, principals and teacher-leaders observe and engage in reflective inquiry with teachers to note growth, to impact student achievement and to build the learning culture in each school. Those doing Walks and Talks follow an explicit protocol including defined rules regarding subsequent talk that is growth-promoting about teaching decisions in and across classrooms, schools and districts. The conversations are based on the notion of reciprocal and respectful relationships and lead to non-evaluative discussions that focus on learning together as teachers and administrators. Learning Walks and Talks are most effective when they occur daily and briefly, because those “walking” collect multiple data points over time and thereby gather a complete picture of how the whole school or system they are observing is performing within a student improvement focus.



## Five Questions for Students

1. What are you learning?
2. How are you doing?
3. How do you know?
4. How can you improve?
5. Where do you go for help?

(Sharratt & Fullan, 2012)

# Collaborative work is in the very air we breathe in organizations these days.

Learning Walks and Talks help instructional leaders understand how they can best support assessment-informed instruction. The purpose of training sessions is to

- understand high-impact classroom practice and work toward achieving it in every classroom, thus reducing variation in practice within and across schools
- build a common language for administrators, leaders and teachers
- reflect on developing patterns and trends in schools
- ask the five key questions of students and determine explicit instruction
- ask parallel reflective questions about teacher practice, which should result in principal and teacher collaborative work
- give constructive feedback to formulate a plan for the next level of work which will be observed in subsequent walks and
- define the support that a learning leader can provide to teachers and students.

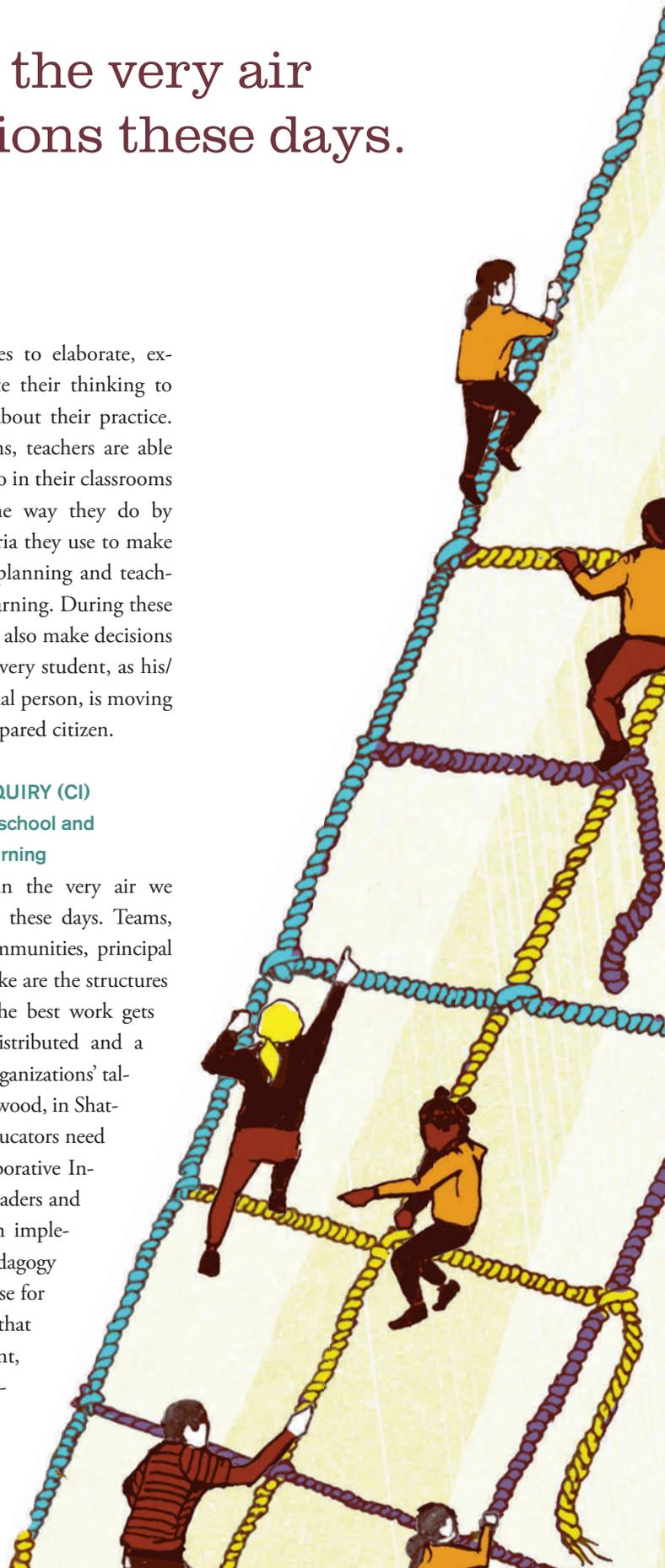
When educators in a system care about improvement in all schools and walk through each other's building, they create relationships that enable positive collective capacity building throughout the system. Walking in classrooms daily and talking about assessment that drives instruction are the two keys to becoming an instructional leader who is focused on increased achievement for all learners.

After many Learning Walks and Talks, lead learners engage in authentic learning conversations focused on their observations. These might engage one teacher at a time, or whole

professional communities to elaborate, extend, apply and evaluate their thinking to create new knowledge about their practice. During the conversations, teachers are able to articulate what they do in their classrooms and why they teach the way they do by thinking about the criteria they use to make daily decisions in their planning and teaching to impact student learning. During these conversations, principals also make decisions in order to ensure that every student, as his/her own unique individual person, is moving forward as a globally-prepared citizen.

## 2. COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY (CI) Responding to system, school and classroom collective learning

Collaborative work is in the very air we breathe in organizations these days. Teams, professional learning communities, principal learning teams and the like are the structures created to ensure that the best work gets done, leadership gets distributed and a large proportion of the organizations' talents are unleashed (Leithwood, in Shattatt & Harild, 2015). Educators need time to engage in Collaborative Inquiry (CI) together (as leaders and teachers) before they can implement the integrated pedagogy that we and others espouse for our students. We believe that CI strategies at the student, teacher and leadership levels are not separate entities. The better leaders



and teachers become at it through consistent practice, the better they will be able to use CI as a process with students. Each of these interrelated levels of inquiry supports increased student achievement – our core business.

System inquiry supports problem solving by providing resources and creating infrastructure capable of building and mobilizing collective knowledge across the system. Leadership inquiry focuses on how to support teachers and build professional capacity in the interest of increasing achievement. Teacher inquiry focuses on supporting every student by

- making cognitive demands
- planning environments to learn from and with other students
- fostering and supporting the innate curiosity of students
- constructing learning not only as a curriculum/subject focus but also as a relentless pursuit of knowledge that contributes to understanding the world
- making time for Knowledge Building (Be-reiter & Scardamalia, 1993) and
- implementing the CI practices to activate deep thinking.

Many Ontario schools have embraced the Collaborative Learning model as an opportunity

for job-embedded learning, sharing research on teaching approaches, developing lessons together, observing in classrooms and building collective capacity by examining impactful practices collaboratively.

### 3. PRINCIPAL LEARNING TEAMS

#### A promising practice to improve collective principal efficacy

In Ontario, the Leading Student Achievement (LSA) project encourages and supports the development of Principal Learning Teams (PLTs). Principals work in teams and networks to increase their capacity as leaders, impacting teaching and learning through CI that leads to improved student learning.

The data from the LSA principal surveys in the report by Leithwood (2014) suggests that principals place a high value on their PLTs, especially regarding the direct benefits to them as individual leaders. This is encouraging information regarding the efficacy of PLTs as a shared leadership practice. Principals form networks to

- help with workplace challenges
- seek advice from trusted colleagues
- create safe spaces for reciprocal influencing
- find new ways to think about and make meaning of their work

- support learning what they need to know more about and
- commit to taking action together.

Manny Figueiredo, a system leader, and the principals of his cluster of schools discovered that their most successful PLTs

- support the instructional leadership capacity of administrators
- provide job-embedded Professional Learning for leaders and teachers
- build learning-focused partnerships with others to deepen their instructional leadership
- place value on how time is spent and
- create a culture of empowerment.

How do we universalize the remarkable things that some PLTs like Manny's do so that all PLTs can benefit from and demonstrate this learning? PLTs offer a space and place where ideas can be tested and developed. Each member of the PLT builds his or her inquiry. Their inquiries are always connected to system and school improvement plans; however, powerful and deep principal inquiries are very specific and centre on what principals need to understand and do in order to move their thinking to support teaching and learning. These are very personal and deep wonderings, coming from a place of vulnerability.

An example may be a principal wondering about assessment practices within a curriculum area. The *inquiry* might be built around the following questions:

- What do I need to understand in order to support staff and students?
- What can I develop as a theory around this work that makes sense?
- Where is my curiosity taking me?
- What is a good CI/theory-building question?
- How can I build and test my theory?
- How might I receive feedback?
- As I revise and build my thinking, can I begin to see what my CI might account for and what it might not explain?
- Is my CI supported by a major author or by research?
- Can I identify my deepest thinking?
- Have I come to a place where I begin to identify ideas and actions?

Note that there is no linear sequence for an inquiry. It is easy to say, "Do this, then

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this, then this, then arrive at this.” The scaffold presented above need not be followed in sequence. Remember when we think, we move “in between” scaffold prompts. As we move more deeply into inquiry, a number of scaffold prompts may be activated simultaneously by different members of the PLT.

The principal presents his or her inquiry work at the PLT. Conversation develops around the presenting principal’s story, questions, wonderings and curiosity. Support comes from others “adding to” and identifying “significant” or “new” learning. The PLT is

- not a space for argument or criticism
- a non-evaluative space for participants to appreciate the thinking and vulnerability of a colleague doing similar work
- a space to understand, reflect, add to, and help the presenting principal to refine his/her thinking and
- a space where misconceptions can be voiced and worked out, and new concepts can be formed.

Finally, this good work and new knowledge should not be lost or restricted to only members of the one PLT, as ideas can easily evaporate. How can these very important findings and new knowledge be made available to others? How can the impact of this work influence others beyond the PLT? Suggested answers from field and expert opinion can be found in a digital resource from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat at [learnlead.ca](http://learnlead.ca)

In Ontario, Learning Walks and Talks, Collaborative Inquiry and Principal Learning Teams help principals construct conversations to understand the power of pedagogically focused leadership. Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2011) confirm our strong belief that leaders who practice pedagogically focused leadership have a significant impact on student outcomes and do make a difference. Students benefit when leaders focus their work on pedagogical learning, shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers. ▲

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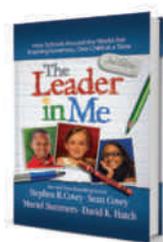
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