

AN OPEN DOOR TO LEARNING

INQUIRY PROCESS BUILDS COLLABORATIVE CULTURES WITHIN AND BETWEEN SCHOOLS

By Lisa Cranston

When I began my work as a curriculum consultant for a local school board more than 10 years ago, most professional development took place at the district office or another central location, such as catering halls. Teachers and administrators would leave their schools, come to a workshop, then return to their schools and be expected to implement whatever strategies had been covered at the session. As consultants, we

were expected to have expertise in our area and to share our expertise with teachers, administrators, trustees, and the public.

Since that time, there has been a dramatic shift in how we support educators and administrators in their professional learning. While there is still a time and a place for centralized workshops, much of the professional learning takes place at the school and is directed by the needs of educators and students.

This deprivatization of classroom practice means that no longer are teachers working in isolation behind closed doors. Instead, professional learning has moved to the school and the classroom, and teachers are encouraged to

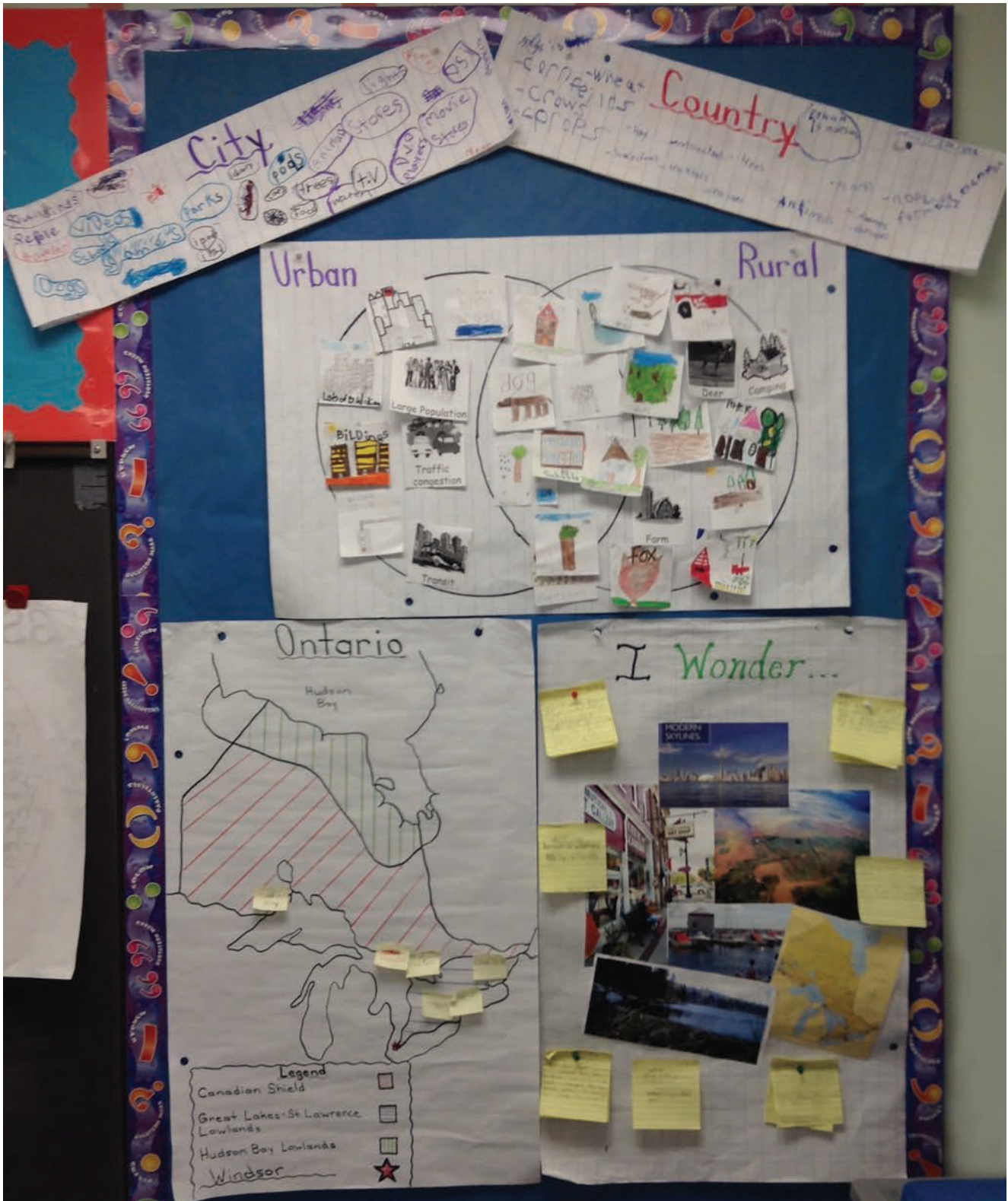


Photo by GREATER ESSEX COUNTY DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
 Third-grade social studies students used inquiry-based learning to study urban and rural communities in Ontario.

share their work and their students' work. Teachers are able to observe students in other classes, have other teachers observe their students, and participate in discussions about the teaching and the learning they observed.

Changing the deeply rooted norm of privacy has been difficult as such a change required risk-taking by teachers and leaders (Fullan, 2007). As a result of this shift, we have had to re-examine our roles in supporting teachers in their professional learning. Collaborative cultures take time to build, and a one-size-fits-all approach does not work.

With the support of central office curriculum consultants, educators at three schools in Southwestern Ontario used a collaborative inquiry process combined with classroom observations using a lab class model to investigate student inquiry-based learning while building a culture of openness and professional learning within and between schools.

PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Collaborative inquiry is “a practice of engaging educators as researchers and has been shown to be an effective means to both professional learning and to enhanced student learning. The inquiry process begins with a question or wondering about learning or the learners, and educators work together to analyze student learning, engage in professional reading and dialogue, and reflect on their practice. The process is not linear; there are many entry points along the journey” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Three urban sites participated in this collaborative teacher inquiry project using an inquiry-based approach to teaching in primary grades during the 2013-14 school year. The kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators at those schools had participated in professional learning focused on student inquiry as part of the school board's support during the five-year rollout of full-day kindergarten beginning in September 2010.

They were eager to continue their exploration of student-led inquiry and share their learning with colleagues in other grades. The administrators at all three schools were also eager to extend student inquiry-based learning beyond the kindergarten classrooms.

In addition, curriculum consultants had offered a three-day summer institute on inquiry learning in August 2013, and kindergarten and primary teachers from each of these schools attended and expressed an interest in continuing their learning. The final combined

team from three schools included five kindergarten teachers, four early childhood educators, four 1st-grade teachers, two 1st/2nd-grade combined teachers, four 2nd-grade teachers, one 2nd/3rd-grade teacher, one intermediate special education teacher, and three curriculum consultants.

Stoll (2009) notes that capacity building in schools is strengthened by groups of teachers coming together to share and analyze their work, but school-to-school learning networks give schools an even wider range of ideas and choices and moves good practice around the system. Teachers learn with one another as well as from one another and learn more about their learning.

We met four times as a whole group with all three schools in what we called networked learning sessions. During these whole-group sessions, teachers could network with teachers from other schools to share and analyze their work together. Between each networked learning session, schools selected a half-day to engage in in-school classroom observations using a lab class model. Each of the three curriculum consultants involved in this project was aligned with one of the participating schools and engaged in the learning at the school level.

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

According to Scardamalia (2002, in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), “inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that places students' questions, ideas, and observations at the centre of the learning experience. Educators play an active role throughout the process by establishing a culture where ideas are respectfully challenged, tested, redefined, and viewed as improvable, moving children from a position of wondering to a position of enacted understanding and further questioning. Underlying this approach is the idea that both educators and students share responsibility for learning.”

When students are engaged in learning, their motivation, persistence, enthusiasm, and achievement increase. Research suggests that students are more likely to develop as engaged, self-directed learners in inquiry-based classrooms (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010, in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011).

Inquiry-based learning fits with our view of teaching and learning as multilayered and multifaceted, with connections between content areas as well as between all the learners — adult and children — in the classroom. Using a combination of teacher collaborative inquiry and a lab class model, our group set out to explore inquiry learning with kindergarten to 3rd-grade students.

LAB CLASS MODEL

As part of the initial networked learning session in October, the teams worked through the first three steps of the lab class model. Lab class is a professional learning structure focused on descriptive observations of student conversation, action, and product in an effort to improve student learning, modified from

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the district's work using instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2011).

PREPARING FOR LAB CLASS

1. Determine a focus.

Teams developed their collaborative inquiry questions based on evidence about students' capabilities and areas for growth as well as their own professional curiosities about inquiry-based learning. Questions varied from school to school and continued to evolve throughout the project, which ran from October to May. We created collaborative inquiry questions using the frame: What is the impact of teacher practice on student learning?

2. Learn to be descriptive.

We knew that it was important to spend time learning to be descriptive when observing students. City et al. (2011) noted that trying to simply observe what we see at the most basic descriptive level without inference or judgment is very difficult, and we had experienced this in working with educators on other projects. We used photos and video clips of students engaged in learning to practice taking descriptive observations and provided feedback to one another on our progress.

3. Discuss norms.

As a group, we created norms for the in-school classroom observations, which we reviewed before each classroom observation visit. Our norms were:

- Be positive: Focus on student competencies.
- Record observations of student conversations, actions, and products.
- Silently observe for at least 10 minutes before asking students any questions.
- Ensure any questions asked are open-ended.
- Minimize hallway conversations.

ENGAGING IN LAB CLASS

These next steps took place at each school. During the first networked meeting, each school selected a date for its first lab class. Two teachers at each school volunteered to be the first classes observed. Teachers received a full morning of released time and supply coverage, and the curriculum consultant aligned with each school also attended the lab class to facilitate the learning.

4. Visit classrooms to take descriptive observations of student conversations, actions, and products.

Before heading to the classrooms, we met briefly to review the norms and the team's inquiry question. The two teachers who had volunteered to be observed gave a five-minute overview of the inquiry happening in their classroom and shared any concerns they wanted us to keep in mind when observing. We found that 20 minutes in each classroom was enough time

to collect observation data.

Teachers in the project noted that they continued this practice beyond the lab class visits. In her feedback, one kindergarten teacher wrote, "Writing out reflections of our students' experiences (documenting) has allowed us to clearly see the next steps in their learning. Being able to revisit these written statements allows us to see how far the children have come or revisit areas of learning as necessary."

5. Engage in individual analysis of observations.

Following the classroom observations, we returned to our meeting area. Each participant selected three to five observations that were descriptive, student-focused, asset-based, and related to the identified student learning focus to share with the group. Each observation was then recorded on a separate sticky note.

6. Cluster observations and name emerging trends.

With the curriculum consultant acting as facilitator, teachers worked together to name and cluster emerging trends as teachers shared the observations they had recorded.

7. Identify conditions present.

Next, we discussed what conditions were present that allowed these trends to emerge. Conditions might include the routines and procedures in place, the organization of materials in the classroom environment, or specific teaching strategies. We took time to celebrate these conditions, our learning, and our students' learning.

As the project progressed, we realized that this step was very important for all participants. We encouraged and supported each other by recognizing the great learning that was happening, by both teachers and students, in the classrooms we visited. The special education teacher in our group told us, "At our last lab class, my class was observed. At the feedback, I was happy to hear that one of my weakest students was completing the activity successfully and reaching higher-level thinking. Inquiry has allowed me to see the growth in my students by focusing on their oral contributions."

8. Determine next steps.

Based on the observations from lab class as well as the contributions from teachers whose classrooms were not observed, we collaboratively determined next steps and the professional learning we needed to engage in related to these next steps. The curriculum consultants supporting this project met periodically to share the learning and next steps for each group in order to determine common learning goals, address questions, and consider possible resources.

After each cycle of lab class, we would again get together as a whole group for a networked learning session to engage in shared learning across schools and grades.

CONSOLIDATION AND CULMINATION OF LAB CLASS

9. Share the learning.

At the final networked learning session in May, we guided teachers and administrators as they reflected on their own personal learning, the students' learning, and their team's collaborative inquiry journey.

We asked them to consider with whom they wanted to share their learning and how they might share it. Each team developed its own communication plan, which included using Twitter to share with parents and the community, creating an infographic about inquiry learning to share with all stakeholders, and using bulletin board documentation panels to share with school colleagues as well as parents.

One kindergarten team noted, "Our purposeful documentation has provided parents with an opportunity for them to make meaning of their child's learning." A 1st-grade teacher said, "The inquiry process naturally involves the family as well because the students come home requesting materials or talking about what they are learning and wanting to research more and bringing what they know from home back to their learning at school."

Staff members at one school, realizing that colleagues who hadn't been able to participate due to funding limitations were also interested in exploring student inquiry, decided to invite a colleague to be their "inquiry buddy" for the following school year.

REFLECTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND NEXT STEPS

As the project progressed, students' enthusiasm for learning when engaged in inquiry encouraged and motivated team members. Their natural curiosity and inquisitiveness drove them to explore ideas and issues that were meaningful and relevant to them in a real-world context.

Teachers nurture this natural inquisitiveness through an inquiry approach. "They are enabling students to address curriculum content in integrated and 'real-world' ways and to develop and practice higher-order thinking skills and habits of mind that lead to deep learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011).

We examined the types of questions that students were asking of themselves and each other about their topics of investigation. Wien (2008) argues that "thinking of questions as 'seeds to thinking' rather than queries requiring answers is a major change in a teacher's teaching practice. If the question is a 'seed,' it is asked for a different purpose than receiving a

correct answer; it is asked to stimulate thinking and feeling. To be asked, 'What do you think?' is a very different engagement than being asked for an answer."

Teachers observed that students were more engaged in their learning because they were exposed to authentic and meaningful experiences. One 1st-grade teacher noted that "students have developed a sense of community because they are now working more collaboratively and sharing more of their ideas with each other. Students feel valued because their interests are considered and their environment reflects their ideas."

Resources that previously sat on shelves unused were now eagerly explored as teachers sought more information to deepen their understanding of student learning through inquiry. Through our discussions, experiences, and readings, we were forced to reconsider the roles of teacher and student.

One challenge we faced was addressing teachers' beliefs about the overall and specific expectations in the standardized curriculum. We heard concerns from teachers, parents, and administrators about the need to "cover the curriculum." Wien (2008) stated that "the explicit and direct instruction of a linear, fragmented approach is one way to teach a standardized curriculum. For young children, it is not the best approach, for it contravenes the research knowledge bases of child development and neuroscience. Another way to teach standardized curriculum is to embed it in richer, more integrated processes such as emergent curriculum, where its presence can be documented to make it visible, rather than being measured on tests."

A team of 3rd-grade teachers exploring a science unit on structure and stability reported that "in making student voice more visible, we have seen our students take a lot more ownership for the learning. Many students engaged in problem-solving to create their own structures using a variety of materials to demonstrate stability. One student created a book about the Titanic that he turned into a play, and he is now creating a movie based on his prior knowledge."

Through this collaborative inquiry model, curriculum consultants, colleagues, and administrators supported teachers as they investigated the impact of inquiry-based student learning and found that, not only did they cover the curriculum expectations, but in many cases the learning extended beyond expectations as students delved deeper into the questions they were exploring.

One kindergarten team noted, "Students are given opportunities to reflect on their learning to bridge the gaps between earlier concepts and new learning. For example, students learned about tally marks to vote on a book, and in a future activity, they were able to use tally marks to keep track of student points."

Leadership in collaborative inquiry and professional learning is imperative. In their review of the history of teacher collaboration in education reform, Riveros, Newton, and Burgess (2012) noted that Dewey had argued that teachers' reflection

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on their practice would benefit the entire school system but that leadership was critical. Without organizational support, the research they cited showed that teacher collaboration made no difference.

As we deepen and extend our school-based learning through collaborative inquiry, we have to consider how we as central office staff can support teachers, system leaders, and administrators in creating and sustaining a culture of professional learning in our schools. Models like the collaborative inquiry/lab class model described here, with a combination of networked learning between schools at large-group sessions and small-group, in-school classroom observations, offer an option for engaging in purposeful professional learning. At our final meeting, a 3rd-grade teacher concluded, “Working together, we have learned that we have some common struggles, and we are able to learn from each other. We are more effective as a team.”

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The sandwich strategy

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WORKING TOGETHER TO GET BETTER

We can best support student learning by teaching in response to students' current thinking. Supporting teachers' collective analysis of student work can be a powerful tool for informing and improving instruction.

The information gathered from a rich formative assessment task can support teachers' learning about how students come to know particular disciplines. With the support of a skilled instructional coach and their colleagues, teachers can take what they have uncovered about students' thinking and collectively make commitments to try instructional tasks and strategies that can be reflected upon later.

By examining student work together, the school community engages in conversations that support continuous improvement of instruction and student learning. Student data analysis is better together.

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