

What is professional collaboration and how can its practice be enriched and led to support student learning within and across schools?

Sabbatical Report (1 May – 7 July 2017)

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I would like to acknowledge the opportunity of a ten-week Principal sabbatical leave made possible by the Teach NZ scheme. This time was invaluable as it gave me the opportunity to undertake professional reading, reflect, and talk to other educational professionals. Most important, however, is that the sabbatical allowed me to stop, step back, think and recharge my energies.

My particular thanks to the Sancta Maria Catholic Primary School Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave and approving the funds, which afforded me the wonderful privilege of visiting schools and attending a conference overseas. My Deputy Principal took up the role as Acting Principal with efficiency and total commitment. For this, I am sincerely grateful as it allowed me the opportunity to really step back and take the time for quality headspace.

To the schools, teachers, leaders and Principals that gave their time so graciously to share their experiences and understandings with me, I am extremely appreciative and thankful for their openness and willingness to share.

Executive Summary

My investigation shows that collaboration is complex, and requires deep understanding and complete commitment to be truly effective. It requires participants to meet regularly and to take the time to develop professional collective responsibility. Effective collaboration calls for interdependence and for participants to be accountable for their own learning, while supporting the learning of others. Through my investigation, it became evident that there are essential elements required for rich collaboration to take place: relational trust, collective responsibility, clear purpose, time allowance, effective communication, and collective inquiry. These essential elements will be analysed in more detail within this report. It is essential to have buy-in from all parties involved, and their full commitment to ensuring a continuous cycle of collective inquiry that is focused on a shared purposeful challenge aimed at positive outcomes for student achievement.

Rich collaboration therefore calls on participants to share and examine their values and beliefs, and to build strong relationships of trust and respect. In collaborative processes, all voices are heard, and innovative solutions generated to bring about changes in practice and pedagogical approaches that will impact positively on student learning. Rich collaboration requires the collective group to continuously make and remake meaning, and to be committed to investing the time and energy into the attainment of a specific and clear vision.

Rationale and Background Information

In 2013, Sancta Maria Catholic Primary School opened two Innovative Learning Environments (ILE). This required two groups of three teachers, and their students, to teach and learn collaboratively. As the Ministry of Education is strategically committed to building

all new schools with innovative, flexible learning environments by 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2011), it is increasingly important for school leaders to develop a clear understanding of collaboration.

Furthermore, in 2014, the Government introduced the *Investing in Educational Success* policy (Ministry of Education, 2017), with the aim of raising student achievement through effective collaboration between schools and aligning student learning pathways. This policy requires clusters of schools to work collaboratively in a Community of Learning/Kāhui Ako focused on a collectively agreed student achievement challenge that will make a difference to student learning outcomes in the cluster. Understanding what climate and skills are required to be able to effectively collaborate professionally now and in the future has therefore become paramount.

The purpose of my sabbatical was therefore to deepen my understanding of how to enrich and lead collaboration within my school and across the schools in my cluster to benefit and enhance learning achievement for all students.

Collaborative learning is an approach in which system and school leaders build collective capacity; create new, energising 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. (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. xxiv)

My intention was therefore to research what leading effective and disciplined collaboration within and across schools looks like and to better understand how this process can enhance and influence student achievement. I wanted to understand what effective collaborative leaders do to set the conditions for rich collaboration.

My investigation included visits to schools in the United Kingdom, where the academy process of joining schools has been underway for some years, and interviewed principals that work with other schools in multi academy trusts (see Table 1 below). I attended a conference day in Scotland: 'Leading Collaborative Learning at Every Level: From System to Classroom', facilitated by Lyn Sharratt, Beate Planche and Maggie Ogram. They have research and practical experience of supporting teachers and leaders to have positive impact on student outcomes through collaboration. The day was well attended by educators from Scotland, England and even a group from Iceland. The programme for the day was intentionally set up to allow for many opportunities for interaction and discussion. I was also fortunate to have the opportunity to visit a school in Glasgow.

In addition, I interviewed three school leaders in New Zealand to gain an understanding of how they manage collaborative processes within and across schools. Two of these Principals are currently the Lead Principal for their Community of Learning/Kāhui Ako. It is evident to me that Principals are key to leading and creating a culture of collaboration within and across schools and must have in-depth understandings of what rich collaboration looks like and feels like.

Table 1: Investigation Participants, Locations and Roles

Participant	Location	Role
Principal 1	Academy School South England.	Acting Principal of the Academy Trust. Previously Principal of the Primary School only.
Principal 2	Academy Trust School Central England.	Principal of one of the academy primary schools.
Principal 3	Academy Trust School Central England.	Principal of one of the academy primary schools.
Principal 4	Primary School Auckland.	Lead Principal of one of the Central Communities of Learning /Kāhui Ako
Principal 5	Primary School Auckland.	Lead Principal of one of the South Auckland Communities of Learning / Kāhui Ako
Principal 6	Primary School Auckland.	Primary School Principal

My school visits and interviews indicated that what is required to effectively collaborate within and across schools in order to raise student achievement shows some variation. Those school leaders who spoke of moving rapidly into forming a community of learning, found subsequently that a deeper understanding of what true collaboration means should have been addressed before moving forward.

Six essential characteristics crucial to creating a collaborative climate emerged through the investigation. These six essential elements are:

- relational trust,
- collective responsibility,
- clear purpose,
- time allowance,
- effective communication, and
- collective inquiry

Before analysing each of these elements, it is important define the term ‘collaboration’.

Defining Rich Collaboration

There is no single definition for the term “collaboration”, though many definitions suggest that collaboration is essential to deep, true and effective leadership, teaching and learning.

Collaboration in education takes place when members of an inclusive learning community work together as equals to assist students to succeed in the classroom. During my research, however, I have come to realise that collaboration extends well beyond simply work being done together. Thomas Kayser defined collaboration as:

a joint effort between two or more people, free from hidden agendas, to produce an output in response to a common goal or shared priority. Often this output is greater than what any of the individuals could have produced working alone. (2014).

Collaboration therefore requires a commitment from all parties to a shared specific challenge that is problem solved together through team action to generate innovative outcomes. How do we know we are truly collaborating and not just co-operating and being collegial? Gilbert (2016), stated that true collaboration generates its own new practices suggesting collaboration is different to just sharing and reflecting. Collaboration involves working together to create something new in support of a shared vision. The key components are that it requires joint, not individual effort, something new is created, and through a joint effort, a shared vision is attained. It is “not about creating a place where people feel good but rather about cultivating the expertise of everyone to be focused on a collective purpose” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 48).

The Essential Elements of Rich Collaboration

Having provided a definition of ‘collaboration’, the six characteristics or elements of collaboration will now be further analysed. As collaborative skills develop over time, it is important to be acutely aware of what effective collaboration looks like, if colleagues are to work together to develop relational understandings and ways of co-labouring together. My reading, school visits, observations and interviews of leaders about their understandings of collaboration, suggest the following six characteristics as being indicators of true collaboration.

- *Relational Trust*

Actively building relationships and trust is the outstanding first essential element, as this is required to establish strong foundations for rich collaboration, where all parties feel safe. Sharratt and Planche (2016) suggested that collaboration is grounded in trust, safety and strong relationships. Building relationships requires providing opportunities for the various parties to learn more about each other. Relationships build as we work together, share and commit to the collective purpose of the collaboration. “To be truly collaborative as a group of schools we need to be able to trust each other,” commented Principal 1, yet although trust is fundamental, the collaborative group cannot wait for trust to develop before starting to work. Trust does take time to build, but the immediate work of collaboration can allow relationships, and thus hopefully, trust to build.

In order to develop trust when working collaboratively, being open to listening, being non-defensive, having a genuine interest and regard for others, and challenging respectfully are critical. “It is, [however], not easy to open yourself up and to really look deeply at things as it may mean that what you are doing is not as good as you think it is” (Principal 5). Being

open thus requires everyone in the group to feel safe within the collaborative group. Risk-taking in a group requires collective work to be grounded in mutual trust and respect for the capabilities of others in a climate that suspends all judgment. Rich collaboration requires us to let go and to be more open to “digging deep into our own practice” (Principal 6), although doing so leads to feelings of vulnerability.

The values held by educators and their individual schools’ cultures will affect the building of relationships and trust. For this reason it is essential to initially “ensure that discussion about our values and beliefs about teaching and learning share common ground when we are moving forward together” (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 6). Being deliberate about spending time to share perspectives and understandings about teaching and learning will help to accelerate the process of building a strong collaborative team.

True collaboration cannot exist without personal commitment, which makes it possible to engage in robust debate, the deprivatisation of practice and deep sharing. It is recommended to establish a baseline of trust enabling all parties to feel safe to participate in discourse, share practice and sensitive information, and be willing to take calculated risks. Principal 1 discussed the need to be open: “Transparency is really important for true collaboration to take place” (Principal 1). It is through creating a sense of parity that all involved in the collaboration process come to share power equally and contribute to the decision-making. It is important we be competent in our roles and do what we say we will do and follow up. Collaboration works best when treated as true partnership where relational trust is high and each party takes full collective responsibility for achieving the goals agreed to.

- *Collective Responsibility*

Collective responsibility supports a culture of growth and is critical to enhancing the idea that we are all in this together to improve teaching and learning. Whether applied to an Innovative Learning Environment, or more generally to teachers and leaders working within and across schools, participants need to shift their thinking and actions away from “my” class, “my” students or “my” school. To bring about rich collaboration requires accepting collective responsibility and making a mind shift towards thinking and acting as “we”, “us” and “our” in relation to students, classes and schools. For Principal 4, “the key is a sense of team and us as opposed to me. It is about thinking differently”. These ideas were noted by a recent Education Review Office (ERO) report considering collaboration across schools. To develop and function effectively as a collaborative group requires shifts in thinking and practice to accepting a collective commitment and responsibility for the achievement of all students. (ERO, 2016). The process of rich collaboration should thus bring about a sense of joint-ownership and a collective mindset that everyone is responsible and all can make a difference to the learning of all students.

The importance of this complete commitment to their shared responsibility by all parties in the collaborative group enriches the experience of collaboration. Principal 5 commented that, “if I could start our *Kāhui Ako* again we would make sure there is a real understanding to what commitment really means”. The following statements by the heads of one of the

academy of schools I visited in the United Kingdom both emphasised that the “Heads work very closely as a group and all are totally committed”. (Principal 3) and “total buy in from each head is needed or it will not work”. (Principal 2) They talked about regular off-site and overnight think tank retreats to develop and demonstrate the sense of collective responsibility and commitment from all the heads of this collaborative group.

Being part of a group culture should, however, still allow for individual autonomy. This was mentioned by many of the principals I interviewed. “Principals often worry about losing autonomy.” (Principal 5); “There is value in individuals keeping their identity” (Principal 1); and, “it is about getting the balance right between the pressures for change and allowing for the autonomy of each school”(Principal 3) or each participant of the group. Fullan (2015) made the case that it is essential for individuals to be both autonomous and collaborative.

To build collective capability, collaboration can be understood as: “co-labouring to become responsible and accountable for our own work while supporting the work of other collaborators. Co-labouring fosters interdependence as we negotiate meaning and relevance together” (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 6). It is therefore essential that every party be committed to a shared group goal, which has relevance to each party. This will encourage “a collective tunnel vision”¹ from the group to focus on a common problem collaboratively.

- *Clear Purpose*

Clarity of purpose is essential as rich collaboration is purposeful. It is thus important to have high levels of challenge when deciding on a clear purpose to the collaboration:

High performing Communities of Learning/Kāhui Ako are characterised by their clear purpose and focus. The starting point for this clarity is effective internal evaluation at both the individual member and community levels. Analysis of student achievement data and investigation of practice leads to the identification of issues that provide a basis for shared purpose and direction. (ERO, 2017, Collaboration to improve Learner outcomes, pg. 13)

Developing a clear purpose and collective understanding goes beyond building relationships and sharing to focussing on how to improve outcomes for all students: “How can we improve and what is needed to do this? What change will we make to achieve this? A shared understanding and shared value of what we are doing is essential.” (Principal 5) Developing a clear purpose needs to be an inclusive process that will involve all parties. It requires starting with a vision or big picture and then narrowing down to specific goals that will capture the vision and progress student achievement.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggested that once the purpose and goals are identified, it is critical that everyone in the group develops a clear strategy for achieving the goals and be able to see their individual roles in that strategy. Identifying the support required to achieve the goals is essential, the strategy must be put into action, and on-going progress reviewed—“Focused direction is never finished. It is always on going” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016,

¹ Linda Bendickson. Conditions for CoLs – Building Trust Setting Goals. Presentation at Kohia Centre Auckland, 11/10/2016

pg. 45). Principal 1 emphasised, however, that focussing “on the goals...sometimes requires baby steps and a never-give-up attitude”.

- *Time*

Time is a significant factor, as collaboration is a continuous journey and needs time to be nurtured and sustained. In order for rich collaboration to be embedded within and across schools, structural changes may need to be made to allow time for participants to talk, reflect and act on changed practice. Failure to allow enough time may result, as Principal 1 found, “students and teachers [were] not...able to work together.”

Building the capacity of teachers and leaders does not happen without deliberate and careful planning to set the conditions that will allow for true collaboration to take place: “Time is needed to grow, nurture and develop the underlying values, aspirations (purpose) of working collaboratively. Especially when changing practice. High quality outcomes need time to be truly embedded” (Principal 1). Careful planning includes looking at timelines and questioning whether adequate time has been budgeted to realistically enhance the rich collaboration required to make a difference to teaching and learning.

A key message at the SCEL Conference Day, Leading Collaborative Learning at Every Level, was that all students can learn and all teachers can teach given the right time and support. “If time to collaborate is a critical factor in school improvement, we must reconstruct the time we have—there is no more time in a school day” (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 135). School leaders set the tone and create a culture of collaboration, and should recognise that discussion and challenge, the ability to go away to think and reflect, collect other voices, and to come back ready to make a collective decision, are processes that all take time.

Not only do collective communities have to look closely ways of using time more effectively, but they must consider forms of communication that do not lose the essence of social interaction.

- *Communication*

Well-developed communication channels, created early in the establishment of a collaborative community, enable ideas to be shared and new knowledge to be created and used. Being mindful of how communication occurs during collaboration is essential to the success of collective communities, thus it is helpful to have discussions and reach agreement on ways of effectively communicating as a collective group. Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggested that frequent communication will cultivate engagement, but that active listening is even more important. Rich conversations develop common meaning. These involve cycles of sharing and reflection, and will lead to the development of a common language about the purpose, deeper understanding and commitment required. Building opportunities to check with all participants regularly over time is essential: “True collaboration is allowing everyone to have an identity and a voice” (Principal 4).

The use of digital media to consolidate common language and reinforce discussions can be effective. Principal 5 noted, however, that “digital is not always the best form and email is

not always effective. Email for information works...[but]...nothing beats face to face communication.” Digital technology may lead to losing depth of understanding and social interaction. Collaboration requires levels of communication that go deeper than digital communication allows, because “building purposeful and continuous interaction [occurs] over time” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 25), and collective inquiry into teaching and learning processes and practices is a process involving more than just one or two people.

- *Collective Inquiry*

Collective inquiry is defined as the process by which educators build shared knowledge and learn together. It requires openness to new learning and the ability to take informed action. Principal 6 stated, “if you took away the word ‘collaboration’ I would replace it with ‘inquiry’. Because inquiry is what it is all about.” At the heart of rich collaboration is collective inquiry which

involves working with other educators who have common goals, seeking to understand and respond to issues of teaching and learning through the use of a deliberate process. Using student evidence of learning as the basis for the inquiry, those involved in the inquiry seek to solve problems or issues of practice that affect student achievement. (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 253)

The goal of collective inquiry is to raise the achievement of students through making meaning together using a problem solving approach, which will result in shifting mindsets and practice. Collectively inquiring into practice requires and altering practice, because to continue the same practice will lead to the same results. School leaders have to set sufficiently flexible conditions to allow teachers and students to take calculated risks.

It is important to know what is happening for the learners—both students and teachers as learners. “We cannot assume we know what is happening for learners without asking them” (Timperley, 2015). Collective inquiry into finding out what is happening with students will illuminate many possible areas of need and it is important to narrow the focus on one or two areas to really make a difference. “We have set two challenges aside and are now just focusing on one challenge” (Principal 5). Collective inquiry that focusses on a specific area of need, carefully examines practices and researches different approaches that may make a difference. During action, progress is continually reviewed. “Deep and systematic inquiry becomes a professional way of life” (Timperley, 2015) and thus creates a continuous cycle of growth and improvement. The challenge for leaders is to create “a culture of genuine curiosity about what is happening for learners” and put systems in place that will encourage “deep inquiry in ways that create agency to make a difference” (2015).

Leading collaborative processes

A key message emerging from the SCEL Conference Day in Perth, Scotland, that I attended was that we are all leaders no matter where we are in a school or cluster of schools.

Collaboration requires people to lead. This is often through influence rather than position, but both are appropriate. In an increasingly complex world leaders must be able to navigate complexity, explore multiple perspectives and feel comfortable in not having all the answers. (CORE Education, nd)

Leadership can include other leaders within schools, and as Principal 4 indicated, in hindsight it was an error not include the senior leadership teams of the schools soon enough in the initial establishment of the Community of Learning of which this principal is part. Senior leaders and middle leaders are the vital link between teachers and the school leaders. “Middle leaders are well positioned to offer support and challenge to teachers and lead their learning both within their own school and across partner schools” (Brown & Stoll 2014).

School leaders, however, remain crucial in creating a focus for action, establishing enabling conditions, and shaping a pathway for change:

We need leaders who create a culture of growth; know how to engage the hearts and minds of everyone; and focus their collective intelligence, talent, and commitment to shaping a new path. They recognise that what pulls people in is meaningful work in collaboration with others. (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 47)

Being flexible and reflective are important ingredients for those leading collaborative inquiry, as “the new process of change shifts from a notion of sequential, discrete stages of the traditional alignment of policy, resources, skill development, and supports (getting pieces aligned) to a more organic process of diffusion and continuous learning” (2016, p. 27). Leading collective inquiry and working collaboratively can be messy and unpredictable, yet challenging and exciting as noticeable differences can be made to student learning and achievement.

The need for having strong educational leaders who understand the importance of innovative approaches to teaching and learning was emphatically stated by Principal 1, while the importance of leaders with total commitment was emphasised by Principal 5: “Principals need to buy in ... be willing to change and not just listen and share”, and Principal 4 added that the “inner belief that what we are doing here is important” is essential to progressing the work of rich collaboration to enhance student achievement.

The importance of leadership at all levels leading in the collaborative process cannot be treated lightly and will be the driving force towards to creating the conditions in which rich collaboration can thrive.

Complexities and challenges

Collaborative work creates challenges and applies to both within school and across school situations. The key is for collaboration to go beyond the level of conversation and reflection and to include a focused inquiry with a commitment to act. The Principals interviewed talked about the challenges of collaboration such as “people’s personalities playing a huge part. Opening doors and trusting each other” (Principal 4). The complexities and challenges are often not evident until embarking on the collective journey of true collaboration. “The Lead Principal role...I had no idea of what it would entail. I went for the job because I could see that it has massive positives” (Principal 4). While it is difficult to know the challenges in advance of starting out on a collaborative journey, this should however not be a restraint to collaboration. It is therefore important to manage and work through each situation as it occurs with openness and clarity. Fullan (2015) stated that it is essential for individuals to maintain their autonomy during collaboration. The fear of losing autonomy can be a barrier to rich collaboration, emphasising the need to encourage an understanding and commitment to the common good of the group focused on enhanced student learning.

Implications and impact on student achievement

Collaborative learning makes a difference to increasing all student achievement and Sharratt and Planche (2016) suggested that teachers and leaders are responsible for ensuring that opportunities for collaborative learning are powerful and meaningful for both individuals and teams of learners (teachers and students). Being focused on a collective student achievement inquiry or challenge and being deliberate about channelling professional learning is essential. For one group of Auckland schools, working collaboratively has “already raised our student achievement even though it is early days” (Principal 5). Creating a learning culture within and across schools where leaders, teachers and learners are expected to develop their learner agency and help others to do the same can only have a powerful effect on student achievement.

Purposeful collaboration and collaborative learning is a journey that increases confidence and abilities of all who are deeply involved. Principal 6 stated that strengthening collaboration is a journey and understanding the difference between cooperation and collaboration has been a challenge. Their teachers have an understanding that collaboration means collectively digging deep into their practices and are now focusing on how to work together to lift their teaching practice. Rich collaboration should bring about new learning, a shift in teaching practice and improved outcomes for students. Linda Bendikson² suggested viewing collaboration as an opportunity to innovate whilst always checking for impact, ensuring purposeful innovation. To build a culture of growth, Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggested that organisations need to support learning, innovation and action through cultivating collaboration. Rich collaborative cultures are powerful drivers of improvement. The impact of collaboration on student learning is that “most great learning happens in

² See Footnote 1.

groups. Collaboration is the stuff of growth” (Sir Ken Robinson, cited in Sharratt & Planche, 2016 p. 21). Therefore, deliberate and careful planning to set things in place to truly understand and commit to working collaboratively will make a difference to both teaching and learning.

Conclusion

While this report has only just touched the surface, it is evident that “collaborating is turning out to be a powerful but complex strategy” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 74). The collaborative learning cycle asks participants to use assessment to plan, put into action, check for impact and refine while growing and learning. Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggested that collaborative work is a key driver in shifting mindset and that there is no one way to build a culture of growth or to learn collaboratively, but that success requires a focused collaborative agenda that relates to the system’s goals. Collaboration strengthens over time as relational trust grows and a deeper understanding of what it means to ‘co-labour’ and problem-solve together.

The focus of rich collaboration, whether involving leaders, teachers or students co-labouring together, is to have a definite impact on student achievement. It is about consistent, collective shaping and reshaping of ideas and solutions that forms the essence of rich collaboration within and across schools. Fullan and Quinn went as far as to say that “there was never a time when collaborative power was more needed to work through absolutely rapid change dynamics aimed at deep learning. Only the purposefully collaborative will survive!” (2016, p. 73) Collaboration is not simple and requires careful thinking, preparation and time to achieve, and to really understand collaboration requires allowing it to develop over time by repeated action and reflection.

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