

**SHIFTING THE ROLE:  
SCHOOL-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS' EXPERIENCES  
AS THEY BUILD A LEARNING COMMUNITY**

John Dickson, *District School Board of Niagara,*

and [Coral Mitchell](#), *Brock University*

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative action-research study that explored how one group of district-level school superintendents conceptualized their role as they built their own learning community. Data analysis yielded four elements that supported the participants' efforts: (a) using a process as an entry point, (b) aligning various problems of practice, (c) providing supportive conditions, and (d) having a deep understanding of learning-community principles. From this experience, participants saw a need to shift the role of superintendent from a director of professional learning to a lead learner participating directly with teachers and principals.

### **Introduction**

Ever since Senge (1990) introduced the concept of a learning organization, educational theorists have been adapting this idea for schools and school organizations. Over the years, the concept evolved into what is commonly referred to as *learning communities* wherein schools are repurposed to support educators' as well as students' learning. This view of schools has been accompanied by a shift in thinking about how educational leaders use professional development as a vehicle for improving teaching and learning. In practice, school- and district-level leaders are positioned as key players in building sustainable learning communities (Sackney & Mitchell, 2008), with school leaders creating the internal conditions and district leaders creating the

systemic conditions (Fullan, 2005). Yet, although district-level superintendents usually hold primary administrative responsibility for school improvement initiatives, the role of district-level superintendents in building capacity for learning communities has not been adequately explored. This gap in the research base was addressed by the study reported in this paper. Specifically, the paper presents the findings of a study undertaken to investigate how one group of district-level superintendents studied and understood their role as they participated in their own learning community.

### **Learning Communities as Professional Learning**

Although the term *learning community* has become ubiquitous in today's educational lexicon, a universal understanding of this concept is lacking. As Fullan (2005) notes, "there is a growing problem in large-scale reform; namely, the *terms* travel well, but the underlying conceptualization and thinking do not" (p. 10). This lack of conceptual clarity has led educators to identify any team or meeting as a learning community, regardless of how the team was formed or what was its purpose. Some of these teams are no more learning communities than when teachers turn students' desks together during instruction and call it co-operative learning. In fact, when teams or meetings have been mandated from above and use top-down methods to drive the agenda of the team or the purpose of the meeting, they represent the antithesis of authentic learning communities. Leithwood (2010) maintains that, under such circumstances, learning communities do not yield the expected transformation of instructional practices and improvement in student learning.

According to Hardy (2010), most district-wide professional development initiatives use top-down models whereby teachers and principals are told what professional learning needs to

take place and how it will be done. This approach typically requires educators to be withdrawn from their classrooms, often after hours and outside of school, to attend workshops at which they are introduced to specific instructional strategies or programs that they are then expected to implement in their classrooms. The content of these workshops is often based on a perceived systemic need or “best practice” as determined by district-level administrators and staff (Hardy, 2010). Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, and Beatty (2010) contend that these methods are not effective because (a) they do not honour the teacher as a professional, (b) they take the teacher out of the key professional environment, (c) they assume that outside experts know best what kind of professional learning teachers need, and (d) they do not give teachers autonomy over their own learning. Bruce and Ross (2009) and Mitchell and Sackney (2009) point out that this kind of professional learning often leaves principals and teachers feeling silenced and powerless. The negative impact on their sense of professional efficacy is likely to be counterproductive in achieving the goal of improved student outcomes.

Mitchell and Sackney (2009) argue against the traditional model of professional development and advocate a shift toward building learning communities to support substantive professional growth. Supovitz (cited in Katz, Earl, & Jaafar, 2009) describes a learning community in this way:

Members of a group engage together in challenges of practice so that their understanding of those challenges grows deeper and more unified. Through their investigations, proposed solutions emerge that are then tested to see if they help . . . Through such a repeated process, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful and the group develops a tighter sense of camaraderie and common purpose. As a result, they can construct understanding, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals.  
(p. 17)

Stoll, Bolan, McMahon, Wallis, and Thomas (2006), in a review of related literature, summarize the definition of a professional learning community as “a group of people sharing and crucially

interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (p. 223). Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) broaden the lens by including a focus on student learning and related teacher learning. Stoll et al. state further that the “key purpose of professional learning communities’ work is to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals, for students’ ultimate benefit” (p. 229). These definitions imply that a learning community should not simply bring professionals together but should engage educators, at all levels of the system, in collaborative work that critiques and refines educational practices, with the goal of enhancing the student experience and improving student achievement.

This goal links professional learning communities to the effects of collaborative inquiry on student achievement. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) state that, since there is a strong and direct correlation between teaching practices and student achievement, educators should continually build the capacity to match their teaching strategies to students’ learning profiles. At the individual level, each teacher is expected to have the instructional knowledge, skills, and ability to ensure that each student is routinely successful (Marzano et al., 2005). At the school level, capacity takes on a collective dimension when communities of teachers develop a shared sense of effective teaching and learning, and an ethic of collaborative inquiry (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). At the district level, capacity refers to the “complex of structures, management systems, and support mechanisms that contribute to goal attainment” (Lee, cited in Bruce et al., 2010, p. 1). These capacities position a learning community as functioning within three domains: the personal, wherein individuals increase their own professional competencies; the interpersonal, where shared understandings and common purposes emerge from collaborative critique; and the organizational, which brings educators together and supplies the resources to facilitate collaborative work.

In a culture of collaborative inquiry, learning communities deprivatize teacher practice and create a collective commitment to change. For Katz et al. (2009), it is a culture that “engages educators in opening up their beliefs and practices to investigation and debate” (p. 13).

According to City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009), such a culture invites educators to critically analyze the instructional core and dominant theories of action, and to use student work as a source of information about effective strategies for teaching and learning. At a practical level, David (2009) states, “teachers work together to identify common challenges, analyze relevant data, and test out instructional approaches” (p. 87). Through collaborative inquiry, teams of professionals use observations of students, conversations in the classroom, and analysis of student work to uncover, develop, and share effective professional practices and then to inform and adjust instruction so as to reach every student.

Although the literature on learning communities has been primarily directed toward school-based educators, district-level administrators play a key role in creating the conditions that enable and support activities at the school. Waters and Marzano (2007), for example, find that district-level administrators in high-performing school districts set clear, non-negotiable goals for student achievement and teacher instruction, align all professional development and school improvement activities with these goals, provide appropriate resources to achieve the goals, and monitor progress toward the goals. Hirsh (2010) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) offer lists of specific practices, such as initiating conversations about achievement data, new research, and leading-edge innovations, that align well with Waters and Marzano’s emphasis on directing all professional learning toward the goal of high-quality teaching and improved student achievement.

In summary, the purpose of professional learning at every level of the organization is to build teacher capacity to teach effectively. Capacity, according to Bruce and Ross (2009), is the “ability to achieve stated goals” (p. 1). In order to achieve the goals, they maintain, teachers need professional learning models that will empower them to engage in meaningful, classroom-embedded inquiry. If district-level school superintendents better understand the essence of authentic learning communities, they may be better equipped to create the conditions within which this sense of empowerment can flourish for all stakeholders. However, superintendents who have not themselves participated in a learning community may have some difficulty with the process. The study reported in this paper was undertaken to address this issue.

### **Context of the Study**

According to many researchers (e.g., City et al., 2009; Katz et al., 2009; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009, 2011), there is a strong relationship between school improvement and educators' capacity-building activities in learning communities. However, much of the research has focused on the roles that teachers and principals play in building learning communities, with little attention paid to the role of district-level superintendents. In most jurisdictions, superintendents have primary responsibility for developing, implementing, monitoring, and refining the processes and conditions in which learning communities function. The problem for many superintendents, however, is that they often have little personal experience with learning communities upon which to draw. This issue can, in part, be attributed to the managerial role that superintendents typically play in most school boards, which encourages superintendents to develop skill sets that are potentially incommensurate with the philosophy of learning communities.

This incommensurability is problematic because effective classroom practices are derived, in part, from the leadership shown to educators by those responsible for providing professional learning opportunities. Robinson (2007), for example, in a meta-analysis of 11 studies on leadership dimensions and their impact on student learning, found that the single most impactful factor (average effect size of 0.84) was leaders who not only promoted professional learning initiatives but also participated directly with teachers in professional learning. She adds,

if the research focus shifted to leaders' promotion of, and participation in, the kinds of professional development that have a demonstrable impact on students, as well as on the participating teachers, then the impact of this leadership dimension on student outcomes is likely to be even larger than that reported to date. (p. 22)

This observation implies that district-level superintendents will be better equipped to create appropriate professional learning opportunities if they understand the essential character of learning communities and if they have personal experiences with the process of building learning communities.

The question of appropriate professional learning was a concern for the board of education that hosted the study reported in this paper. In that jurisdiction, district-level superintendents and the director of education had determined that the goals around student achievement were not being met systemically. Overall trends in student achievement, as measured by annual provincial tests, were, for the most part, either flat-lining or on a downward trajectory. The superintendents realized that the top-down model of professional development was not as effective as they had hoped and decided that an alternative approach was required. They chose to explore the concept of learning communities as a model for professional learning. This decision arose from promising results coming out of some elementary schools in which learning communities were being built to improve and enrich teachers' classroom practices.

To initiate the system-wide process, each superintendent brought together the school principals in his or her administrative portfolio to build what was called a *principal network learning community*. The assumption was that the principal network learning community would provide direction and support for the school-based learning communities. As the superintendents worked with the principal network learning communities, they grappled with two questions: First, how could the superintendents determine whether the school-based initiatives were effective in changing teacher practice? Second, how could they bring some consistency to what was happening throughout the system? As they discussed their attempts to answer these questions, the superintendents realized that they each had a different interpretation of what a learning community should do and be. They decided to build their own superintendent-level learning community in order to arrive at some common understandings about the concept.

The superintendents had a long history of working together effectively as a collaborative team, but they had not participated as a group in planned learning activities. The decision to grow their own learning community came from a desire to extend their collaborative practices into their individual and collective learning. The research project reported in this paper began with the inception of the superintendents' learning community. By tracking the experiences of one group of superintendents as they developed their own learning community, the research was expected to inform efforts to build sustainable learning communities in this and other school jurisdictions.



## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore what contexts, processes, contents, and conditions were used by a group of superintendents as they created their own learning community. The study tracked their experiences through the following questions:

1. How do the superintendents build personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacity in their learning community?
2. How do the superintendents conceptualize and make use of the processes, content, context, and conditions with which capacity can be built?

These questions integrated two existing frameworks, one theoretical and one experiential.

Mitchell and Sackney's (2009, 2011) theoretical framework for learning communities builds capacity in three domains: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. Mitchell and Sackney (2009) describe *personal capacity* as the search for knowledge as one engages in a process of discovery, reflection, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of existing and new knowledge.

*Interpersonal capacity* shifts "the focus from the individual to the group [and] accommodates a discussion of how learning is shaped by interactions among members of a community" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011, p. 53). Mitchell and Sackney (2009) define *organizational capacity* as the systems and structures within which personal and interpersonal capacities are developed. The experimental framework, based on Katz et al.'s (2009) work on guided inquiry, situates capacity-building experiences within the key elements of *process, content, context, and conditions*. The experiential framework was used to guide the superintendents' process as they developed their learning activities, whereas the theoretical framework was used to analyze the types of capacity being built. With these two frameworks, the study tracked how these superintendents increased their understanding of what makes a learning community effective. This deeper understanding was expected to help them bridge the gap between the theories in which learning communities are grounded and the practice of implementing the concept.

## **Methods and Procedures**

The project followed a qualitative methodology positioned within an action research design (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001), a participant observer method (Mills, 2000), and a focus-group structure (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). This research process brought together a group of district-level superintendents who were building a learning community within their cadre. As they created their own learning community, participants were faced with a variety of new learning experiences. Since these experiences were not predetermined prior to the commencement of the study, the qualitative design features represented an appropriate research strategy to allow participants to explore and evolve their thinking, insights, and learning.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants from district-level superintendents in one medium-sized school board in Ontario. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) define a purposeful sample as those individuals who “are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researcher is investigating” (p. 401). Knowledgeable individuals were considered to be those superintendents who were creating their own learning community. Specifically, superintendents who were members of the identified learning community, who volunteered to be part of the study, and who agreed to attend the focus-group meetings were eligible for selection, and 5 superintendents met all three criteria. Three participants were superintendents of elementary schools, 1 was an assistant superintendent of elementary schools, and 1 was superintendent of secondary schools. Of the 5 participants, 2 were female and 3 male; 1 had less than 1 year experience in the role, 2 had between 2 and 5 years experience, and 2 had between 6 and 8 years experience. The researcher was one of the 5 participating superintendents and served as participant observer (Mills, 2000).

Data were collected during three 3-hour focus-group meetings in which participants were guided through a process of individual and collective inquiry into how they worked with school principals to build learning communities. Three focus-group meetings was considered a reasonable number, given the inter-meeting time needed to implement the plans emerging from the meetings and other time commitments of the superintendents' administrative portfolios.

At or prior to an introductory meeting, participants received two possible models for conducting and recording their experiences: a collaborative-inquiry model and a lesson-plan model (see Appendix A). These two models were chosen because they had previously been used to guide the superintendents' work with the principal network learning community. Although most of the participants were familiar with the models, the process of using each model was explained at the introductory meeting in order to promote common understandings. At the conclusion of this meeting, each superintendent chose one of the models to guide subsequent work with the principal network learning communities and identified a specific problem of practice that their work with the principals would address. In the month following the meeting, the superintendents developed plans to implement the model, applied the plans in meetings with their principal network learning communities, and discussed the outcomes of the activities with other superintendents. At the next focus-group meeting, participants met to share their experiences, to analyze their learning, and to identify the next steps in their process.

In each focus-group meeting, participants explained how they used their chosen model to develop learning goals for their principal network learning communities, and they referred to the model as they reflected on the learning outcomes and established goals for the next round of learning. For the first two focus-group meetings, the participants invited an external expert to assist in their learning process; for the final meeting, they met without the external expert to

reflect on their experiences and to articulate their learning outcomes. Upon completion of each meeting, participants were invited to comment on anything else they felt was relevant to share. Data were collected by audio-taping the meetings as participants worked through the process and reflected on their learning experiences and outcomes.

McMillan and Schumacher (2001, p. 466) establish interim data analysis as a process to detect emerging topics or patterns and to inform subsequent data collection. In this study, interim data analysis occurred during and after each focus-group meeting to identify themes and patterns emerging from the discussions. As their thinking was subjected to probing and clarifying questions at the meetings, the participants were continually reflecting on their ideas and making their tacit theories and understandings explicit. Through this reflective process, new working theories and corresponding action plans emerged. Participants refined and executed their theories and plans and shared the results at the next meeting, and thus the process continued.

Final analysis began with McMillan and Schumacher's (2001) strategy of sorting by predetermined categories. Specifically, the data were organized into a matrix (Appendix B), with the vertical axis representing the theoretical framework of personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacity (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009) and the horizontal axis representing the experiential framework of process, content, context, and conditions (Katz et al., 2009). Descriptors for each element of the two frameworks had been determined from a review of the literature (see Appendix B), and data units were placed in the cells that most closely matched their meaning. For example, the statement "I differentiate the strategies that I use at each network and I try to be very intentional" was placed in the cell associated with personal capacity (individual skill) and process (inquiry method). This data display was inspected for distribution patterns in the placement of data across the cells.

Once the data from all three focus-group meetings were placed on the matrix, an inductive analysis was conducted to draw out common themes and to generate interpretive results. This analysis used the constant comparison method (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 468) to search for phrases or sentences that conveyed similar meanings, to cluster the similar data units, to determine a label that characterized the similarities, and to examine the clustered data for elements that mediated and informed participants' understandings about learning communities. The inductive analysis yielded four key elements that supported the participants' efforts to build capacity for learning communities: (a) using a process to frame activities within learning communities; (b) aligning the various problems of practice within the system; (c) providing supportive conditions; and (d) having a deep understanding of the purpose, essential features, and underlying principles of a learning community.

## **Results and Discussion**

The first level of analysis was deductive, in that the data were categorized according to pre-existing descriptors from the theoretical and experiential frameworks. The second level was inductive, in that the organizing structure emerged from the data themselves. The results will be presented and discussed first with respect to the distribution of data across the data matrix and second with respect to the four elements from the inductive analysis.

### *Data Distribution*

An inspection of the display matrix revealed that most of the data fell within the personal process and organizational process cells, followed by the organizational context cell. The remaining data were distributed relatively evenly but sparsely across the personal context,

personal conditions, organizational conditions, and personal content cells. The data located in the personal domain came entirely from the 5 participants, whereas the data in the organizational domain came entirely from the external expert. Very little data was evident in the content cells, and almost no data fell within the interpersonal domain. This analysis indicates that the participants were primarily building capacity around personal learning processes, but had not moved as far into the content, context, and conditions of learning, and had not yet moved into building capacity at the interpersonal or organizational levels.

We have chosen one example to demonstrate evidence of increasing capacity. In the first focus-group meeting, one participant identified this goal: “I want to learn about getting the right questions. If you don’t have the right question, it leads to failure in the group.” In the final session, he explained that his efforts to develop good questions with the principals had changed the way he worked with them on a more general level. He offered this description:

Helping them to not only identify that narrow focus, that narrow inquiry, but helping them get to it, to execute it. [I say,] “You can’t do everything, but you can do one thing really well. Where do you want to spend your time? How can I help you to do that?”

Although the participants all worked on different learning goals, each one commented in the final session that their participation in the superintendents’ learning community had changed how they approached their work. One participant, for example, noted,

having feedback and input from my colleagues provided me with insights and perspectives that I would not have gleaned on my own. Plus, having that give-and-take, that push back, forced me to be very clear in my own thinking around an issue.

A similar comment came from another participant:

We are in a more refined place, deeper thinking, than we were at the beginning. As we go through this process, I realize that this is about our learning, and it has taken us time to get to this realization. We all learn

differently and I am becoming more and more conscious of it as I get into this role.

In general, increased capacity was evident in new understandings about learning communities, new practices in their work with colleagues and with school principals, and new views of the superintendent's role.

Data analysis revealed that the participants were building capacity largely in the personal domain, with little or no capacity being built in the interpersonal and organizational domains. Mitchell and Sackney (2009, 2011) contend that an authentic learning community is best achieved when capacity is built in all three domains simultaneously, with growth in one domain influencing growth in the others. They argue that a conceptual understanding of learning communities emerges from examining and experiencing the interrelationships among personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors. Given that the superintendents were in the beginning stages of constructing their learning community, it is not surprising that the personal domain received the greatest attention. As Mitchell and Sackney (2011) note, a "learning community is first and foremost about people, and it is with people that personal capacity is concerned" (p. 20). However, this result is somewhat troubling in light of the role of district-level superintendents in providing professional learning opportunities in general and in orchestrating the implementation of learning communities in particular.

Mitchell and Sackney (2011) suggest that when capacity is primarily built in the personal domain, a sense of alienation could ensue. Under these conditions, participants might "learn new ideas but have no one to talk to about them and little space to experiment with them" (p. 31). In this study, their elevated position within the organizational hierarchy gave the participating superintendents the autonomy to set their own conditions for work; therefore, it might be assumed that their positions and work portfolios automatically delivered sufficient

organizational capacity. Moreover, the superintendents had a history of working effectively as a collaborative team, so it might be assumed that they had already developed sufficient interpersonal capacity. Furthermore, the structure of this board provided the superintendents with opportunities at the principal network learning communities to discuss and experiment with new ideas generated at superintendent meetings. Yet by limiting their learning discussions, reflections, and analyses to the personal domain, superintendents potentially limited their own learning as well as the learning of others in the system. In their focus-group meetings, the superintendents found that the discussion with their peers exposed them to diverse ideas from various corners of the system. This broader perspective helped them work as a team to support learning throughout the system, rather than just for the schools in their portfolio. Consequently, movement toward explicitly building interpersonal and organizational capacity should be considered the next step in the superintendents' development as a fully functioning learning community.

#### *Use of a Framing Process*

A key finding from the inductive analysis was the importance of having access to a process to guide the work of the learning community. The participants in this study recognized that having a specific model to develop their plans helped them to work through the complexities of the process and to develop the deep understanding that would prepare them to use the model effectively. As one participant noted,

having a framework was beneficial because it provided me with a way to get the process started and to help guide our discussions when we got bogged down on certain issues or couldn't seem to move the conversation along. It also provided some consistency in the networks because while we were all working on individual inquiry questions, we were all following the same format.



Many authors (e.g., Bruce et al., 2010; Eaker, Dufour, & Burnette, 2002; Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, & Lehtinen, 2004; Katz et al., 2009) have presented models, frameworks, and processes that facilitate capacity building within learning communities. In this study, the participants chose two inquiry models described by Katz et al. (2009) because they were grounded in research and they provided a comfortable access point. With the choice of two models, the superintendents felt better able to understand both the content and the processes associated with learning communities, as well as the relationships between the two. They used the model as an entry point into their learning community and as a practical way to invite other people into their learning. As their experience grew, the model became a way to identify, structure, and reflect on their learning goals and outcomes.

However, this result raises some issues. Mitchell and Sackney (2009) and Katz et al. (2009) caution that relying on a framework could limit members' understanding to the framework itself, without bringing them to an appreciation of the key principles of a learning community. Under these circumstances, the profound shift in thinking required for deep engagement with the practices associated with learning communities is lost, and implementation of the model becomes formulaic rather than capacity-building. On this issue, the participants came to realize that using a framework was appropriate as a starting point, but it was not an end point, nor would it automatically lead to the desired changes in practice. These results suggest that introducing a model without simultaneously having educators understand why and how it helps to build capacity could easily become an activity trap. Under these circumstances, the learning would be more about the procedures of the model than about the professional knowledge that the model should facilitate.

As their understanding of the nature of the learning community deepened, the participants considered how to change the professional learning opportunities for principals and teachers. They recognized that traditional professional learning was largely ineffectual because it was directed from above, it did not link directly to student achievement, and it led many educators to feel disempowered. They ultimately realized that, if principals and teachers were to change their practice, they needed to lead their own professional learning. On this point, one participant observed, "I am trying to transition myself out of the facilitator's role and more and more have [the school principals] take it on. I keep referring back to the gradual release of responsibility and moving from modelled to shared to guided to independent."

Bruce et al. (2010) arrived at similar conclusions in their study of professional learning and its impact on teacher efficacy. They found that teachers felt more efficacious when they controlled their own professional learning and that those with high teacher efficacy were more likely to (a) try out new and difficult instructional strategies, (b) use classroom management approaches to stimulate student autonomy and reduce custodial control, (c) attend more closely to the needs of lower ability students, and (d) influence student achievement through teacher persistence and an expectation of student persistence. These findings suggest that teachers who have autonomy over their own professional learning are more likely to adapt their practice in order to improve student outcomes. This understanding was central to the superintendents' realization that they could and should free principals and teachers to control their own professional learning.

### *Alignment of Problems of Practice*

A second finding to emerge from inductive analysis was the importance of establishing a direct connection between the superintendents' problems of practice and the principals' and teachers' problems of practice. One participant made the point in this way: "Principals get the alignment piece: that teacher learning needs are based on kid learning needs, principal learning needs are based on teacher learning needs, and superintendent learning needs are based on principal learning needs." This finding extends the research of Hord (2008), Katz et al. (2009), and Militello, Rallis, and Goldring (2009), who assert that the focus of learning communities begins with a problem of practice around student achievement. Given the hierarchical structure in which the participants worked, it was unrealistic to expect that they would know the learning profiles of the thousands of students in their care. It was, therefore, logical that they would determine student learning goals by way of principal learning goals, who in turn would determine their learning goals by way of teacher learning goals, which is based on student learning outcomes.

However, identifying a compelling problem of practice proved to be one of their greatest challenges. They found it difficult to bridge the gap between "we learn as a group of superintendents" and "student learning improves." In fact, this challenge became their first problem of practice: How do we as superintendents determine what students' real learning needs are, so that we can create the conditions to respond appropriately? In an attempt to identify a problem of practice that could lead to meaningful and sustained improvement in student achievement, the superintendents mapped a series of If/Then statements that led from their actions to student achievement. With this strategy, they were able to direct their own learning toward the learning of students, in spite of the hierarchical separation between them. This

strategy also helped the participants to realize that the essential purpose of a learning community is to structure professional learning around problems of practice that connect directly to the experiences and outcomes of students. The participants recognized that the impacts of their own learning on student outcomes might not be easily or quickly determined, but they were committed to finding a pathway that would connect their work as superintendents to the experiences of students in the classroom and to students' ultimate learning outcomes.

This finding raises two related issues: (a) identifying the problems of practice that will maximize student learning, and (b) asking the questions that will help members identify a compelling problem of practice. In the words of one participant, "if we learn to ask better questions, then principals will ask better questions and teachers will ask better questions and they will be able to determine their narrow focus based on their students' needs." For these participants, the professional learning process within a learning community was constrained by the extent to which they could generate meaningful and relevant problems of practice. The participants noted that asking the right questions at the right time could elicit the tacit thinking of the members of their learning community. This thinking could then be opened for scrutiny and debate, which could lead to deeper understanding by all members.

This approach represents a profound shift in administrative thought and practice. Traditionally, superintendents have taken a top-down approach to professional learning by identifying so-called best practice that all teachers are expected to use and then requiring teachers to attend workshops to acquire these skills. However, when these participants saw the need to connect their own problem of practice with the principals' and teachers' problems of practice, they realized that they had to shift away from the traditional role of control over professional learning. They further realized that they needed to align the learning of

superintendents with the essential learning required of students, teachers, principals. Their experience confirms Darling-Hammond and Richardson's (2009) argument that leaders should facilitate the creation of work-embedded professional learning opportunities that emerge naturally from actual student learning experiences.

### *Creation of Supportive Conditions*

The third key finding from inductive analysis was the crucial role of system leaders in creating conditions for professional learning. In this study, the participants noted that sharing and modelling their learning at the principal network meetings helped to create safer conditions for the principals as they engaged in their own inquiry process. As one participant stated, "what's most important is that we show principals and teachers that we are learning, too; that we don't have all the answers and we don't tell them what to do, but rather we model the learning process for them." By defining themselves as co-learners, the superintendents were building an environment in which principals could feel safe to experiment and take risks. Moreover, the participants were reconceptualizing their role from a director of learning to a lead learner. They saw this shift as a necessary condition for building capacity among the principals with whom they worked.

A related outcome was the role played by critical friends. The participants understood critical friends as those trusted colleagues who offer fresh insights into one's own professional practice. Katz et al. (2009) suggest that critical friends can be a powerful influence in the learning process, but they do not see being a critical friend as an easy task. In this study, the participants faced some difficult realities with this strategy:

When we sit around the table as a senior team, we don't play the role of critical friend. We started that here today, but it's no wonder that our

principals can't do that for each other and our teachers can't do that at their PLCs. We can't do that or we haven't done that for each other.

Katz et al. (2009) further argue that hierarchical power relationships can affect the authenticity and effectiveness of the critical friend. Specifically, they contend that members in a group may defer to the wishes of a superior due to imbalances of power. This phenomenon was evident in the participants' observation that, in their principal network meetings, the principals often deferred to the superintendents as the experts and looked to them for approval. Having a critical friend of the same formal position or title, as was the case in the superintendents' learning community, potentially creates more appropriate learning conditions. Interestingly, however, the same deference to authority manifested itself in the two focus-group meetings that included the external expert. In these two sessions, the superintendents, who had attained a high level of authority and position within the organization, still turned to the external expert for affirmation, clarification, and advice. This result demonstrates that deference to authority is a deep-seated tendency that appears at every level of the organization. Because power imbalances affect the ability of colleagues to serve as critical friends, creating the right conditions involves paying attention to the power dynamics within a learning community.

The power dynamics in learning communities are assumed to be characterized by distributed leadership and shared power (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Yet authentic power sharing is not easy to achieve, given the traditional model of "command and control" schooling policies and administrative practices. Although the superintendents in this study had, through the principal network learning communities, begun to break down the power imbalance between district-level and school-level administrators, the deference to authority evident in the data implies that the cultural assumptions of the traditional model prevailed. This finding indicates that, if power is to be authentically shared, district-level administrators will

need not just to make technical or structural adjustments but also to confront and challenge deeply rooted cultural and philosophical mindsets about the distribution of power.

The participants' experiences in building their own learning community demonstrated to the superintendents that they had a new role to play in building learning capacity within the school system. Specifically, they saw a need to shift their role from a traditional manager to a lead learner. In practice, this means that superintendents take their own learning seriously, ask themselves, "What do we need to get better at?" and set up a plan of action to answer this question. They become participants in professional learning instead of merely providers of professional development. By moving toward this new role, superintendents signal that learning for all—students, teachers, principals, and superintendents—is the focus throughout the organization. Moreover, by extending participation in learning communities across the system, superintendents create the conditions for learning community processes to be more sustainable. As Capra (2002) points out, sustainability is a property of an entire system, not of the individual units therein, because resonances and feedback loops support and sustain those activities and practices in which the community as a whole is predominantly engaged. In other words, if district-level leaders actively participate in learning community processes, they set up feedback loops that can sustain the processes at the school level.

This point implies that superintendents need to engage in the inquiry process themselves if they are to understand how it works and how principals and teachers feel as they go through the process. It also implies the need to anchor collegial learning as a way of life at every level of the system. Personal experience with both the process and expected and actual outcomes helped these superintendents to understand that the fundamental nature of collaborative inquiry places ownership for learning in the hands of those who must implement

the learned practices (David, 2009). In the traditional approach, superintendents often tell principals and teachers what they should learn. However, this study confirmed that creating supportive conditions means inviting individuals to identify their own learning goals, to develop authentic professional learning experiences, and, on the basis of these experiences, to increase their professional capacity.

### *Deep Understanding of Learning Communities*

The most compelling finding to emerge from the data was the importance for educational leaders to have a deep understanding of the essential character and underlying principles of learning communities. These understandings and philosophical beliefs reflect a “profound shift in how we think about, talk about, and value learning” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009, p. 1). The participants in this study understood the complexity involved in this profound shift, and they noted its connection with the technical aspect of learning communities. This awareness is evident in one participant’s description of a principal network meeting:

When we [the superintendent and school principals] came to the realization that the common focus of the professional learning community was to maximize capacity for all teachers so that they in turn could maximize capacity for all kids, then they [the principals] realized that *they are* the professional learning community, and that *they are* the vehicle through which real change will occur. This is simply the way for them to get there. What was lacking was their understanding of what a true network or professional learning community looks like—what a true collaborative inquiry should look like, and that is where their learning has greatly improved. They had to own it, and they had to understand it before they could own it.

The necessity of deep understanding is also reflected in current literature. Mitchell and Sackney (2009), for example, assert that without this deep understanding, educators are merely “tinkering at the edges” (p. 1) of educational practice. “Tinkering at the edges” implies that leaders may be able to identify, understand, and use the technical aspects of a learning community, but they



might not have the conceptual understandings and philosophical beliefs required to sustain meaningful and authentic change. As they moved through the challenges of growing their own learning community, these superintendents developed a deeper understanding of the relationships between belief and technique.

This focus shifts the educator culture from one of teaching to one of learning. To navigate this transition successfully requires superintendents to develop leadership attributes and practices that are grounded in the philosophy, principles, conditions, and processes of the learning community concept. Developing this deep understanding, however, is not easily achieved, nor does it occur in isolation. In this study, it required a commitment to learning together through an iterative, reflective process. These participants began by constructing a shared understanding of why they were participating in a learning community, and gradually deepened their understanding of underlying principles as they worked through collaborative exercises and critical discussions that were directed toward specific questions of professional practice.

### **Final Thoughts**

Although the participants in this study were in the early stages of growing a learning community, their experience showed them the value of going through the process themselves so they could more effectively respond to the learning challenges and successes of the teachers and principals in their care. They had begun the process as a collaborative work team; they emerged as a group of learners who were dedicated to building a culture of learning that focused professional dialogue on improved teaching and enhanced student achievement. They came to see that building the capacity for such a culture is a long-term process that requires dedicated

support for educators and alignment of goals and activities. As Mitchell and Sackney (2011) point out, if educators understand how personal, school, and system goals are connected, there is a greater likelihood for coherence and growth, rather than fragmentation and competition, to emerge. They ask leaders “to see an emerging whole and to penetrate into patterns of relationships and origins of action in any event, situation, or circumstance” (p. 88). Educators who see and consider “the integral wholeness” (p. 88) in the various parts of the school system can more effectively build and sustain capacity.

This study positions learning communities within a belief that human learning occurs naturally and not as the result of a prescribed set of activities, strategies, or practices. The research literature (see Stoll et al., 2006) is rife with the advantages that this mindset can offer, and yet it has not been embraced wholeheartedly by all educators. The findings of this study suggest that, in order to bring forth the desired changes in belief, thought, and practice, the philosophical perspectives of learning communities should be explained and incorporated in professional learning activities. The results also suggest that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Equally important are the personal experiences of educators, including (especially) district-level leaders, as they participate in the process.

In this study, the superintendents recognized that the traditional role of building capacity from a managerial perspective was insufficient to sustain continuous positive outcomes for students. In other words, simply creating the board’s improvement plan and relying on central office personnel to produce and deliver professional learning opportunities for teachers and principals had limited impact on improving student achievement. As school boards move further towards learning communities as the preferred vehicle for school improvement, district-level superintendents will need to understand the importance of serving as lead learners.

In theory and practice, learning is meaning making, and meaning making is personal to the learner. Authentic and significant learning develops when professional learning is embedded in the environment in which the educators work. This study confirms that learning *is* the work of all educators, and that they are effective in their practice *because* they are learning. With this understanding, educators can examine and reflect on the experiences, learning, and success of all the people in the community, and use this information to stay on track with what the community set out to do. In this way, a learning community becomes not a thing, not a set of activities, and not an event. It is, quite simply, a way of being and a way of life.

## References

- Arhar, J. M., Holly, M. L., & Kasten, W. C. (2001). *Action research for teachers: Travelling the yellow brick road*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bruce, C. D., Esmonde, I., Ross, J., Dookie, L., & Beatty, R. (2010). The effects of sustained classroom-embedded teacher professional learning on teacher efficacy and related student achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*, 1598–1608.
- Bruce, C. D., & Ross, J. (2009). *Literature review for the CIL-M pilot project external review, year 1*. Unpublished manuscript presented at a meeting of the system-level principals and superintendents of the District School Board of Niagara, St. Catharines, ON.
- City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Richardson, N. (2009). Teacher learning: What matters? *Educational Leadership, 66*(5), 46–53.
- David, J. L. (2009). Collaborative inquiry. *Educational Leadership, 66*(44), 87–88.
- Eaker, R., Dufour, R., Burnette, R. (2002). *Getting started: Restructuring schools to become professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Fullan, M. (2010). The role of the district in tri level reform. In P. Peterson, E. Baker, & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Vol. 6, pp. 295–302). Oxford: Elsevier.
- Hakkarainen, K., Palonen, T., Paavola, S., & Lehtinen, E. (2004). *Communities of networked expertise: Professional and educational perspectives*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Hardy, I. (2010). Critiquing teacher professional development: Teacher learning within the field of teachers' work. *Critical Studies in Education, 51*, 71–84.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hirsh, S. (2010). The new central office plays a key role in ensuring effective professional learning. *Journal of Staff Development, 31*(3), 72.
- Hord, S. (2008). Evolution of the PLC. *Journal of Staff Development, 29*(3), 10–13.

- Hord, S., & Sommers, W. A. (2008). *Leading professional learning communities: Voices from research and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Katz, S., Earl, L. M., & Jaafar, S. B. (2009). *Building and connecting learning communities: The power of networks for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Leithwood, K. (2010, February). How the Leading Student Achievement project improves student learning: An evolving theory of action [Report to the Ontario Ministry of Education]. Retrieved from <http://resources.curriculum.org/LSA/files/LSATheoryofAction.pdf>
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, J. T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2001). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Militello, M., Rallis, S. F., & Goldring, E. B. (2009). *Leading with inquiry and action: How principals improve teaching and learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Mills, G. E. (2000). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2009). *Sustainable improvement: Building learning communities that endure*. Rotterdam, Neth.: Sense.
- Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2011). *Profound improvement: Building learning-community capacity on living-system principles* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Robinson, V. M. J. (2007). School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. *ACEL Monograph Series*, 41, 5–28.
- Sackney, L., & Mitchell, C. (2008). Leadership for learning: A Canadian perspective. In J. MacBeath & Y. C. Cheng (Eds.), *Leadership for learning: International perspectives* (pp. 121–136). Rotterdam, Neth.: Sense.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Stoll, L., Bolan, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7, 221–258.
- Waters, J. T., & Marzano, R. J. (2007). The primacy of superintendent leadership. *School Administrator*, 64(3), 10–16.

## **Appendix A: Experiential Frameworks**

### *Collaborative Inquiry Model*

1. Develop an inquiry question
2. Develop a working hypothesis
3. Develop a plan to address the hypothesis
4. Develop criteria to monitor /measure the hypothesis/ what evidence will be collected and how will it be collected
5. Implement the plan
6. Analyze the evidence
7. Reflect on your learning / process
8. Share your learning invite feedback from colleagues
9. Identify next practice for the inquiry cycle to continue
10. Reflect on how the experiences of this meeting inform our work with school administrators in assisting them to build a Professional Learning Community

### *Lesson Plan Model*

1. Who is in your class?
2. What are the learning needs of your class?
3. What's your evidence for the learning needs?
4. What are you trying to achieve in this interaction (that will be observed by critical friends) with your class? (What's the learning intention?)
5. What would count as criteria for success?
6. What evidence would count as meeting the criteria?

**Appendix B: Data Analysis Matrix**

|   | <b>Process</b><br>Discussion types<br>Discourse patterns<br>Inquiry methods | <b>Content</b><br>Substantive ideas<br>Meaningful issues<br>Problems of practice | <b>Context</b><br>Prior knowledge<br>Background<br>History | <b>Conditions</b><br>Supportive or harmful influences<br>Cultural and structural factors |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Personal Capacity</b><br>Professional knowledge, skills, abilities<br>Personal reflection and evaluation   |   |  |  |  |
| <b>Interpersonal Capacity</b><br>Group processes<br>Shared understandings<br>Group climate<br>Collective reflection and evaluation                        |   |  |  |  |
| <b>Organizational Capacity</b><br>Professional investments<br>Decision powers<br>Structural arrangements<br>Resource allocation<br>Communication pathways |   |  |  |  |