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Brandon, Jim

University of Calgary

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NEIL LEADING AND LEARNING CYCLES

Jim Brandon¹

Candace Saar²

Sharon Friesen¹

University of Calgary¹

Galileo Educational Network²

Design-based professional learning and collaborative inquiry have mobilized shared instructional leadership to advance pedagogical practices that support the success of all students in Canadian Rockies Public Schools through the NEIL initiative. We report on current year focus on reciprocal learning cycles. Leaders support teacher learning through reflective questioning based on classroom evidence. They also enhance their leadership practice by (a) deepening their understanding of specific research informed teaching through collective consideration of the same classroom evidence and through (b) reflective questioning from leadership peers, based on their interactions with the teachers in pre and post visit conversations.

Keywords: instructional leadership; effective teaching, professional learning

Canadian Rockies School Division (CRPS) is undergoing a profound shift in its learning culture through its partnership with the Galileo Educational Network (GENA) on the *Nurturing Excellence in Instruction and Leadership* (NEIL) initiative. Our focus in this paper is on the engagement of school leaders and teachers in reciprocal leading and learning cycles during the 2015-16 school year as part of the jurisdiction's ongoing strategy to implement the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta (PPCSLA) towards the realization of the Inspiring Education vision to support each student to become an *engaged thinker* and *ethical*

citizen with an *entrepreneurial spirit*. We begin by framing the NEIL work in the educational literature before outlining our case study research design. Six key findings are then discussed.

FRAMING NEIL LEADING AND LEARNING CYCLES

Over the past three years the NEIL initiative has mobilized evidence-based professional learning (Timperley, 2007, 2011) to advance shared instructional leadership (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2012) and research informed pedagogical practices (Friesen, 2009) that support the success of all students. Our 2015-16 emphasis was on building capacity of school leaders to nurture teacher and leader learning through ongoing cycles of collaborative inquiry and knowledge building. Design-based professional learning challenged principals and vice-principals to sponsor *evidence-informed conversations* to nurture *both* teacher and leader learning through thoughtful consideration of classroom gathered evidence. Through processes conceptualized in Appendix 1 below, meaningful forms of evidence of effective teaching practice were identified through interactions with teachers, gathered in classrooms by school leaders, and shared back to the teachers in evidence-informed conversations founded on relations of respect and challenge to move both leading and teaching practices forward.

CRPS teachers invited teams of school leaders, university faculty, and GENA into their learning environments to view their work with students in process. This work enabled school leaders to become more practiced in leading evidence-informed conversations about teaching and learning and to obtain feedback and suggestions about such leadership practices from other leaders and participating teachers as diagramed in Appendix 2 below.

METHODOLOGY

The overriding purpose of our study was to investigate how the NEIL initiative's application of the PPCSLA is impacting shared instructional leadership, teaching practice, and student success in CRPS. In keeping with the principles and assumptions of qualitative case study research (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2006; Yin, 2009). A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2012). "*Bounded* means that the case is separated for research in terms of time, place or some physical boundaries" (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). The issue under investigation within the bounded system of the Canadian Rockies Public Schools in 2015-16 school years is *the NEIL initiative's impact on shared instructional leadership and teaching practice and student success*.

Data Sources

Interviews, focus groups, field notes, artifacts, online *Google Docs*, and classroom observations allowed for a rich and textured understanding of the research questions. A total of 27 educators have participated in three rounds of focus group interviews to date. A *constructivist* approach to research interviewing was employed. Such interviews are understood to be flexible, context sensitive, and dependent on the personal interrelationships of the interviewers and interviewees (Brinkman and Kvale 2015, p. 198).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data is being informed by the view that "coding is deep reflection about, and, thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data's meanings (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014, p. 72). In first cycle coding, summaries and field notes from the interviews and focus groups, and Google Docs were initially read in their entirety to get a sense of their content

and context, without imposing a specific analytic lens. The next reading of the texts looked for themes to determine coding categories and to become familiar with the overall content and to determine the level of interest in relation to the research questions. Emerging themes were identified and analyzed. In second level coding, pattern codes were developed (Miles et al., 2014, p. 86-104), which then led to more detailed pattern codes – larger categories or themes – were created to form the basis for the analysis.

RESULTS

Six key findings from our three-year investigation into the ways through which the NEIL initiative's application of the PPCSLA is impacting shared instructional leadership, teaching practice, and student success in CRPS are presented in sub-sections related to each of the three specific research questions.

Research Question One: *In what ways are the iterative cycles of design-based professional learning impacting shared instructional leadership and teaching practice?*

1. **Participants continue to embrace the evolving NEIL approach to shared instructional leadership.** The interactive involvement and reciprocal learning among school leaders, teachers, and central office personnel is supporting a renewed and learning focused leadership model within CRPS.

What I see with teachers who are doing this - engaging students and following the principles of the TEF, I see less behavior issues. And this is with ALL kids from the low end child to the high end functioning child to the autistic child. They just love it and can't wait to get into the classroom. And we talk about how we get all of our teachers on the bus and moving forward but right now we're all on the bus because of the PLNs and working with

Galileo so we have all of those things in place and it isn't just us as principals trying to move teachers forward. Everyone is expected to make their learning and that of their students visible so even those at the back of the bus are going to have to pay attention to how we work and learn together in this school. (Principal describing the impact of iterative knowledge-building cycles in the school)

A model of shared instructional leadership is emerging across all schools through the utilization of the TEF, PPCSLA, and Robinson's (2011) image of leaders of professional learning. The active involvement of teachers, school leaders, and central office personnel in collaborative inquiry, data collection and research, supports a renewed leadership model and provides encouragement to division teachers to consider future roles or careers in educational leadership.

2. **The NEIL initiative is keeping student, teacher, and leader learning at the forefront in an unprecedented, energizing and enabling manner.** School leaders, system leaders, and teachers report that the heightened focus on evidence of student, teacher, and leader learning is generating renewed excitement, engagement, and efficacy.

What I find is the fact that we are using common language has aligned our teaching practices across the whole division. And just like in teaching when we want the criteria or the goals to be clear to improve student learning then it's the same with teachers. The criteria for achieving instructional excellence is clear because we're all using the same framework, which is the TEF." (focus group interview comment from principal)

3. **Both shared instructional leadership and teaching practice are being developed with participants rather than for them.** Participants at every level appreciate the ways in which the NEIL planning team continuously incorporates their feedback into the design of iterative

and overlapping leader and teacher inquiry and knowledge-building cycles that connect session learning to leading and teaching practices in schools.

My leadership practices have been dramatically impacted through this work. We no longer have staff meetings but rather learning cafes where we've provided teachers with an environment to share and the risk-taking part of that. Me being part of the PLNs and modeling the designing of units and getting feedback using the TEF, gathering all of that data and making it visible in our school development plan are all examples of the changes we've made at my school. (Vice principal describing the active involvement of school leaders in helping to nurture instructional excellence)

Research Question Two: *In what ways are evidence-informed conversations through NEIL leading and learning cycles impacting teacher learning?*

4. **An increasing number of opportunities have been provided for teachers to bring forward evidence of learning to their teacher and leadership colleagues as part of their teacher inquiry and knowledge-building cycles.** In the NEIL learning sessions, through professional growth planning, and in a number of other contexts, teachers are sharing evidence of student learning in multiple forms with their colleagues. These evidence-informed conversations based on relationships of respect and challenge generate specific and helpful feedback related to the five principles of effective teaching detailed in Friesen's (2009) *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (TEF) that is now being used in each of the six schools. The focus on TEF is a key link in the process of improving teaching practice that deepens student engagement and strengthens student learning in relation to the *Ministerial Order on Student Learning* (Alberta Education, 2013).

Set professional learning time for teachers to work with Galileo and in PLNs has enabled teachers to share and learn from each other and improved their ability to take risks. Evidence of this was the project that my team was using related to structures and building bridges. When we compare what teachers have been doing around this topic for the past “78” years to what students and teachers are now doing, we see clear evidence of change. Originally students completed a worksheet where they filled in the blanks related to bridge building. Now students are documenting their thinking and the process they go through in designing and constructing their bridges. So they begin by developing their own blueprint designs for their bridges and they worked digitally so they could keep track of the changes and refinements they made in their designs along the way. They also photographed what they had designed initially and what they changed to make it better. Even that gives you a sense of the changes that occurred in terms of teachers’ assessment practices and what they were now collecting as evidence of student learning. When teachers came together and had to bring evidence of student learning to a group of their colleagues, it changed how they thought about assessment and evaluation. (Principal describing the evidence of teacher and student learning observed in her school).

5. **Teacher participants in the 2015-16 Neil Leading and Learning Cycles indicate increased appreciation of school leader efforts to make their leadership learning visible to their teaching and leadership colleagues.** NEIL Cycles provided a mechanism for principals and vice-principals to work with each other and teachers to strengthened their comfort, confidence, and competence in leading evidence informed conversations. In so doing their visibility and vulnerability in classroom settings enhanced their credibility in the eyes of participating teachers.

Research Question Three: *In what ways are evidence-informed conversations through NEIL leading and learning cycles impacting school leader learning?*

6. **Principals and system leaders are bringing evidence of teacher learning forward to their teacher and leadership colleagues as part of their leader inquiry and knowledge-building cycles.** In the NEIL learning sessions, through professional growth planning, and in a number of other contexts, school and system leaders are sharing evidence of teacher learning in multiple forms with their colleagues. These evidence-informed conversations based on relationships of respect and challenge generate specific and helpful feedback related to the PPCSLA and research-informed aspects of leading professional learning (Fullan, 2014; Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011).

So in talking to teachers before they meet in their PLN groups or before they meet with colleagues during the Galileo sessions, as one of the teachers said to me, ‘I know we’re going to talk about it (the work I’m doing with my students) so that makes me want to do something’. So whether that’s guilt or positive peer pressure I don’t know but it’s changing what’s happening in classrooms. Because so often the TPGP goal was something that was done in September and then punted down the field and we never looked at it again until May. But now this is ongoing and there’s some accountability that something needs to get produced. And with those regular meetings you get to see the progress or in some cases the lack of progress with the teachers you’re working with. (Assistant principal describing the role of leaders in the professional learning of teachers)

Our work as leaders is to make sure that these types of structures and routines (knowledge building cycles) are embedded in the school culture and across the division so that all teachers come to understand that this is where we’re going and it’s everybody’s professional responsibility to continue to grow and learn. (ELT member describing CRPS challenge in sustaining this work when they no longer have the funding to access the services of Galileo).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

NEIL Leading and Learning Cycles are engaging teachers and school leaders in ongoing, nurturing, reciprocal, and transparent learning about teaching and leading. At the same time as school leaders support teacher learning through generous reflective questioning based on classroom evidence, they also enhance their professional leadership practice in two ways: (a) by deepening their understanding of research informed effective teaching practices through collective consideration of the same classroom evidence, and (b) benefiting from generous reflective questioning from their school leadership colleagues, based on their interactions with the teachers in pre and post visit conversations.

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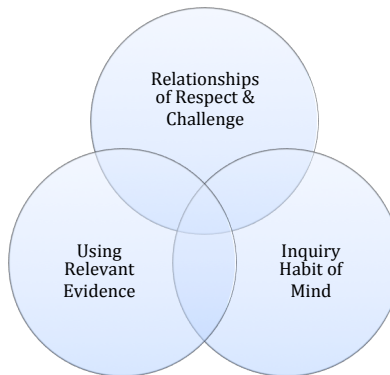
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Appendix 1. Evidence Informed Conversations



Appendix 2. NEIL Leading and Learning Cycles

NEIL Inquiry and Knowledge-building Cycles in Classrooms

