It is what leaders do in schools and who they are that matter the most.

Alma Harris (2008) Distributed Leadership: Developing Leaders for Tomorrow, p. 39

Cathy was using a Book Club strategy to raise deeper questions about literacy practice. Chris, as part of the school’s professional learning program, was involved in Lisa and Blake’s inquiry around formative assessment and learner engagement in Mathematics. He hoped that their teamwork would result in increased individual capacity, build Blake’s repertoire of instructional strategies, and have positive results for all the learners involved. Donna was pulling together a team to focus on the needs of under supported Year 9 learners. She was taking a hard look at the evidence and mobilizing resources to better meet their needs. Geoff was thinking about the variation in learner motivation and engagement across classrooms and how he could become better equipped to strengthen the learning orientation and knowledge in his school. Alison was determined to improve the quality of teaching, learning and the life chances of learners in her remote community. Karim was passionate about providing his new refugee learners with every opportunity to succeed in their new country. He was working hard with his teachers to make sure they had the skills, knowledge and resources needed to
Each of these school leaders was taking action to support teacher learning. Each was responding to the unique context of their school communities. These leaders were constantly thinking about how they could deepen learning in their schools and how they could build the capacity of their teachers through professional inquiry and dialogue.

School leaders focus on learning, set directions, ensure the development of staff, reculture their schools, distribute leadership and respond to the unique contexts in which they work. In other words, school leaders take action. Leadership matters and so do the forms of action that leaders take. It is through the actions that leaders take to design powerful adult learning opportunities that the mindsets of intense moral purpose, trust, learning, evidence and inquiry are collectively made apparent. We call this the mindset of learning-oriented design. This is where leadership thinking hits the learning action road.

Making the shift from sorting to learning is relatively new work for many schools. The examples we provide reflect the efforts of leaders whose schools are in the early stages of making a fundamental shift to a focus on deep learning for all learners. Your school may be much further along the continuum and your challenge may be to maintain or perhaps increase the momentum. We invite you to think about the key ideas that inform the learning-oriented design mindset, to consider where your school is right now, and to determine your next leadership steps in designing for deep adult learning.
The notion of design reflects the sophistication and complexity required to create appropriate structures and rhythms for adult learning. We understand that context matters. Some schools have strong and unique cultures that support risk-taking and innovation; other school cultures serve to undermine and discourage initiative. Schools do not exist or operate in isolation from the community, district, local authority, province or state. Reshaping school culture requires understanding the local context, values and history. In designing processes and structures for adult learning, school leaders must pay attention to context and they must have the courage to address aspects of the school culture that inhibit growth and learning. Intense moral purpose drives leadership action.

In thinking about designs for professional learning, we prefer the designs based on ‘evidence-informed practice,’ ‘wise action’ or ‘next practice.’ Next practice has been defined as “practice, which is potentially more powerful than current ‘good practice’, in advance of hard evidence of effectiveness, but informed by research, and developed through skilled and informed practitioners” (Learning Futures 2008, p.5). We are cautious about the use of the term ‘best practice’ because we have seen too many examples where what has worked relatively well in one school, district or country fails dismally in another. Teachers are justifiably skeptical when a new leader arrives in a school and extols the successes of the best practices “in my old school.” We have also seen well-intentioned school leaders attempt prematurely to use structural changes to stimulate reform. Too often these attempts failed because school leaders did not invest enough effort in building teacher knowledge, trusting relationships or staff commitment.
to the proposed reform. We have been impressed by the good judgment of many school leaders with inquiry and evidence-informed mindsets, who have been successful in shifting their schools to a focus on deeper forms of engagement and learning. They have done so by using strategies that fit the culture of their school and the developmental levels of their faculty. They have incorporated knowledge about teacher learning, distributed leadership and learning communities into their leadership work and have made adaptations to suit the challenges of their unique school community. The successful leaders we have observed, including some who are quite early in their careers, are wise as well as current in their understandings about how to shift the culture of the school to a learning orientation.

Recent research on teacher professional learning, particularly as documented in the New Zealand best evidence synthesis\(^1\) work, provides a useful foundation for leaders in their adult development work. Our thinking about learning-oriented design has also been influenced by emerging and increasingly robust evidence about the impact of distributed leadership. Not only does the research on distributed leadership hold promise for sustaining improved learning, we have observed that leaders, with the mindsets we describe, naturally and intuitively move to a more distributed form of leadership. The international research on professional learning communities also provides important insights for leaders working to build the collective capacity of teachers and support staff.

We have found that, when leaders are equipped with a knowledge base from both research and practice of what has worked or is working in schools similar to their own,
their confidence in their ability to diagnose their context and to initiate wise action increases. Sometimes they ‘compose’ their own innovations, and sometimes they use the ‘soundtrack’ of an evidence-informed approach; they always bring their own unique imagination and instrumentation to the work.

As we explore what a mindset of learning-oriented design means for leaders, we will draw on several of the principles for teacher learning and development identified by Helen Timperley (2007, 2008) and her colleagues in New Zealand. We will consider the important contributions of the research on distributed leadership and learning communities. Then we will describe and illustrate three evidence-informed strategies to create and support deeper adult learning. We will follow three of our new leaders, Cathy, Chris and Donna as they incorporate principles of teacher learning development into their work.

TEACHER LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Resulting from her work with the best evidence synthesis, Timperley (2008) has identified ten principles that inform teacher professional learning. (Please see Appendix A for a complete summary of these principles.) Four important understandings underlie these principles:

1. Notwithstanding the influence of factors such as socio-economic status, home, and community, student learning is strongly influenced by what and how teachers
2. Teaching is a complex activity. Teachers’ moment-by-moment decisions about lesson content and process are shaped by multiple factors, not just the agenda of those who are looking for change. Such factors include teachers’ knowledge and their beliefs about what is important to teach, how students learn, and how to manage student behavior and meet external demands.

3. It is important to set up conditions that are responsive to the ways in which teachers learn. A recent overview of the research identified the following as important for encouraging learning: engaging learners’ prior conceptions about how the world works; developing deep factual and conceptual knowledge organized into frameworks that facilitate retrieval and application; and promoting meta-cognitive and self-regulatory processes that help learners define goals and then monitor their progress towards them.

4. Professional learning is strongly shaped by the context in which the teacher practices. This is usually the classroom, which, in turn is strongly influenced by the wider school culture and the community and society in which the school is situated. Teachers’ daily experiences in their practice context shape their understanding, and their understandings shape their experiences. (2008, p. 6)

A close reading of these assumptions underscores the important role that formal school
leaders have in creating both the conditions and the context to maximize teacher learning. Timperley (2008) notes that there are three leadership roles that appear crucial to gaining and maintaining the interest of teachers in participating in ongoing learning. These include creating a vision of new possibilities – not through extensive vision-building exercises but rather through every day modeling and actions; providing leadership to the school’s adult learning program through participating and adding expertise; and, by making sure that all the adult learning opportunities are well organized and supported. (2008, p. 17)

The findings from Viviane Robinson’s (2007) recent analysis of the high impact behaviors of formal leaders complement the professional learning principles and leadership roles summarized in Timperley’s work. Robinson identifies five leadership dimensions that have a positive impact on student outcomes:

1. Establishing goals and expectations
2. Strategic resourcing
3. Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
4. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment

The fifth dimension is the one most clearly and directly connected to the mindset of learning oriented design. Robinson’s study indicates that promoting and participating in teacher learning and development has the greatest positive effect on student learning. In her synthesis of international findings, the effect size for this dimension was 0.84. Much more is involved in this dimension than simply providing opportunities for staff
development. Gone are the days when the principal might delegate responsibility for teacher learning to a staff committee, make sure that lunch is arranged, and disappear to the office during the session. A learning-oriented principal participates in the professional learning with the staff as the leader, as a co-learner or as both. The behavior of the leader speaks volumes about the importance of teacher learning as Robinson (2007) observes:

Leaders’ promotion of and participation in teacher professional learning is an indicator of their focus on the quality of teachers and teaching. Such a focus is likely to have payoff for student outcomes given that quality teaching is the biggest system level influence on student achievement. (p.16)

Researchers in the USA have also found a strong connection between principal involvement in professional learning and teacher participation and learning. Quint, Akey, Rappaport, & Willner (2007) looked at the connections between instructional leadership, teaching quality and student achievement. Their key finding was that greater principal involvement in professional development for teachers is significantly and positively associated with the frequency with which teachers reported receiving professional development (p. 34). They also noted that principals identified by teachers as good instructional leaders organized, lead, and attended professional development sessions with teachers and worked with individual teachers and groups of teachers to improve instruction. (p. 46) As principals work to transform their schools, strengthening adult learning has to be one of their key priorities and one that cannot be ignored or set aside in
the face of competing demands for time and attention.

In emphasizing the important role that principals have in teachers’ professional learning, Timperley (2007) acknowledges that this finding comes with such high expectations for formal leaders that it may be unreasonable to expect one person to be able to achieve the desired outcomes alone. Timperley draws on the work Mary Kay Stein and her colleagues (2003) who argue that:

Professional development for teachers is not sufficient to change instructional practice, especially across an entire system. Teachers must believe that serious engagement in their own learning is part and parcel of what it means to be a professional and they must expect to be held accountable for continuously improving instructional practice. Similarly, principals must not only be capable of providing professional development for their teachers, but also have the knowledge, skills, and strength of character to hold teachers accountable for integrating what they have learned in professional development into their ongoing practice. (in Timperley 2007, p. 192)

She concludes that “this demanding notion of leadership, associated with the realization that what is being asked may be well-nigh impossible to deliver, has led to the view that effective leadership is and should be distributed” (2007, p. 192). Based on our own school leadership experiences and evidence from our case study schools, we agree that shifting schools to a deeper focus on learning and equitable outcomes requires an
expanded team of leaders. This understanding then takes us to a discussion about
distributed leadership and the connection with learning-oriented design.

**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

We have cited evidence throughout this book about the significance of school leadership
and its impact on learning. As we look more deeply at the kind of actions leaders take, it
is important to remind ourselves of this significance:

> While we know that within school factors or influences cannot totally offset the
> forces of deprivation, schools *can make* a difference and *do make* a difference to
> the life chances of young people, particularly those young people in the poorest
> communities. Within all schools but particularly in high poverty schools,
> leadership is a critical component in reversing low expectations and low
> performance. The quality of leadership has shown to be the most powerful
> influence on learning outcomes, second only to curriculum and instruction.
> (Harris 2008, p.11)

The distributed leadership model emphasizes the active cultivation and development of
leadership activities within all members of the school organization. Central to the concept
of distributed leadership is the belief that leadership capability and capacity are not fixed
but can be extended and developed. Alma Harris (2008) maintains:
This means that in schools, as different people seek and are tacitly or openly granted leadership functions, a dynamic pattern of distributed leadership gradually takes over. Over time the leadership needs of the organization will shift and change. These needs are unlikely to be met without fluid, flexible and creative sources of leadership. (p.59)

Harris (2008) suggests that one of the reasons that schools are able to move the trajectory of student learning in a more positive direction is because leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization (p. 72). She notes that, although the evidence base is still emerging, what it says about distributed leadership and organizational change is encouraging: “It highlights that school leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed” (p.18). The 2007 McKinsey report on high performing systems concludes that the answer to improving systems lies quite clearly in developing better teachers with stronger instructional practices. The report also points toward the need for strong and effective infrastructures within schools that allow teachers to be the best teachers they can be (2007, p. 13).

Leithwood and his colleagues (2007) suggest that the success with which leadership is distributed to teachers depends on the quality of principal initiative. Individual teachers are rarely in a position where they alone can alter the professional learning arrangements or the infrastructures of their school. Changing school structures is most often the responsibility of the formal school leader. Leaders first need to understand the impact of
the current school structures and teaching strategies in either promoting or inhibiting improvement in learning for young people. Then, they need to be willing to challenge current practices and, if warranted, change strategies and structures. Changing long-held routines and structures, regardless of how warranted these changes are, can unsettle school norms and cause unrest. Intense moral purpose and a strong focus on putting the needs of learners first will support a principal through these challenges.

**Distributed Leadership for Teacher Learning**

Leithwood and his colleagues (1999) introduced the phrase ‘intellectual stimulation’ to the transformational leadership vocabulary. The school leaders we have worked with find this notion helpful, especially as they consider their responsibilities in strengthening and supervising the learning program of their schools. Understanding the developmental levels of teachers and considering the appropriateness of a range of intellectual stimulations makes sense to them. Eleanor Drago-Seversen (2004) concluded that it was critical for school leaders to connect staff development strategies with the developmental levels of the adults in the school. Drago-Seversen draws on work done in the field of developmental psychology when she points out:

Much of what is expected and needed from teachers for them to succeed and grow within widely used staff development models demands something more than an increase in their fund of knowledge or skills (i.e., informational learning). It demands changes in the ways they know and understand their
experiences (i.e., transformational learning). In other words, the expectations intrinsic to some models may in fact be beyond the developmental capacities of those using them. (2004, p.19)

Effective distribution of leadership requires that principals pay attention to the skills and developmental levels of teachers. Principals make determinations about what teachers are capable of doing and who has the potential to make a greater contribution. They also, as Drago-Severson has indicated, need to consider whether the professional learning model being considered for use is the best for the overall developmental level of the staff. Both persistence and flexibility are needed in designing adult learning programs.

Bruce Joyce and Beverley Showers (2002) have spent their research careers studying ways of improving learner success by identifying the conditions that are required for the kind of teacher learning that translates into better practice. Their studies have led them to emphasize the need for within school coaching that is personalized and timely. Our observations have indicated that successful school leaders diagnose the cognitive levels and the sophistication of learning and teaching strategies used by individual members of their staff; they think about the staff as a whole; and then they guide the process of selecting an adult learning approach that most closely matches the overall stage of development of the teachers and support staff as well as the learning culture of the school. Then, and this is vital, they demonstrate their commitment to the strategy selected through their active and enthusiastic participation in learning with their staff.
These successful school leaders also consider patterns of distribution as part of their design work. In a recent study Leithwood (2007) and his colleagues extended Gronn’s (2002) description of patterns of distributed leadership. These descriptions are useful for school leaders to think about as they engage in adult learning-oriented design. The researchers hypothesized:

The most effective pattern of distribution would be ‘planful alignment’ followed in order of effectiveness by ‘spontaneous alignment, ‘spontaneous misalignment’; and (least effective) ‘anarchic misalignment’ (Leithwood et al. 2007, p.54).

The shared values and beliefs that Leithwood identified as likely to be associated with planful alignment include:

- Reflection and dialogue as the basis for good decision-making;
- Trust in the motives of one’s leadership colleagues;
- Well-grounded beliefs about the capacities of one’s leadership colleagues;
- Commitment to shared whole-organization goals; and
- Cooperation rather than competition as the best way to promote productivity within the organization. (p. 41)

In their study of Canadian schools, they found that planful alignment was most likely to happen with the school’s highest priority initiatives and that this form of alignment
dropped off considerably as the focus when the school was working on lower priority initiatives. They suggested that the most obvious reason for this disparity was the attention and effort of the principal (p. 55). The researchers concluded that the most effective forms of distributed leadership might well depend on the effectiveness of the leader in providing direction, attention, encouragement and support to their teacher leaders. Through these forms of support a more coherent design for adult learning takes shape and becomes an ongoing part of the school culture.

From the research on teacher professional learning and distributed leadership, we understand the importance of the actions that principals take to distribute leadership, co-design adult learning opportunities and build teacher capacity. These actions, through increasing teacher capacity and school coherence around shared priorities, have a positive impact on student learning. Over time, leaders work hard to create communities where ongoing professional learning is simply the ‘way it is around here.’ The findings from the international research on effective professional learning communities provides another useful perspective on the conditions that lead to deep and ongoing adult learning in schools.

**LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Along with the growing evidence about the impact of distributed leadership on student learning, there is also emerging evidence about the links between professional learning communities and enhanced student outcomes. Stoll (2006) cites the following:
A learning enriched workplace for teachers appears to be related to academic progress (Rosenholtz 1989) and achievement in high school math has been shown to be positively affected by increased learning in a school with a professional learning community (Wiley 2001). Moreover students achieved at increased levels in schools with positive professional communities when teachers in classrooms focused on authentic pedagogy (Louis & Marks 1998). (Stoll 2006, p. 613)

The idea of being part of a learning enriched school community appeals to many educators. We have concerns in our North American setting about the implication through the widely available “PLC” workshops that developing a professional learning community is relatively simple work. Our observations suggest that developing a genuine learning community involves a major cultural shift. Halverson (2007) argues that, although the value of professional community in schools is widely recognized, knowledge about how to create and sustain professional communities is not widely understood (p.50). We agree with Karen Seashore Louis (2006) who suggests that shifting school cultures requires professional community, organizational learning and high degrees of trust. Louis explains that the whole school needs to operate as a learning organization which involves teachers working together to gather information about the needs of their learners, their teaching strategies, and their content areas and then discussing, sharing and critiquing new ideas. Organizational learning emphasizes the benefits that can result when teachers and principals regularly work together around the
issues of practice that come from examining the information gathered purposefully for staff study. To do this work well calls for the construction of meaningful contexts and conditions under which new routines are practiced rather than merely discussed (2006, p. 481) and Louis provides an important caution for leaders designing adult learning:

Teachers and principals who believe that modest changes such as study groups and team times are a sufficient set of tools to reculture their schools do not really grasp the sea change that is required to deepen trust and create the intellectual ferment that characterizes a learning organization. (2006, p. 485)

Canadian researchers Larry Sackney and Coral Mitchell (2000) have defined a learning community as “a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented and growth promoting approach towards the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning” (p. 5). They also argue that shifting a culture to one of inquiry and active collaborative reflection from one of isolation and individuality requires a high degree of trust and considerable organizational learning. Lorna Earl and Helen Timperley’s (2008) book Professional Learning Conversations – Challenges in Using Evidence for Improvement also illustrates the difficult work involved in becoming a deep learning community. Despite a sincere commitment to the importance of professional dialogue, authors from a range of countries found that genuine, ongoing, deep conversations that were productive in creating stronger learning for young people were rare. Again, this finding underscores the complexity of this work and the need for intense persistence by school leaders.
The Role of the Principal in Professional Learning Communities

Just as with distributed leadership, the role of the principal in creating effective learning communities must be emphasized. The active involvement of the formal leader in each of the characteristics that Stoll and her colleagues (2006) identified as important dimensions of professional learning communities also attests to the challenges in designing a learning organization. Their study suggests that leaders in partnership with staff colleagues need to develop:

- Shared values and vision;
- Collective responsibility for student learning;
- Collaboration focused on learning;
- Reflective professional inquiry;
- Individual and collective professional learning;
- Openness, networks and partnerships;
- Inclusive membership; and
- Mutual trust, respect and support. (p. 614)

Stoll emphasized that creating and sustaining a professional learning community is a major strategic leadership task. The report of the two-year study of 16 case study schools in England ended with this view:
Across all our schools, messages were consistent; the contributions of the head and senior staff were seen as being crucial, not least in achieving positive working relationships. It was important to engender respect and create a culture where staff felt valued…. Successful leaders had a clear sense of their own values and vision, as well as the confidence to model good practice. (2006, p. 619)

Mitchell and Sackney (2006) concluded from their five-year research study that learning communities are characterized by both patterns of distributed leadership and by strong leadership from the principal. They observed that, without the school principal’s focused and continued attention, efforts to build a learning community among the staff floundered. By contrast they noted that in schools where principals stayed involved in the process, teaching and learning remained a central focus (p. 631). Halverson (2007) claims that the key behaviors of principals with strong learning communities include:

Providing meaningful opportunities for teachers to work together on pressing issues of common interest, being physically present in the school, creating networks of conversation among faculty, making resources available to support individual teacher development, building bridges and networks to practice and knowledge outside the local school, and fostering a school community in which instruction is viewed as problematic. (p. 50)

The school leader with a mindset of learning-oriented design understands the power of distributed learning to build capacity and recognizes the importance of creating a
professional learning community that is sustained over time. Reculturing the school by developing and deepening adult learning in order to improve student learning is at the heart of learning-oriented design. Leaders help create, coordinate and maintain the organizational routines that will lead to this deeper professional learning. Keeping in mind our earlier comments about the importance of context, culture and the developmental levels of the teachers and support staff, let’s examine some of the ways our school leaders are working to strengthen and extend adult learning. Let’s also consider how they are working to provide intellectual stimulation in contextually appropriate ways. Let’s see how Cathy approached this challenge.

**Book Club**

*Cathy’s review of student performance in reading had confirmed her beliefs that although most of the learners were good decoders, many of them were struggling with deeper forms of comprehension. Her conversations with teachers and her classroom observations indicated that teacher understanding and application of assessment for learning principles were superficial and inconsistent. She hoped that engaging staff in a book club discussion where they could explore new approaches to reading instruction and formative assessment would be a way to begin deepening professional learning. She understood that if she started with a model for staff development that was too challenging she would likely lose rather than gain ground for learners. Her understandings regarding teacher learning suggested to her that an appropriate start would be with professional readings and invitational applications to practice.*
She invited all the members of her staff to meet on a Tuesday morning before school and had a hot breakfast waiting when they arrived. She was pleased (and slightly surprised) when nine of the sixteen teachers on staff showed up. They started with a chapter from a book on reading strategies they had previously agreed upon. They decided to meet once a month to discuss what they had read, commit to trying a new strategy and report back on what they had learned in their classrooms. At the monthly full staff meetings, a member of the Book Club provided an update about what they were learning and doing – and made sure there was always an open invitation for others to join. Gradually, the responsibility for leading the discussion at the Book Club shifted as teachers became more confident in leading the discussions. The conversations that started on Tuesday mornings continued in the staff room, the hallways, at the photocopier and in classrooms as teachers increasingly visited each other to see how the new ideas were being applied.

Cathy enlisted the support of a literacy support teacher from another school to be part of the Book Club and to serve as an inquiring and challenging ‘friend’ to the change work. Debbie’s expertise and her ability to ask probing questions helped to extend their thinking and deepen their learning. As the group grew in confidence, they began to bring samples of student work to the meetings and started to look at the impact of their new strategies on learner outcomes. Two of the more confident teachers started to make short video clips of their cross grade learners talking about their use of learning intentions and criteria for success. These video clips provided a rich source for further discussion and planning.
Cathy’s efforts to build a learning community and to distribute leadership were informed by the case study of Adams’ School in Chicago as described by Richard Halverson (2007) in Jim Spillane and John Diamond’s book on Distributed Leadership in Practice. At Adams’ School, the principal used the Breakfast Club as a pivotal organizational routine to create stronger professional learning. After several years of mixed results with external interventions to improve learning results, the principal and staff at Adams began to revise their views about what constituted quality professional learning development. The principal noted that real improvement started to occur when teachers started talking about their teaching (p.39). The principal and staff at Adams had learned the hard way about the perils of imposed professional development (p. 40). Their experiences led the staff to develop a series of features into the structure:

- The program was voluntary - to avoid the stultifying atmosphere of many faculty meetings;
- The substance of the discussions themselves motivated teachers to come to the program – when valued information was exchanged at the meetings, word got around and people wanted to come;
- Meetings took place in the mornings, so that teachers would be fresh and ready to entertain new ideas;
- Readings were kept short so that teachers would have a greater chance of reading them before coming to the session
- Teachers were able to select the readings and lead the discussions. (p. 40)
The Breakfast Club represented a significant change in the school’s approach to professional learning. While the structure was originally designed as a way to open up discussions about instructional research, over time, Halverson (2007) noted that increased participation in the Breakfast Club:

helped to create some of the key characteristics of professional community at Adams, including the establishment of teacher collaboration and curriculum design as cornerstones of the professional development program, the de-privatization of practice, the cultivation of in-house expertise among faculty and staff, and the creation of a sense of ownership among staff about the instructional program. (p. 41)

We believe there is much to be learned from the Adams’ case study. Most leaders understand from their own experience that simply popping articles into staff mailboxes or emailing links for recommended reading are insufficient strategies to foster adult learning. Providing time, space, resources, support, refreshments, and a structured routine for sharing relevant readings, new ideas and beliefs, and stronger practices, are much more likely to deepen professional learning. Cathy’s leadership in making the link between new teacher learning and student outcomes is extremely important. She understood and was able to put into practice what Timperley’s synthesis had led her to conclude: “Professional learning experiences that focus on the links between particular teaching activities and valued student outcomes are associated with positive impact on
those outcomes” (2008, p.7).

She argues that a major determinant of whether or not professional learning activities impact on outcomes for diverse learners is the extent to which those outcomes form the rationale for and ongoing focus of the teachers’ engagement in adult learning programs. We have observed the positive changes that Cathy has created in her school by starting with the Book Club, building trust gradually, encouraging an enhanced inquiry-mindedness, introducing new knowledge and then intensifying the focus on the impact of new reading and assessment strategies on student learning.

Her decision to involve an external challenging friend was also wise. Timperley’s work suggests that the engagement of expertise external to the group of participating teachers is necessary because substantive new learning requires teachers to understand new content, learn new skills and think about existing practice in new ways (2008, p. 16). The involvement of an external person with expertise can also help to counter the norms of politeness and non-challenge that can restrict new learning. Debbie was able to take teachers beyond what they already knew and was able to effectively challenge some of their existing beliefs.

In the Adams’ case study, the principal made the Breakfast Club invitational and voluntary. Cathy decided to take the same approach and was pleased when a majority of staff did show up. She wondered though about the longer-term wisdom of this voluntary approach. She worked hard to make the Book Club meetings as engaging and as meaningful as possible. She was reassured by the finding from the professional learning research that developing teacher engagement at some point in the adult learning process
is more important than initial teacher volunteering (2008, p. 12). Timperley further suggests:

The research evidence shows that learning important content through engagement in meaningful activities, supported by a rationale for participation that is based on identified student needs, has a greater impact on student outcomes than the circumstances that lead teachers to sign up. These two dimensions determine whether teachers engage in the learning process sufficiently to deepen their knowledge and extend their skills in ways that lead to improved student outcomes. (p. 13)

By creating the time, space and conditions for meaningful teacher learning, focusing on the connection between new strategies and student outcomes, enlisting the support of an external resource person, and participating as a co-learner with her faculty, Cathy is on her way to developing a stronger learning community. She is, however, well aware that she needs to deepen the work by providing more reflective collaboration time during the day and is actively seeking the resources needed to do so, and she is wondering how to involve every teacher over time.

Collective Inquiry / Assessment Cycle

Blake was well aware of student dissatisfaction with his teaching. He knew a great many of his students were not succeeding in his Math classes and although he was concerned,
he simply didn’t know where to start. He had begun to trust Chris and he agreed to work with Lisa to see what he could do to help his students – and himself. Chris, Lisa and Blake were asking some important questions. How could they work together as a team to improve the learning outcomes for Blake’s students – indeed for all of their students? Would the use of formative assessment strategies increase learner engagement and improve Mathematics results? What were the specific learning needs of their students? What knowledge and skills did they need to develop to help their learners? What was Chris’ role in promoting and supporting their learning? How would they engage their students in new learning experiences? Would their shared learning and planning lead to improvements in Blake’s teaching – and improvements in his students’ learning and engagement? Could they build and sustain the trusting relationships needed to make their partnership work?

Powerful questions with big implications. Chris made sure that Lisa and Blake had the resources they needed. Their teaching timetables were adjusted so that they had common planning time and he provided additional release time for them during the day to meet and to observe each other’s classes. Together the three of them explored the current research on formative assessment and on learner engagement. A couple of months into the year, as Blake’s confidence was beginning to grow, they decided to implement a four-week assessment cycle.

Blake and Lisa started by bringing samples of student work to their planning meetings. They discussed specific areas where their students seemed to be struggling and then
decided on strategies they would try. Lisa asked Blake to observe her working with her learners and to give her feedback on the strategies she was trying. Their conversations became more focused and more precise as the year progressed. Other members of the Math department noticed Blake’s renewed enthusiasm and started to express curiosity about what Blake, Chris and Lisa were doing.

The kind of collaboration that Judith Warren Little (1990) describes as joint work is critical to genuinely inquiring communities of practice. Collaborative work that improves learning and understanding for young people generally involves constructing an environment in which educator’s theories or schemas are shifted through creating cognitive discomfort or disturbance. Bruce King’s (2002) work on the impact of professional inquiry on professional learning led him to conclude:

Collective inquiry also seemed to encourage organizational growth by keeping a community focused, yet dynamic. Coupled with the research on professional community in schools and on organizational learning, the implication may be that in order to build capacity or to keep it at a high level, in the long run professional development at all schools should entail collective school wide inquiry. (p. 253)

The team inquiry involving Blake, Lisa and Chris could not be construed as school-wide collective inquiry. Nevertheless it was an important starting place as other teachers witnessed the proactive teamwork to support Blake and his learners and they grew increasingly curious about what this trio was learning. Through his own direct
involvement, Chris was not only continuing to build trust, he was also demonstrating his understanding of learning-oriented design. Chris was wise to start with specific and immediate problems of practice. The evidence from the synthesis on teacher learning (Timperley 2008) suggests that effective professional learning opportunities combine grounding the learning in the immediate problems of practice, deepening relevant pedagogical content and assessment knowledge and engaging existing theories of practice on which to base an ongoing inquiry process (p. xxvii). Timperley’s work also suggests that through the inquiry process teachers collectively and individually identify important issues, become the drivers for acquiring the knowledge they need to solve them, monitor their impact and adjust practice accordingly (p. xxvii).

These principles of teacher learning have been incorporated into a model of an inquiry and knowledge building cycle that provides a useful framework for school leaders to consider in their learning design work. The four questions in the boxes are framed from the perspectives of teachers and their leaders because it is they who must answer them. “But it is also assumed that they will receive support to do so: the research evidence indicates that involving external expertise can be crucial for promoting this kind of inquiry and knowledge-building.” (2008, p. 20)

[FIGURE 7.1 NEAR HERE SOMEWHERE PLEASE]

We think that the questions Blake, Lisa and Chris were asking reflect many of the principles of teacher learning identified by Timperley. We also believe that their decision
to implement an assessment cycle will provide them with a routine for their ongoing learning. Their next steps might be to increase the involvement of other teachers and to draw on some additional external expertise much in the way that Cathy was able to rely on Debbie. We have found in our case study schools that when formal leaders and groups of teachers meet regularly to thoughtfully review student work and to plan together based on learner needs, deeper learning occurs. When this process is intelligently facilitated, new adult patterns of genuine collaboration are formed – and through this joint work, positive changes are made to student learning.

Chris’ decision to support Blake’s development as a teacher and Lisa’s growth as a teacher leader through shared inquiry and a regular assessment cycle, makes sense to us. As he builds trust and strengthens relationships with both Blake and Lisa, Chris has become able to provide the kind of intellectual stimulation and support they both need. As a result, Blake is becoming a more confident and effective teacher, Lisa has learned more about leadership and the contribution she can make to the professional learning of her colleagues, and most important, the students have reaped the benefits of deeper learning.

Let’s take one more look at Donna and her determination to better meet the needs of her struggling Year 9 learners who were in danger of fading or dropping out. She wondered how she could better engage teachers in considering the learning evidence regarding these learners and how they could work as a team to find and make use of the resources available to them.
Donna knew she needed to do something to help these young people and she knew she could not do it alone. She started by meeting with the learners and asking about their experience in school. She listened carefully to their stories. Then she began sharing their stories and the evidence about their performance and their challenges with a few key teachers, including the literacy support teacher and the counselor. They agreed to form a small inquiry/action team with the initial purpose of becoming better informed about current research on social emotional needs of adolescents and on reading interventions. The team agreed they needed to develop a strategy to change the trajectory of these young people – and to do it before it became too late to salvage their academic year.

Donna arranged release time for the group to meet and she made sure the refreshments were plentiful. At first Donna took the lead in identifying useful and relevant resources but quite quickly others began suggesting additional resources – print and people. The group read, talked, thought and planned. Within a fairly short time, they moved to action.

Focused literacy instruction time and deeper social emotional connections with the learners were the two keys to their efforts. The action team developed an intensive six-week literacy intervention designed to provide the learners with improved reading skills and learning strategies to deal with text in content areas. The teachers tapped into community resources to provide focused group counseling based on the social-emotional needs they had identified as important including strategies to deal with anger management and loneliness. The team met regularly to examine student work, to assess the progress of the students and to extend their own learning. At the end of the year, the
whole staff decided that the work of improving literacy and social emotional connections was simply too important to reside with this small group and they supported broader involvement. They agreed to make literacy instruction a focus for their professional learning for the next year. They also agreed to listen carefully to the personal stories and experiences of their learners. The action team agreed that they would act as a resource by learning more about adolescent literacy programs such as the one developed by a Harvard literacy researcher, Catherine Snow, in conjunction with practitioners from the Boston public school district. The team agreed they would come back from their investigations with action plans for staff consideration. They also agreed that they would have some ideas about how to design more professional planning time into the regular school day.

Donna’s determination not to let these learners fall through the cracks demonstrates her mindset of intense moral purpose. Her understanding that she needed to provide evidence in a compelling way to get the attention of her colleagues reflects her evidence mindset. Her forming an inquiry team and providing time and resources for them to develop a strategy to deepen their own understanding of the learning needs of these young people and then to put this learning into action, reflects her action-orientation and her understanding of learning oriented design. To do this she had to make effective use of time.

“We need more time.” How often as school and district leaders we have heard these words. The importance of providing adequate time for adult learning cannot be
overemphasized. Changing practice in significant ways requires multiple opportunities to learn new information and to understand the implications for practice in a trusting and challenging learning environment. Sometimes, however, the issue is not to create more time but rather to make more productive use of the time that is available. Many adults in a variety of occupations report that they find meetings to be unproductive and a waste of time. Many teachers begrudge the time they have to spend in mandatory school staff meetings where formal leaders communicate the organizational tasks that need to be accomplished. In an age where schools have easy access to a wide range of interactive communication strategies, we continue to find too many faculty meeting agendas preoccupied with organizational detail and mind-numbing routines. In contrast to these wasteful practices, the learning-oriented leaders we have observed often start to shift the culture of their schools by deciding how and when they meet and for what purpose.

Simply providing time for discussion of new strategies, however, is not sufficient. Leaders understand that to support adult learning they need to create the conditions of trust and challenge so that, as Halverson (2007) suggests, they can view teaching and learning matters as problematic. Building in the expectation that teachers, as well as the principal, will try out a strategy over the next few weeks and report back on what they learn creates a sense of mutual accountability. This change in the use of time, combined with trust and challenge, emphasizes the importance of adult learning and provides a starting place for new norms to develop. In conventionally organized schools, structural separations can contribute to functional and emotional separations. Mitchell and Sackney (2006) suggest that bringing people together in a school requires building both different
mindsets and different structures (p. 635). In their learning community work, they observed that many principals started by building structures that brought staff members together in planning and decision-making teams connected to learning and curriculum.

In our observations of learning-oriented school leaders, we have seen a range of approaches to structural change. The key is that structures are redesigned to create greater focus on learners and their learning. In schools with traditional curriculum based structures and cultures that are highly resistant to change, some leaders have shifted norms by removing the subject area structures altogether. By creating more inclusive school-wide structures and new leadership roles schools have found fresh sources of energy and creativity.

CONCLUSION

The research and practice evidence regarding teacher professional learning, distributed leadership and professional learning communities provides leaders with important perspectives in designing for adult learning. School leaders who approach this design challenge with the mindsets of trust, inquiry, intense moral purpose and a focus on learning and evidence understand that developing powerful, context specific strategies for adult learning is a central feature of their leadership work.

The strategies for adult learning described in this chapter are not intended to represent a comprehensive list for new leaders. Rather our intent is to prompt thinking about the
ways in which school leaders approach the complex challenge of extending and
deepening adult learning. The manner in which leaders respond to the unique contexts of
their schools will have broad variations. We encourage you to consider your own setting
and the ways in which applying the knowledge of teacher learning, distributed leadership
and professional learning communities will deepen and extend the learning of your
support staff and teachers.

In the final chapter, we will consider the importance of learning partnerships and
networks of inquiry, challenging friendships and other forms of support for school
leaders who are determined to make a difference to student learning. We will explore
how leaders are connecting with others across schools, districts, and increasingly across
countries in their determination to meet the learning needs of every young person. And,
we will look at the power of being fully engaged in the ‘good work’ of leadership.

Questions for Consideration

1. A key principle for effective teacher professional learning is to build the adult
   learning program around the learning needs of the students. To what extent is this
   the norm in your school? Connected with the evidence mindset, how will you
determine the learning needs that are most important as a focus for adult
   professional development in your school? How will you encourage and sustain
   teacher engagement around these learning needs?
2. School leaders provide intellectual stimulation for teacher learning. Leaders also pay attention to the developmental needs of teachers and the context of the school important. How are you building your own understanding of the culture of the school and the developmental levels of the teachers on your faculty?

3. Your involvement – as a leader or as a co-learner – in the professional learning program at your school has a significant impact on learner outcomes. What are you doing to demonstrate your commitment to professional learning? What more could you do?

4. Identifying and developing leadership potential in others is a key leadership responsibility. What are you currently doing to build capacity in your faculty? How could you use the evidence from the distributed leadership research to further encourage and support your teacher leaders?

1 www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/bestevidencesynthesis

2 As a general guide, an effect size of greater than 0.6 indicates a large and educationally significant impact.

3 http://www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/spotlight/index.html