

"In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions."

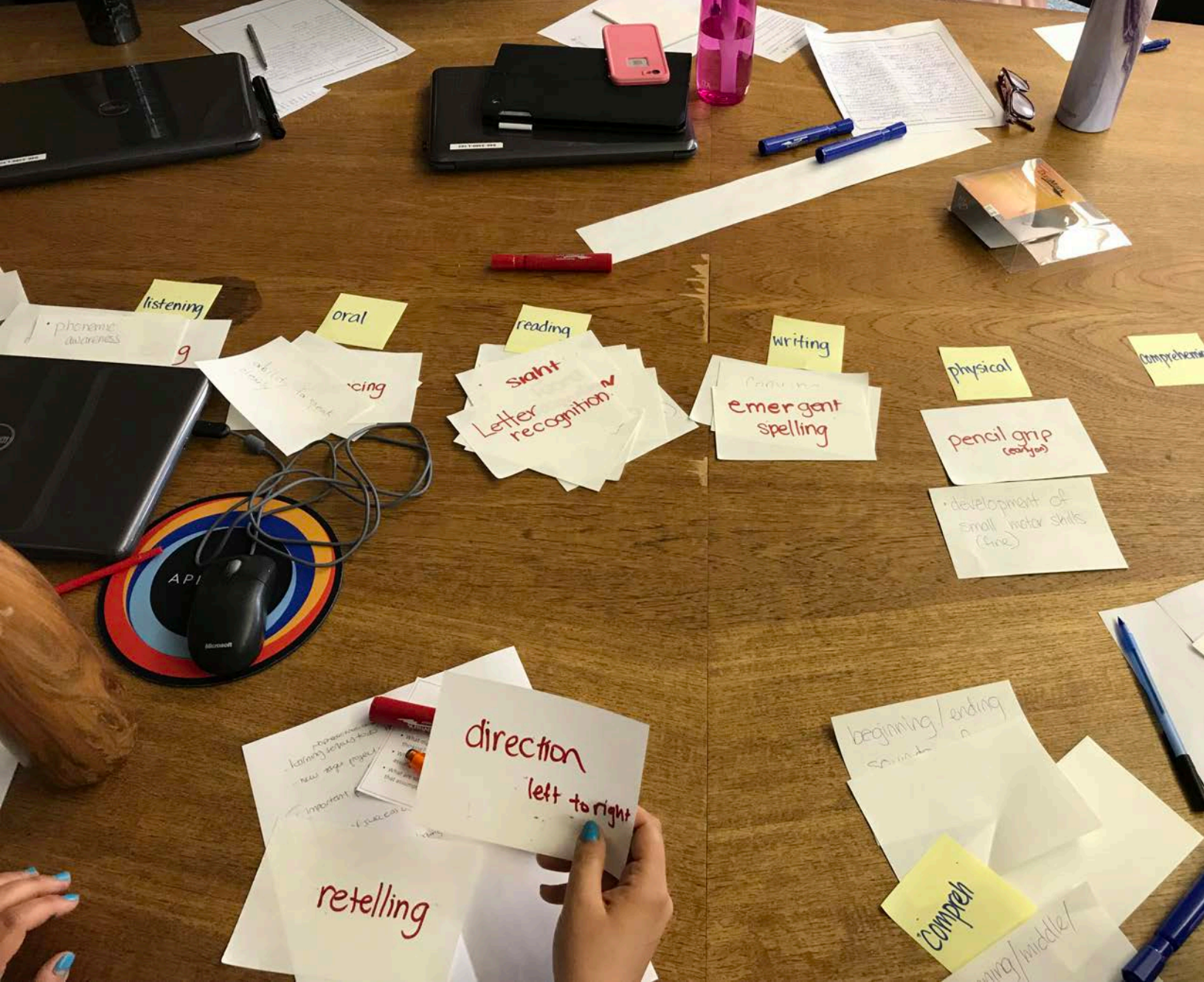
-Margaret Wheatley



Building

A Collaborative Culture

by
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As school leaders in this complex, fast-paced world, how do we craft the containers for engagement? According to Randy Cronley, there are four basic human needs for engagement: the need for trust, the need to feel a sense of worth, the need to foster hope, and the need for competence. Principals, Vice-Principals, school staffs, and parents have a collective responsibility to be engaged in student learning and development. As leaders in the system, the 'what, why, and how' of what we do matters.

Every school leader will say that our work begins with relationships. We want to create collaborative cultures

of care: cultures where each person feels valued and respected, and cultures that presume competence, so that each person will grow and develop because of our time together. To do that as leaders, we need to be both collaborators and inquirers.

When exploring how we foster collaboration and inquiry, we need processes, strategies, tactics, and skills. The Adaptive Schools© Seminars explore effective teams, and how to develop the facilitation skills to lead and develop collaborative groups. The training is the 'how' of being a leader of learning.

The Adaptive Schools© Seminar is a four-day, in-person program with the goal of developing the collective identity and capacity of organization members as collaborators, inquirers, and leaders.

Participants grow an increased capacity to develop and sustain high functioning collaborative teams by establishing meeting norms and decision-making structures, and knowing when and how to engage in dialogue or discussion. Gaining the skills to move groups beyond consensus to a common focus creates collective action. Learning to engage in cognitive conflict allows teams to value the diversity of perspectives and ideas. The strategies for planning and facilitating meetings help keep groups resourceful, on track, and on topic.

Here are the accounts of five school leaders who have participated in the training and subsequently applied the mindsets, strategies, tactics, and skills to their leadership.

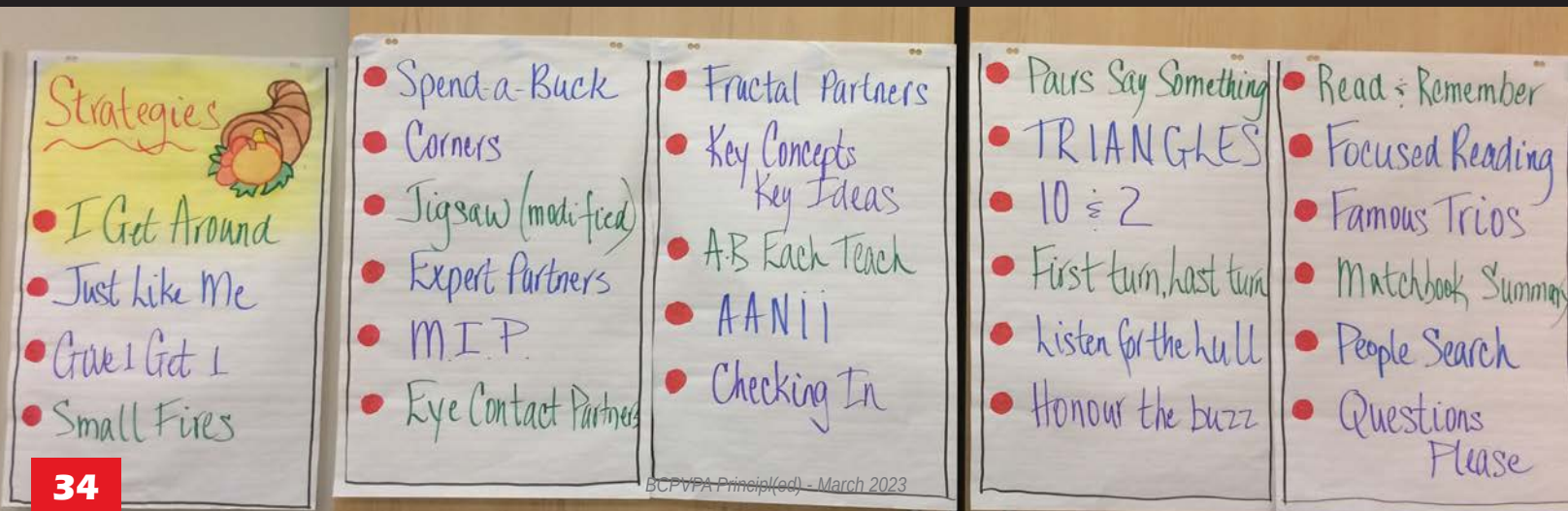
Ross Jacobsen is the Principal of Smiling Creek Elementary in Coquitlam.

Ross attended the seminar, and then very quickly made the decision to support his department heads in getting the training. He wanted to grow the capacity of his school so that they had a shared language and toolkit to plan collaborative work. The key learning for him was establishing working agreements on his staff, and more particularly with his student services team. He found his staff meetings became more productive, and they had more fun together. Collaborative work grew on his staff, and the time spent in meetings was more productive. They became good at making meaning out of data to identify grade level needs and school needs, so that resources and interventions were targeted and supported. From those teacher leaders that Ross supported in their training grew a next generation of leaders. Two of those leaders – Jennifer Nichols and Erin Reid – contributed to this article.

Jennifer Nichols is a Vice-Principal at Maillard Middle in Coquitlam.

Jennifer combines her learning from the Adaptive Schools© Seminars and Cognitive Coaching© towards creating and developing a thoughtful and purposeful professional learning community. She says that nurturing a culture of care is created by taking time to set up common values, establishing group norms, and using decision-making models.

Jennifer has seen an impact in staff commitment, with the biggest impact in the team of teaching assistants. She says, “We had a lot of cognitive capital in the building already, we just needed to find a way to listen, share, and support each other. Spending time building trust – getting to know each other through the AS strategies – has made a substantial difference in how we interact and listen. It is not perfect, but we all agree on our values and our purpose.”





Erin Reid is a District Literacy Mentor in Coquitlam.

Erin has used the AS toolkit in district meetings, work with schools, and planning for professional learning. Erin reflects that this learning has, “changed her entire way of understanding group dynamics and navigating challenging group situations. The tools really support action and allow for all voices to be heard. Groups move forward in action rather than getting stuck in an unproductive place. When groups come together cohesively, even when opinions differ, school culture and outcomes for students are positively impacted.”

Sean Della Vedova is the Principal of Central Elementary in Coquitlam.

Sean shares, “It is amazing how putting a little effort into thinking about how participants will interact can result in deeper, more productive conversations. Having a plan before we dive into potentially divisive topics helps me to be a better listener and leader. We have transformed our collaboration blocks with students and staff to being more interactive and engaging. With the increased use of technology, it has supported the documentation of work in a more streamlined manner. Process helps us, as colleagues engage in such important work.”

Lucinda Wolters is the Principal
of Arden Elementary
in the Comox Valley.

Lucinda quickly recognized the relevance and applicability of the Adaptive Schools® Seminar to school leadership, and the work of building collaborative, intentional cultures that do indeed influence student learning. Teachers responded positively to her facilitation, and their level of engagement in building shared understanding and collective ownership for student learning increased significantly. Lucinda says, “I noticed when I began using the AS concepts, strategies, and skills that this was a very different approach to unifying teachers in what was needed for our students. We quickly were on the same page by investing the time in processes, to honour all voices and collective thinking on key topics.”

Lucinda noticed the most influential application of the AS work has been with staff meetings. Building shared understanding through dialogue has been critical to influencing their decision-making. An increase in collective commitment to collaborative work was noted, and this became embedded in the school culture.

Utilizing the tools as well as the foundational concepts introduced in the seminar has influenced a significant shift in the culture of the school from isolated pockets of innovative practice, to leveraging the AS work to whole school decision-making. This was a result of using the AS work in their staff meetings, to go beyond teams or departments. Lucinda noticed that she, alongside the teachers, has been able to implement new approaches school-wide. “Our collective work is more intentional.”

“I would add that I have much more clarity about my leadership identity and how to enact that as a *leader of learning*. Going beyond leadership theories, I can more confidently live what I believe, to engage others in what’s important for kids through thoughtful facilitation. Besides, it matches what we want to see in classrooms, too.”

Conclusion

The patterns of relationships and the capacities to develop and sustain collaborative cultures are supported by how we engage in our shared work. Learning how to develop the capacity to build trust, rapport, and to honour the contributions of staff supports engagement. Through thoughtful approaches to developing a shared language, values, and norms, leaders are able to create collaborative cultures of care that influence student learning.

Interested in Adaptive Schools® Seminars for you and your school team?

Participants will develop:

- An increased capacity to initiate, develop, and sustain high functioning groups
- New lenses for diagnosing the stages and phases of group development
- An expanded repertoire of practical facilitation tools
- Understandings of when and how to engage groups in dialogue and discussion, the limitations, forms, and values of each
- Skills to move groups beyond consensus to common focus
- Ways to value and use dissension, argument, and conflict
- Strategies for keeping group members on track, on topic, energized, and resourceful

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Collaborative Conversations are:

♥ We are all learners,
☀ respectful
☀ supportive

♥ there is trust

♥ we are listeners

♥ relatability

♥ open to learning & growing

♥ we are all on a continuum

♥ coming from different
journeys

♥ genuinely interested in each
other

♥ a sense of humility