Collaborative inquiry should be conceived as a professional learning strategy as opposed to a rigorous research design. It is a powerful strategy for building teachers' capacity to lead because it provides a structure for teachers to become authentic leaders and decision makers. Leadership opportunities extend beyond merely serving on a committee or acting as a department or grade level chair. Through their collaborative work and learning by doing teachers have the potential to become more meaningfully involved in school- improvement and catalysts for change.

The four-stage model begins with teachers framing a problem of practice. During this first stage, teachers determine a meaningful focus, develop an inquiry question, and formulate a theory of action. The most effective collaborative inquiry teacher teams keep in mind that their end goal is to increase learning and achieve greater success for all students. Therefore, they begin by identifying current student learning needs in order to ensure that their inquiry is authentic, relevant, and worth the investment. The focus of their inquiry must also be an issue individuals can act upon. Identifying promising approaches and implementing changes in practice are key elements in this process. If the problem the team identifies falls outside their realm of control, there will be little they can do to impact change.

When formulating a theory of action, teacher teams compose a sequence of 'if - then' statements that illustrate the causality between their actions and expected outcomes. Framing theories in the form of a hypothesis (if - then) compels educators to consider causes (instructional and/or leadership practices) that precede effects (student learning/teacher learning). It helps to uncover relationships between teaching and learning and/or leading and change as teams examine what they think will work against the realities of what is actually happening given their existing culture, specific context, and unique population.

During stage 2 of the collaborative inquiry process, teachers work together to develop new knowledge and competencies and implement changes in practice. They also identify sources of information that will help answer their inquiry question and collect evidence about how their actions are impacting students. Once teacher teams feel they have gathered enough information to address the question posed, teams engage in analyzing the evidence (stage 3). Teachers make meaning of data by identifying patterns and themes and formulating conclusions. As teams refine their thinking, they revisit their theory of action accordingly.

During the fourth and final stage, teachers come together to document, share, and celebrate their new understandings. Teams consider next steps by identifying additional student learning needs and reflecting on what they learned through their inquiries. Finally, participants debrief the process by considering how their work was reflective of the characteristics of collaborative inquiry.