Collaborative Inquiry

Empowering teachers in their professional development

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IT IS IRONIC that, with all we know about the benefits of collaborative, inquiry-based learning for students, we struggle to create the same rich learning opportunities for teachers. Reports like *Reading Next*[1] and *What Makes Middle Schools Work*[2] highlight the benefits of collaboration for both students and teachers, while emerging research suggests that inquiry-based approaches empower teachers to advance their practice and student learning. It follows that, if we want to develop educational practice and get better at meeting the needs of students, teachers need opportunities to inquire and learn together. In this article, our goal is to identify what is needed to create and nurture collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning for teachers.

What is inquiry?

Inquiry involves *exploring to learn*. To launch an inquiry, educators identify questions they want to learn more about to address a need in their practice environment. Cochran-Smith and Lytle note that "a unique feature of the questions that prompt practitioners' inquiry is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersections of the two."[3] For teachers to feel invested in inquiry, they need to define the area of practice to be addressed and feel empowered to learn through the development and sharing of new knowledge.

Inquiring teachers engage in iterative cycles of action and reflection (see Figure 1). Mindful inquiry starts with defining a problem and then framing it as a more specific, personally relevant question. Then, teachers draw on resources to advance their professional learning, plan how they might take up ideas and enact them in practice, monitor progress towards goals, and make adjustments as needed. Rich forms of inquiry unfold when teachers engage in inquiry cycles across time, interweaving learning and reflection on practice.

Essentially, inquiry involves action-oriented, reflective, and iterative interactions between self, context, and social dynamics. The power and depth in rich forms of inquiry arise in part from teachers' opportunities to negotiate their relationships with practice, students, content, and colleagues. While inquiries typically involve identifying and taking action regarding a tension in one's teaching practice, mindful inquirers also make an effort to rethink their beliefs, assumptions and experiences.
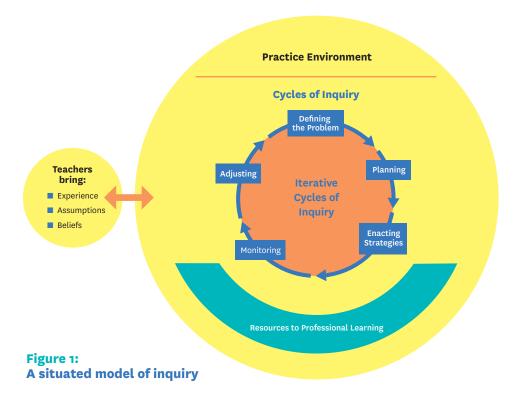
Collaborative inquiry

Engaging in inquiry by oneself does not have the same impact as collaborative inquiry. Research suggests that teachers make and sustain valued changes to their practice when they collaboratively construct, monitor and adapt context-specific approaches to address their goals. In collaborative inquiry teachers work together to define problems, co-plan, co-teach, co-monitor and interpret outcomes, and then consider together "what's next." When teachers collaboratively develop and test their own conceptions, they can better grapple with new theories and practices.

As professionals working in regions and schools with unique populations, teachers automatically belong to a community of practice. Yet they may not think of their school culture in those terms, and may not have opportunities to come together in supportive, sustained inquiry-based structures. Teachers working in the same school may be isolated from one another, have hectic schedules and be awash in competing demands and agendas. In the press of any given day, they may struggle to find the space to inquire into and make deep changes in practice, much less find time to think through issues with others.

So, given the barriers teachers often experience, in their work schedules, time, resources and energy, how can these inspiring forms of collaborative inquiry be nurtured and supported?

Supporting collaborative inquiry

For close to a decade we have worked to identify qualities

Figure 1:
A situated model of inquiry

Diagram labels: Practice Environment; Cycles of Inquiry; Teachers bring: Experience, Assumptions, Beliefs; Defining the Problem; Adjusting; Planning; Iterative Cycles of Inquiry; Monitoring; Enacting Strategies; Resources to Professional Learning

of environments that combine to support and nurture teachers' rich, sustained and productive engagement in collaborative inquiry.[4] Our analyses have revealed the importance of four supporting conditions:

- structural supports;
- cultural and social/emotional supports;
- learning and process supports; and
- teacher ownership/agency.

Structural supports: Structural supports create opportunities for collaborative inquiry. Some ways to create time for collaboration include: scheduled blocks of time for working with colleagues, release time for teachers to meet, "late start" days for students, and building inquiry into staff meetings. Structural supports can facilitate educators' inquiry processes within learning team meetings. They can also create opportunities for teachers from different perspectives to come together, for example, by forming cross-role inquiry teams.

To illustrate the value of structural supports, consider the case of a secondary-level Math department struggling to meet the diverse needs of learners. Collectively members of the department wondered what would happen to student engagement, knowledge, and skills if they used more differentiated instruction. Two types of structural supports were enacted to support their collaborative inquiry. First, the math department committed a portion of their monthly meeting to this focus. Second, Ron, a Math teacher with special education experience, was allocated some of the school's learning resource teacher time to work with colleagues between meetings.

How were these supports helpful in supporting collaboration, inquiry, and, ultimately practice change? One example is that of Kent, an experienced teacher who was interested but skeptical about the department's shift towards differentiated instruction. Kent approached Ron to work together between department meetings. Ron and Kent set goals together, then co-planned and co-taught lessons involving multimodal practices. Together they drew ideas from professional books, joined a district K-12 study group, and shared their progress with colleagues. Kent and Ron found it difficult to shift their practices at first – and students initially resisted change. But, as Ron and Kent persisted and refined their practices over time, they and their students discovered the benefits of their new approach.

Cultural and social/emotional supports: Cultural and social/emotional supports are needed to realize the potential of collaborative inquiry. These focus on creating a learning context in which members feel valued and comfortable engaging in inquiry together. This is important, as collaborative inquiry requires educators to surface gaps in their knowledge or practice and take risks as they work through obstacles to infuse new ways of thinking or working into their practice.

A culture of trust, where all participants are valued for their strengths and potential, is essential. Further, it is important to recognize that educators bring past experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and values to their teaching and learning (see Figure 1). Within learning teams, educators need opportunities to consider how new goals and practices might be congruent with these.

An important approach to creating a culture of collaboration is to use language that frames the co-inquirers as participants in learning "communities" or "teams." This language conveys an expectation of collegiality and cooperation. Respectful and rich collaboration can also be fostered by engaging team members in:

- sharing what they value and believe about teaching and learning;
- brainstorming tensions experienced in teaching;
- co-constructing supportive ways to work together; and
- continuously refocusing together on individual and group reasons for taking up inquiry.

Facilitators can explicitly support team members to co-construct criteria for how they might work best together, and then build from those criteria to consider how their collaborative inquiry process is advancing their learning and practice.

To illustrate how cultural and social/emotional supports might be established, consider the case of a school in which a literacy leader served as a learning team facilitator. In that role, she guided the group

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L'enquête collaborative peut conférer un perfectionnement professionnel valorisé et utile aux enseignants en leur permettant de jeter efficacement des ponts entre la théorie et la pratique tout en personnalisant leur apprentissage. Les écoles et administrations scolaires doivent appuyer et offrir des initiatives de perfectionnement professionnel soutenues, collaboratives, axées sur l'enquête. Dans cet article, les auteurs indiquent quatre conditions requises pour engendrer et entretenir un apprentissage professionnel collaboratif fondé sur l'enquête – soutiens structurels; soutiens culturels, sociaux, émotionnels; soutiens de l'apprentissage et des processus; appropriation et habilitation des enseignants – et donnent des exemples illustrant leurs propos.

in co-constructing criteria for conceptualizing their work together by asking colleagues, "What qualities would make our group sharing supportive and powerful?" Across meetings, she encouraged the group to refine these criteria and develop meeting protocols that would ensure everyone had opportunities to share their learning, be acknowledged for their efforts, and receive constructive feedback. Over time, members became more comfortable and confident sharing their work-in-progress and interacting with colleagues with varying communication and teaching styles. They became a team within which they felt support for their ongoing efforts to make positive change.

Learning and process supports: Our research suggests that educators value resources that offer new ideas and approaches that might help them address the questions or "problems" they have taken up – but that choice in how to access and work with these resources is also important. For example, in our projects, teachers have been able to extend professional learning through university-based programs, district-level workshops, study groups, resources in school libraries, and working with instructional coaches or colleagues. Having choices in resources, and how to access them, enables educators to select what fits best with their preferred modes of learning, the contexts in which they are working, and the time they have available.

Teachers in our projects have found formative assessment data to be particularly useful. For example, in one project Grade 8 teachers were working together to foster adolescent literacy. They decided to gather start-of-the-year formative assessment data to understand students' literacy knowledge and skills. They found these data invaluable in "defining the problem" and recognizing their students' needs. As the year unfolded, they continued to use formative assessments to track students' learning gains in relation to goals and practices they were trying. Over time, teachers described how having data "snapshots" enabled them to better focus their learning and practice based on how students were learning (or not).

Teachers' sustained investment in inquiry is supported by having access to what *they* perceive to be meaningful assessment data. In our studies, data inspired teachers to change practice when it revealed important gaps for students. Inquiry was sustained when teachers' could directly associate gains in student learning with practices they were trying. Even when not immediately successful, teachers seemed empowered to persist in their efforts, because they could identify targeted changes they were confident would be more successful.

Teacher ownership/agency: Finally, we close by highlighting a fourth important condition. Teachers become more fully engaged in inquiry when they feel ownership and agency in their own learning and inquiry processes. In the contexts where we have observed the richest forms of inquiry, teachers have had a voice in all aspects of inquiry processes, from conceptualizing problems to choosing professional resources to contextualizing new ideas in practice to monitoring progress based on their collective goals. Inquiry communities can achieve their promise in rich ways when leadership and agency are distributed across community members.[5]

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY holds potential for deep and significant change in education. Bringing educators together in inquiry sustains attention to goals over time, fosters teachers' learning and practice development, and results in gains for students. The four supports we've identified – structural, cultural and social/emotional, learning and process, and teacher ownership/agency – together have potential to create and sustain inquiry communities. **EC**

NOTES

1 C. Biancarosa and C. E. Snow, *Reading Next – A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (2nd ed.) (Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

2 Wilcox K. Campbell with J. Angelis, *What Makes Middle Schools Work: A report on best practices in New York State middle schools* (Albany, N.Y.: University at Albany, 2007).

3 M. Cochran-Smith and S. Lytle, *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner research for the next generation* (N.Y.: Teachers, 2009), 42.

4 D. L. Butler and L. Schnellert, "Collaborative Inquiry in Teacher Professional Development," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28, no. 8 (Nov. 2012): 1206-1220; D. L. Butler, L Schnellert and S. C. Cartier, "Layers of Self- and Co-regulation: Teachers' co-regulating learning and practice to foster students' self-regulated learning through reading," *Education Research International* (2013) Article ID 845694; L. Schnellert, D. L. Butler, and S. Higginson, "Co-constructors of Data, Co-constructors of Meaning: Teacher professional development in an age of accountability," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24, no. 3 (2008): 725-750.

5 D.L. Butler, L. Schnellert, and K. MacNeil, "Collaborative Inquiry and Distributed Agency in Educational Change: A case study of a multi-level community of inquiry," *Journal of Educational Change* (2014), online publication.

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