The spiral of inquiry: An introduction to developing a hunch

ECE resources

The aim of this phase of the inquiry is to generate a plausible theory about how particular teaching practices (current or desired) influence learning and outcomes. There are two parts to this phase. The first part involves investigating beliefs and assumptions about the area of focus. The second involves making predictions about the impact that possible changes to practice will have.

It is essential to assess and test the accuracy of assumptions, which tend to come from personal beliefs, goals and values, past experiences, and perceptions of the context of action. Assumptions that remain private and unchallenged often limit meaningful change in practice. An effective way to identify and challenge assumptions is to carefully investigate the root causes of what you observed during the scanning phase, which is one of the things the focusing phase of inquiry is designed to do.

The second part of this phase builds on work around assumptions by getting teachers to form hunches about the relationship between their current practices and children's learning. In other words, teachers theorise and think at a deeper level about what is happening and why, using their observations and experiences with a group of children to put their teaching intuition into play. Framing this as a hunch offers teachers an opportunity to directly test their ideas. It is often useful to construct a hunch with 'if, then' statements, as in the following examples:

- **If** children do not see interesting materials to work with in the art area, **then** they don't use the area.
- **If** adults are not available to children at snack time, **then** there are fewer high quality adult-child interactions at this time.

It is important to test hunches by seeking evidence and determining which hunches are most accurate in order to be reasonably confident about what is causing particular outcomes before experimenting with teaching practice in the next phase. For example, the above hunch about art materials could be tested by talking to children about what they think of the art area, or by bringing in a small selection of different materials and observing children's responses, while the hunch about snack time could be tested by monitoring and recording adult's active and attentive presence at the snack table.

A guide to the developing a hunch phase

The key question to address during this phase is 'how is my teaching contributing to this situation'? Start by **identifying and voicing assumptions**. Why do you take the teaching actions that you do and what impact do you think they have on children's learning? These could be things you have done personally or they could be related to the setting's curriculum, policies, procedures, or environment. You should consider how your beliefs have influenced your actions. Then you can **develop a theory of action** by listing the actions you have taken in regard to your focus area, the beliefs and attitudes that motivated those actions, and the assumptions you had when you took those actions. For example, you might identify that you ask lots of questions during children's play because you feel that you should be doing something while they play, or that you rush through a nappy change because you assume the child does not enjoy the experience and wants to get back to play.

The next stage of developing a hunch is to **interrogate your thinking** by posing questions to critically examine the assumptions that you identified in the previous step about the relationship between

teaching and children's learning outcomes in this context. For example, what impact does it have on children when you rush through a nappy change? What kind of evidence do you have to inform your thinking about this? Consider all possible interpretations of the evidence, and develop multiple explanations which may turn into new hunches. For example, if you find that children do not appear to enjoy nappy changes, is this because they want to get back to play (as you assumed) or could there be other reasons? It might be helpful to **share your inquiry with a colleague or your team** to develop a collective set of assumptions. Be cautious about coming to conclusions: there might be a correlation between factors and outcomes rather than causality (in other words, they might be linked but not in a direct cause-effect way).

Once you have interrogated your thinking and examined your assumptions, you can begin to **create hunches** by constructing 'if/then' statements and listing evidence that supports and does not support these statements. **If** we slow nappy changes down and provide children with opportunities to interact with teachers and participate in routines, **then** children might start to enjoy each nappy change. Discuss your hunches with others, and be courageous and confident about putting your hunches on the table and challenging well-established routines and structures. It is important to consider and plan how you might (fairly quickly) test out these hunches, which is the final step in this phase of inquiry.

Tools for developing a hunch

The following tools may be useful during the developing a hunch phase, although it is not necessary to use any formal tools.

Identifying assumptions tool: Use this tool to identify and interrupt assumptions you have made about the issue you are focusing on. Develop a theory of action by listing your actions before examining the beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and assumptions that motivated your actions. This is a very useful tool to interrupt your automatic reasoning process and to check the validity of your assumptions prior to forming hunches about what you could change.

Interpreting evidence tool: Use this tool to formulate 'if, then' statements and to consider what evidence you will need to collect in order to test your hunch, and what further information and professional learning you will need in order to take action.

Next steps

You can test your hunches by seeking out evidence to support or dispel your hunches, considering all available information rather than just the evidence that confirms your hunches. Use this evidence to confirm or modify a hunch, or reject it and develop a new one. Don't worry if your hunches don't have any evidence base: rather, move on to the next phase, professional learning, which may help you to devise and test new hunches.

References and further reading

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