The spiral of inquiry: An introduction to professional learning

ECE resources

This phase is about deepening professional knowledge in order to improve teaching practice and bring about the desired changes to children's learning and experiences. This phase is critical to teacher inquiry because it moves beyond reflection and a focus on what is happening in your setting to look for new ideas. The professional learning phase involves drawing on research evidence as well as experience. Teachers may revisit their hunches as their growing knowledge enables them to construct new hunches and theories to test during the course of their inquiry.

A guide to the professional learning phase

The goal of this phase is to **increase your knowledge of how to bring about the desired changes in children's learning**. It should be directly linked to the problem or focus area you have identified in the scanning and focusing phases. However, it is not about finding a quick fix or just identifying a set of strategies. This phase involves understanding why new ways of doing things may be better than previous practices.

Start by **creating a plan with the end in mind.** Plan your desired outcome for children (including what the evidence would show was happening). From there, work out the skills, knowledge and dispositions children need. Then you can determine a desired outcome for your teaching, and the skills, knowledge and dispositions that you as a teacher need. Based on this plan, **decide what you need to learn, and how to learn it**, and create SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented and time-bound) goals.

The next step is to **find relevant evidence-informed resources.** Consider what you and others around you already know that might be useful for your learning, who you can connect with for support, and what resources are available. Think about what evidence and information you can gain from professional discussions. Potential sources for professional learning include:

- Your colleagues, including teachers within and outside of your school, professional associations and the online community
- Other settings facing similar issues
- Workshops, conferences and courses
- Academic research
- Online resource banks

It is essential that any information or strategies gained from any of these sources of professional learning are critically evaluated to ensure their trustworthiness and applicability to your area of focus. You can **check the quality and validity of resources** by asking questions and triangulating with other resources such as academic readings or teachers who have had success addressing similar issues. The following questions will help you challenge new ideas and strategies you may come across in your professional learning:

Trustworthiness: What is the strength of the evidence base underpinning the idea or strategy? Is there a range of evidence from different sources supporting the ideas or strategy?

- **Relevance:** Does the idea or strategy address your problem or area of focus?
- **Compatibility:** How does this idea or strategy align with your context? What would you need to change in order to apply it in your context? Are these changes possible? What impact might they have?
- **Certainty (of success/effectiveness)**: To what degree was the idea or strategy effective? Did it lead to improvement? How did the author know the idea or strategy worked? How will you know if this idea or strategy will be effective?
- **Sustainability**: Has this idea or strategy been sustained in other contexts/settings? Would it be sustainable in your context?
- **Relative advantage:** Would this idea or strategy lead to an improvement over current practice? In what ways is it perceived to be better? Is there anything else that might lead to a greater improvement?
- **Observability: Are the benefits of this** idea or strategy **visible to others (children, teachers, parents)? What are the benefits?**
- **Complexity: Is the** idea or strategy **easy to understand and implement or does it require new knowledge and skills?**

When engaging in **formal opportunities for professional learning**, ensure they are connected to your inquiry rather than selecting professional learning activities that are convenient and readily available, or recommended or imposed by someone else.

Once you have identified relevant and high quality resources, you need to **engage critically with ideas** and start to **build a deep understanding of new ideas and strategies**, including the evidence that sits behind particular practices and their underpinning theory. During this stage it is important to be open-minded: gather ideas from all sources and avoid being drawn to familiar ideas that fit with your existing beliefs about teaching and learning. However, be aware of the fallibility of research and question the trustworthiness of the source. Remember that the design of a study impacts the conclusions that can be drawn from it and not all research findings are equally robust. It is also important to consider the relevance of the research to your inquiry by looking for connections between your context and that in which the research was undertaken. Think about how you might adapt new knowledge to make it relevant to your particular teaching environment.

Continue to **revisit your learning and sustain it over time**, allowing for frequent opportunities for re-engaging in learning. The integration of substantial knowledge or very different ways of working and thinking will need to take place over at least one year of engagement, but more often two or three, before real transformation occurs and that learning becomes embedded in your teaching routines and practices.

Tools for professional learning

Below is a list of three tools you can use to help you to plan your professional learning, although it is not necessary to use these or any other formal tools during this phase.

Formulating learning goals tool: Use this tool to identify what you want to learn in this phase of inquiry and to set a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-driven, Time-bound). A SMART goal will enable you to clarify what you are researching, focus your efforts, and use your time and resources more productively.

Resources and strategies tool: Use this tool to brainstorm potential resources you could access, and to plan the learning strategies you will use.

Next steps

As you move into the next phase, taking action, you can start to ask yourself

- What will I start doing based on the new knowledge acquired?
- What will I stop doing based on the new knowledge acquired?
- What will I continue doing based on the new knowledge acquired?

References and further reading

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